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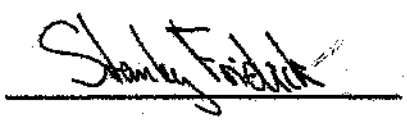
AESTHETICS AND RESISTANCE: ASPECTS OF MONGANE WALLY SEROTE'S POETRY

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A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Arts, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in fulfilment of the criteria for the degree of Master of Arts (September, 1990)

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is my own work. It has been submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in the Division of African Literature, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other university.



Stanley Frielick

30th September, 1990.

ABSTRACT

The literature produced by writers who align themselves with national liberation and resistance movements presents a serious challenge to dominant standards of literary aesthetics. Resistance writing aims to break down the assumed division between art and politics, and in this view literature becomes an arena of conflict and struggle.

This dissertation examines certain aspects of the poetry of Mongane Wally Serote in order to explore the relationship between aesthetics and resistance in his writing. Over the last two decades, Serote has made a significant contribution to the development of South African literature, and his work has important implications for literary criticism in South Africa.

Chapter 1 looks at some of these implications by discussing the concept of resistance literature and the main issues arising from the debates and polemics surrounding the work of Serote and other black political writers. Perhaps the most important here is the need to construct a critical approach to South African resistance literature that can come to terms with both its aesthetic qualities and political effects. This kind of approach would in some way attempt to integrate the seemingly incompatible critical practices of idealism and materialism.

Accordingly, Chapter 2 is a materialist approach to aspects of Serote's early poetry. The critical model used is a simplified version of the interpretive schema set out by Fredric Jameson in *The Political Unconscious*. This model enables a discussion of the poetry in relation to ideology, and also suggests ways of examining the discursive strategies and symbolic processes in this particular phase of Serote's development.

Serote's later work is characterised by the attempt to create a unifying mythology of resistance. Chapter 3 thus looks at Serote's long poems from an idealist perspective that is based on the principles of myth-criticism. As this is a complex area, this chapter merely sketches the main features of Serote's use of myth as a form of resistance, and then suggests further avenues of exploration along these lines. The dissertation concludes by pointing towards some of the implications of recent political developments in South Africa for Serote and other resistance writers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my supervisor, Professor Peter N. Thuynsma, for his encouragement and support.

Thanks are also due to Rouhana Pahad for help in obtaining the interview, and to Craig McKenzie of the National English Literary Mususem for assistance with bibliographic material.

Financial assistance from the Human Sciences Research Council in the form of a bursary is hereby acknowledged. Opinions expressed are those of the author and are not to be regarded as those of the Human Sciences Research Council.

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INTRODUCTION

The 1960s was a time of worldwide upheaval and rapid change. For the industrialised nations of the West, this period was characterised by immense progress in science and technology, but was also a time of protest and revolt by a younger generation disenchanted with the materialistic values of the dominant culture. In Africa, many nations achieved independence from colonial rule, but then experienced the ravages of post-colonial corruption and continued economic exploitation. In Southern Africa however, this was a time when national struggles for liberation increased in intensity, in response to the severe and often brutal oppressive measures designed to maintain white capitalist domination.

The nature and practice of resistance to political oppression differs from place to place (and there are also disparities in the ideologies of different resistance organisations within the same national region), but it is possible to discern common elements. From a literary point of view, the processes of resistance in Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and South Africa have served as a fundamental aesthetic and political quality in the formation of a new and challenging form of literature.[1] In South Africa specifically, the closing years of the sixties saw the production of new forms of poetry and performance, which were generally linked with the emerging Black Consciousness Movement.

The impact of the new poetry was remarkable. It provided the impetus for a renewal of black writing in South Africa, and has been called "the single most important socio-literary phenomenon of the seventies".[2] The academic significance of the new black poetry lies mainly in its radical challenge to assumed notions of the nature and function of literature, for it created much controversy and theoretical confusion in departments of English literature in South African universities. The general aim of this dissertation is to explore and clarify

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[1] See Selwyn R. Cudjoe, *Resistance and Caribbean Literature* (Chicago: Ohio University Press, 1980), and Barbara Harlow, *Resistance Literature* (New York: Methuen, 1987) for a discussion of this process.
[2] Michael Chapman (ed.), *Soweto Poetry* (Johannesburg: McGraw-Hill, 1982) p. 11

several issues arising from the on-going debates over the relationship between literary aesthetics and the politics of resistance in South Africa.

This study looks at aspects of Mongane Wally Serote's poetry for a number of reasons. While it is important to consider the entire body of recent black writing in a discussion of aesthetics and resistance, Serote's work exemplifies the general stylistic and political concerns of this literature. Although Serote is a versatile writer, most of the criticism concentrates on his novel. A focus on his poetry would be an attempt to address the imbalance in existing criticism. In addition, Serote is the only black South African poet to have sustained and developed the emergent poetry of the 60s into a coherent and potentially unifying mythology of resistance. In this respect his work provides a profound literary illustration of the unfolding historical process of resistance to apartheid over the last twenty years.

The process of Serote's literary production to date can be seen as moving through three distinct phases. Each phase is marked by specific and shifting ideologies and aesthetic concerns, but generally informed by the aesthetics and politics of resistance. In this view, phase one would be the early poetry collections *Yakhal'inkomo* (1972) and *Tsetlo* (1974). Phase two would include the long 'epic' poems *No Baby Must Weep* (1975) and *Behold Mama Flowers* (1978). Serote's novel *To Every Birth its Blood* (1981) would also be included here, but this is difficult to slot into a specific ideological or aesthetic category. The ideology of Black Consciousness is prominent in the first phase, but other ideological strains become evident in the second. The novel in particular is characterised by the emergence of a new ideological position.[3] Phase three is Serote's more recent poetry, *The Night Keeps Winking* (1982) and *A Tough Tale* (1987). The poem "Time has run out" will also be discussed here, as this marks a transition between phases two and three.

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[3] Nick Visser, "Fictional projects and history: Mongane Serote's *To Every Birth its Blood*" p. 73

Although any attempt to fix a writer's work into various 'phases' of development will always be somewhat arbitrary, I feel that this kind of division of Serote's work reflects the changing and developing of his political consciousness: from an initial participation in Black Consciousness, through political exile, into a strong commitment to the ideals of the African National Congress. This dissertation traces Serote's changing aesthetic concerns in relation to his political development and the recent history of resistance in South Africa from two different perspectives - the materialist and the mythological.

This kind of approach is a response to the intense theoretical and metacritical debates surrounding the literature of resistance in South Africa. Critical responses to the work of Serote and other poets are a clear indication of the challenge posed by this literature to dominant standards of literary and aesthetic value. The first chapter is thus an overview of this controversial area, and the outline of an approach to Serote's poetry that could possibly come to terms with the theoretical implications of resistance literature for South African literary studies.

CHAPTER 1

RESISTANCE LITERATURE AND CRITICAL GATES IN SOUTH AFRICA

> Resistance poems...are part of a historical process...[and] neither the self-satisfaction of aestheticism, of a belief in art for art's sake, nor theoretical claims to scientific and academic objectivity can account adequately for the historical challenge posed by the literature of resistance to the cultural hegemony of the west. Within this historical conjuncture, the inherited notion of literature in the west as objective, aesthetic, representing universal human values is either compelled to redefine its criteria or is destined inevitably to participate in the First World's post-colonial project of cultural imperialism.[5]

The work of Mongane Wally Serote is part of the historical process of resistance to apartheid in South Africa. While there are differences due to the specific nature and practice of resistance in this country, Serote's work and that of his contemporaries finds a context in resistance literature produced worldwide by oppressed and minority groups - a literature in which politics has a central and determining position. The literature of resistance offers a serious challenge to the basic tenets and assumptions of literary studies in Western academies, and the ongoing debates surrounding black South African writing over the last three decades are evidence of this challenge. This chapter looks at the concept of resistance literature, examines the challenge to dominant modes of criticism which this literature poses, and then suggests a critical approach that might resolve some of the problems.

To begin with, the category 'resistance literature' is problematic. Serote's work does question and challenge received notions of aesthetics and literary value, and it is always tempting to assign writing to a neat category for purposes of analysis. But reducing all South African writing that challenges the dominant order to a single category will inevitably disguise and downplay the ideological differences that exist between various writers, and

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[5] Barbara Harlow, *Resistance Literature* (New York: Methuen, 1987) p. 40

tend to gloss over the ideological shifts in Serote's own work. As Tim Couzens has pointed out:

> There is a danger that ...all black protest poetry will be lumped together in one undifferentiated mass ...Black protest poetry ...must be seen to reflect differing ideologies and differing interests just as the black political movements did - often contemporaneously.[6]

Couzens' article also raises the important question of the relationship between 'protest' and 'resistance', for he concludes by saying (having spoken throughout of 'protest')

> Poetic resistance, like political resistance, amongst black South Africans has been continuous: but it has not been undifferentiated.[7]

The point about the continuity of black opposition to apartheid is important, as is the advice to the literary critic to be sensitive to ideological differences between black writers. But there is surely a significant difference between protest and resistance.

This difference has been outlined by Michael Chapman. In his view,

> It has become necessary to distinguish between two major kinds of Soweto poetry, those of 'protest' and 'resistance'. The former may be seen as confining itself to critical observations of the existing scene, while the latter actively demands change.[8]

In terms of this distinction, the 'shift' from protest to resistance occurs in 1972 with the publication of Serote's *Yakhal'inkomo* and James Matthews and Gladys Thomas' *Cry Rage*. While this a useful point to note when searching for a suitable category for Serote's work, there are certain problems in Chapman's analysis.

The label 'Soweto poetry' is meant to be read metaphorically, and Chapman makes it clear that 'Soweto' is symbolic of a new mood in post-Sharpeville black writing. 'Soweto poetry' thus includes a diversity of writers who have in common a serious commitment to the struggle against apartheid. But it is incorrect to mark Serote and Matthews as initiating a shift in intention from protest to resistance. Resistance is evident in black South African

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[6] Tim Couzens, "Politics and Black Poetry in South Africa 1930-1950", *Africa Perspective* No.7, (April 1978) p. 1

[7] Tim Couzens, "Politics and Black Poetry in South Africa 1930-1950", p. 14

[8] Michael Chapman, *South African English Poetry: A Modern Perspective* (Johannesburg: Ad Donker 1984) p. 193

writing from the early 1960s, and further exploration of 'resistance' in literature seems toindicate that the concept is more complex than merely being the next step after 'protest'.

RESISTANCE IN SOUTH AFRICAN LITERATURE

The 1960s was a crucial period for politics in South Africa. The Sharpeville crisis forced black politicians to adopt revolutionary strategies, and the ANC and PAC carried out campaigns of sabotage during 1961 - 1964. Important later events were the assassination of Hendrik Verwoed and the rise to power of John Vorster, who ushered in a new wave of repressive laws. More significantly, at the end of 1965 the police had succeeded in crushing organised black resistance, by destroying the PAC's and ANC's networks within South Africa. The movements were forced to operate wholly in exile, and this left a political vacuum in terms of organised resistance within the country. But this was soon filled by the emerging Black Consciousness movement, whose ideological seeds were being sown during 1966 - 1969 on black campuses by students disenchanted with the liberal ideology of NUSAS.[9]

To an extent, severe political repression also took its toll on black writing, with many writers either being banned, jailed, or choosing exile. In this respect, Serote speaks of the 'blank page' of literary history, a complete absence of literary reference points for himself and other aspiring black writers of this period.[10] This is generally true, for links with the past were interfered with by censorship, bannings, and other methods of inculcating historical amnesia such as Bantu Education. However, the 60s were far from a period of silence for black writing, and this period sees the emergence of resistance literature in South Africa.[11]

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[9] For a detailed and insightful discussion of this period see Tom Lodge, *Black politics in South Africa since 1945* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1983)

[10] Interview (video) with Edward Blishen, *ICA Writers in Conversation* (London, 1986)

[11] See the survey by Jacques Alvarez-Pereyre, *The Poetry of Commitment in South Africa* (London: Heinemann, 1984), and the poetry collections: Tim Couzens & Essop Patel (eds), *The Return of the Amasi Bird* (Johannesburg : Ravan, 1982) and Johan van Wyk, Pieter Conradie & Nik Constandaras (eds), *SA in*

The term 'resistance' was first applied to literature by the Palestinian writer and critic Ghassan Kanafani in 1966. In this specific situation, the term 'resistance' presupposes an occupying power which has both exiled and subjugated a given population. The dominant order has in addition significantly intervened in the literary and cultural development of the subjugated people. In resisting these interventions, both writer and critic define literature as an arena of struggle.[12]

The first signs of resistance literature in South Africa appear a few years earlier however, in response to the Sharpeville crisis and new conditions of illegality. One of the most significant of these is Bessie Head's poem "Things I Don't Like" (1962)[13] which in its militant tone and foregrounding of the concept 'Black' anticipates the later Black Consciousness poetry. Another important early response is Ingrid Jonker's "Die Kind wat Doodgeskiet is deur Soldate in Nyanga" (1963) - almost prophetic in the light of Soweto 1976.[14] But it is in about 1966 that a new aesthetic begins to take shape in black South African writing. For example there is Dollar Brand's poem "Afrika Music and Show Business"[15], which uses concepts borrowed from jazz music to aesthetically mediate a powerful critique of the exploitation prevalent at many levels of South African society. This kind of poem has correspondences with developments in black American writing. The year 1966 saw the emergence in America of a new 'black' aesthetic with the publication of Amiri Baraka's *Black Art*, and the coining of the term "Black Power" by radical activist Stokely Carmichael - events which had an important bearing on black resistance and writing in South Africa.[16]

Poësie/SA in Poetry (Pinetown: Owen Burgess, 1988)

[12] in Barbara Harlow, *Resistance Literature* (New York: Methuen, 1987) p.2. "Resistance" is first used as a generic term in African literature in E.M Dickinson's collection of Mozambique and Angolan poetry *When Bullets Begin To Flower* (1972)

[13] in Tim Couzens & Essop Patel (eds), *The Return of the Amasi Bird* p.179.

[14] in Johan van Wyk, Pieter Conradie & Nik Constandaras (eds), *SA in Poësie/SA in Poetry* p.457.

[15] in Tim Couzens and Essop Patel (eds), *The Return of the Amasi Bird* p. 190

[16] See Peter Horn, "When it Rains it Rains: U.S. Black Consciousness and Lyric Poetry in South Africa" in Michael Chapman (ed) *Soweto Poetry* (Johannesburg: McGrawHill, 1982)

Many critics have struggled to find a suitable generic term for the work by black South African writers who began to publish towards the end of the 60s. While terms such as 'Soweto poetry', 'Black Consciousness poetry', 'post-Sharpeville black writing', and 'the new black poetry' have their merits, this dissertation will argue that the term 'resistance literature' offers a more useful category for the work of Serote and other South African writers who align themselves and their work with the broad struggle against apartheid. A good working definition of the term is offered by Barbara Harlow in her book *Resistance Literature* :

> Resistance literature calls attention to its..., and literature in general, as a political and politicized activity. The literature of resistance sees itself furthermore as immediately and directly involved in a struggle against ascendent or dominant forms of ideological and cultural production....Whereas the the social and the personal have tended to displace the political in western cultural and literary studies, the emphasis in the literature of resistance is on the political as the power to change the world. The theory of resistance literature is in its politics.[17]

It is in this cultural form of resistance that the challenge to established methods of literary criticism, and theories of aesthetics, manifests itself.[18] The ideological and cultural challenge is also part of the general strategies of resistance organisations, which include armed struggle:

> ...armed struggle is not the just the husk, but the very fruit of cultivation forcing its roots deep into the land....the extreme importance of the cultural form of resistance is no less valuable than armed resistance itself.[19]

In South Africa the strategy of armed struggle was adopted in 1961 by the ANC and PAC after the Sharpeville crisis and in response to severe state repression.[20] The notion of armed struggle appears in South African literature in novels such as *Elegy For A Revolutionary* by

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[17] Barbara Harlow, *Resistance Literature* (New York: Methuen, 1987) pp. 28-30

[18] See also the discussion on resistance and literature in Selwyn R. Cudjoe, *Resistance and Carribean Literature* (Chicago: Ohio University Press, 1980)

[19] Ghassan Kanafani, in Barbara Harlow, *Resistance Literature* p. 11. Serote's later work aligns itself with this position.

[20] Tom Lodge, *Black politics in South Africa since 1945* ch. 10

CJ Driver (1967) and Alex la Guma's *In The Fog of the Season's End* (1972), and in Serote's work from about 1975 with the poem *No Baby Must Weep*. A strong militant sensibility informs the work of exiled poets such as Denis Brutus and Keorapetse Kgositsile, and even the work of Arthur Nortje - usually regarded as a symbolist poet - has overtones of armed resistance:

> Darksome, whoever dies
> in the malaise of my dear land
> remember me at swim,
> the moving waters spilling through my eyes:
>
> and let no amnesia
> attack at fire hour:
> for some of us must storm the castles
> some define the happening.[21]

Poems such as David Evans' "Poet and Guerilla" and Keorapetse Kgositsile's "New Age",[22] make the connection between writing and fighting quite explicit, and set the tone for much post-1976 resistance literature.

The role of poetry in struggles for liberation has been significant, and it has provided a certain impetus to the process of mobilising collective responses to oppression, as well as providing a repository for popular memory. The main aesthetic features of resistance poetry can be seen for example in "A Different Poem". Here Onesima Silvera from the Cape Verde Islands demands "A different poem / for the people of the islands"[23] - where the 'different poem' is also the poem itself which raises the demand. This poem is the precursor of many resistance poems, where the idea of language as a site of struggle is prominent, and 'poetry' becomes the subject of the poem - but a subject to be resisted and undermined, for 'poetry' with its 'pure' aesthetic and complex web of meanings is the property of the ruling class.

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[21] Arthur Nortje, "Natives's Letter" in Barry Feinberg (ed), *Poets to the People* (London: Heinemann, 1980) p. 152

[22] in Barry Feinberg (ed), *Poets to the People* pp. 21 & 41

[23] Onesima Silvera "A Different Poem" in Gerald Moore & Ulli Beier(eds.), *Modern African Poetry* (London: Penguin,1984) p. 59

The same idea surfaces in radical black American poetry, for example in the words of Don Lee:

> I ain't seen no poems stop a .38,
> I ain't seen no stanzas break a honkie's head.
> I ain't seen no metaphors stop a tank,
> I ain't seen no words kill
> & if the word was mightier than the sword
> pushkin wouldn't be fertilising russian soil
> & until my similes can protect me from a nightstick
> i guess i'll keep my razor
> & buy me some more bullets.[24]

The earliest example of this kind of poetry in South Africa is in the "protest songs" of James Matthews:

> to label my utterings poetry
> and myself a poet
> would be as self-deluding
> as the planners of parallel development....[25]

While not all black South African writers would align themselves with this kind of aesthetic manifesto, there is a general tendency for local resistance poetry to follow this pattern. A recent (1987) poem delivered anonymously to the Division of African literature at Wits University is a good example, although here the undermining of the concept of "poetry" is taken to the limit:

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[24] Quoted in George Gugelberger (ed), *Marxism and African Literature* p45.
[25] James Matthews and Gladys Thomas *Cry Rage!* (Johannesburg: Spocas-Ravan, 1972), p. 70

aesthetics for a new society

to hell with poetry
if it can't fill stomachs
to hell with poetry
if it can't stop a bullet
to hell with poetry
if it's written for prizes & flattery
to hell with poetry
if it's written for academics and analysts
to hell with poetry
if it can't break our chains
to hell with poetry
if it can't use a gun
to hell
to hell
with poetry
if it doesn't torment oppressors
i say
to hell
with poetry
if it can't plant seeds
for a new day
a new humanity
a new africa
a new azania[26]

The poem reflects the effects of the state of emergency on political writing, and also the contradiction which occurs at the extremes of resistance aesthetics (the poet would like to do away with the concept of 'poetry', but cannot escape poetic conventions such as line and rhythm, however broken these might be).

Serote is generally too preoccupied with personal and political realities to indulge in abstract and rhetorical word-play about the nature of poetry, but many of his poems do highlight the issue of language and its relationship to power, for example "Black Bells" and "Prelude".[27] The broad literary context of his work is black literature in English, which has, generally speaking, always had a political thrust in terms of content. More immediately the context is

[26] The author is anonymous, but the poem is "endorsed by " 1) khoisan arts ensemble 2) mazania cultural collective 3) meropa arts 4) BLAC (blk liberation arts collective)
[27] In *Yakhal'inkomo* p. 62 and *Tsetlo* p. 9

resistance literature proper, which only really takes shape in South Africa in the 70s and 80s in the work of Black Consciousness poets such as James Matthews and Mafika Gwala, and the later generation of Staffrider poets, in fiction from writers like Mtutuzeli Matshoba and Njabulo Ndebele, in performance from poets such as Mzwhake Mbuli and Mi Hlatshwayo, and in theatre from Black Consciousness groups such as MDALI and later plays like *The Hungry Earth* and *Asinamali*.

Resistance in South African literature has sparked off an ongoing series of critical debates, which essentially revolve around the thorny question of the relationship between aesthetics and politics.

ART AND POLITICS - THE AESTHETICS OF RESISTANCE

> Politics in a work of literature is like a pistol-shot in the middle of a concert, something loud and vulgar, and yet a thing to which it is not possible to refuse one's attention.[28]

Literature has always concerned itself with both the 'private' and 'public' domains of human experience. 'Private' literature deals with individual 'inner' experience, and literature that treats public or collective themes can loosely be termed political literature. Whereas this distinction is in most cases not applicable to African literature, western literature has a long tradition of rigid separation between the two domains. For example, C.M. Bowra defines political poetry as:

> the antithesis of all poetry which deals with the special, individual activity of the self and tries to present this as specially and as individually as it can.[29]

Bowra points out that political poetry as defined above is nothing new and in fact dates back at least to Greek and Roman times, but his analysis remains largely at the level of content and does not begin to explore the ideological factors at play in the production of political

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[28] Stendhal, cited in Michael Wilding, *Political Fictions* (London: RKP, 1982) p. 8
[29] C. M Bowra, *Poetry and Politics* (Cambridge: CUP, 1966) p. 2

poetry. Although Bowra's view is sound within the necessary historical limitations of his analysis, recent theoretical advances have suggested that the aesthetics of political poetry - and indeed the aesthetic domain itself - might be ideologically determined.

It is not enough to define political poetry as the mere antithesis of private poetry. Private poetry can be very political, as C. Craig shows in his study of Yeats, Eliot and Pound, who were:

> driven to politics in order to maintain the institutions and the patterns of society which preserved and promulgated the kinds of memory on which their poetry relied. The open poem demanded for its completion not the free mind of democratic man, but the rich mind of the privileged within a democratic society. The open poem demanded as its counterbalance the closed society.[30]

Conversely, it could be said that the open or democratic society demands as its counterbalance the 'closed' poem. Closed in this sense would mean, for example, that aesthetic structures such as extended metaphor and complex allusion are stripped away because they are seen as reflecting the consciousness of the ruling class; and social, economic and political themes are foregrounded at the level of content. It is in these kinds of literary principles that the outlines of resistance aesthetics begin to emerge - although there are varying and historically specific aesthetic and socio-political ideologies in texts of resistance. In the case of Serote, resistance is always at the core of his work, but there are changes in the aesthetic structures which mediate and transform the core ideology of resistance.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o has clearly defined the aesthetic conflict over the question of politics in literature. As he points out :

> ...in literature there have been two opposing aesthetics: the aesthetic of oppression and exploitation and of acquiescence with imperialism; and that of human struggle for total liberation.[31]

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[30] C. Craig, *Yeats, Eliot, Pound and the Politics of Poetry* (London: CroomHelm, 1982) p. 71
[31] Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Writers in Politics* (London: Heinemann, 1981) p. 38

What Ngugi refers to as the aesthetics of oppression can also be seen as the aesthetics of the rational, empirical, alienated Western consciousness rooted in a Cartesian-Newtonian worldview (commonly understood as the aesthetics of modernism or liberalism). The fundamental determinant of this aesthetic is the subjective cognitive experience of the isolated individual, the aesthetic of 'private' poetry:

> ...aesthetic satisfaction consists in a subjective awareness of the harmony between the imaginative representation and the understanding: in other words, it is an affirmation of pure mind, and distinct from the body and its existence....Aesthetics affirms the delight in pure rationality and in so doing confirms the sphere of pure and 'use-less' subjectivity.[32]

An aesthetic experience that is distinct from the body and its experience is also outside the limitations of time and space. It is thus timeless and universal - and also apolitical, since it is removed from the constraints of social and historical specificity. This view of aesthetics is diametrically opposed to both African and resistance aesthetics.

In the first place, the concept of 'art for art's sake' has little or no place in African artistic and critical thought - art is traditionally functional and part of the everyday activities of life, and does not exist in a use-less subjective vacuum. The idea of participation is central here. In the classical Western view the spectator/critic is passive and detached from the art work, in order to obtain 'objectivity'. As Jim Morrison wrote:

> There are no longer "dancers", the possessed.
> The cleavage of men into actor and spectators
> is the central fact of our time.....
> We are content with the "given" in sensation's
> quest. We have been metamorphosised from a mad
> body dancing on hillsides to a pair of eyes
> staring in the dark.[33]

The 'mad body dancing on hillsides' recalls the world of shamans and other divinely

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[32] Peter Ackroyd, *Notes for a New Culture* (London: Vision, 1976) p. 42. Ackroyd is expressing Kant's view of aesthetics, as opposed to Burke's - which would put individual and social value prior to the art object in itself. However both views still depend on a division between thought and feeling, the 'Cartesian split' that informs much of mainstream Western thinking.

[33] James Douglas Morrison, *The Lords and The New Creatures* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1971) p. 29

inspired performers, and suggests the alienation of much Western art from the primary sources of creation. In the traditional African scheme of things, there is no such thing as a detached, objective observer.[34] The artist is inseparable from his audience, and both participate in the process of artistic creation. In resistance aesthetics, literature has a primarily practical and political function. There is no place for spectators in the struggle for liberation - participation demands total commitment. Ideally, this also applies to the literary critic. As Palestinian resistance writer Ghassan Kanafani suggests in a provocative statement:

> No research of this kind can be complete unless the researcher is located within the resistance movement itself in the occupied land, taking his testimony from the place in which it is born, lives and is propagated: the lips of the people.[35]

Secondly, where traditional Western aesthetics are derived from the isolated and alienated individual, in the African context the individual is only definable within the larger whole of the community. Thus African aesthetics emphasises communal rather than individual experience, and the individual self is realised in collective action. This idea is at the heart of resistance aesthetics:

> Aesthetics...is the exertion of the imagination, starting from the facts, be they pleasant or unpleasant, to situate the collective subject in such a way that it can act meaningfully and with a chance of success.[36]

The aesthetics of resistance have also been defined as:

> ...an insistence on honesty and rigour in perception. Honesty in not retreating into legend and mysticism. Honesty in demythologizing and exposing the reality of oppression and exploitation. Rigor in describing tyrants and their tyranny, without escape into parable and naturalistic metaphor.[37]

In other terms this is "an aesthetic of the antiliterary itself: a kind of counterfiction, a poetry

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[34] See for example Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge: CUP, 1977)

[35] Ghassan Kanafani, in Barbara Harlow, *Resistance Literature* p. 3

[36] Peter Horn, "Aesthetics and the Revolutionary Ideology" *Critical Arts* Vol. 3, No. 4, (1985) p. 20

[37] Keith Gottschalk, "Review of *Inside* by Jeremy Cronin", in *Critical Arts* Vol. 3 No. 2 (1984) p.56

without metaphor, a narrative without irony."[38] While the above definitions are not always applicable to Serote, they do provide general guidelines to the aesthetic directions within his work.

A truly *political* aesthetic, an aesthetic of *resistance,* would thus reflect the values and aspirations of subordinate and resisting classes, and would have as its ideal the revolutionary transformation of society.

Generally speaking, this aesthetic resists the dominant aesthetic of the ruling class. As Michael Wilding has pointed out, "the aesthetic clash carries the force of ideological clash: class struggle."[39] Resistance aesthetics is then a mode of perception that resists the power of reification - the reductive disease of capitalist consciousness that reduces the world of human relationships to abstract relations between things. In literary terms, resistance is a symbolic act where the writer as an individual subject projects and models his or her insertion into the collectivity in a meaningful way, thus illuminating the relationship between individual consciousness and the collective historical experience.

This notion is from the outset a foundation of Serote's literary activity, although there are changes in the way Serote's subjectivity interfaces with collective ideologies - changes in response to the unfolding of history and resulting from the development of the poet's own political consciousness.

The notion of aesthetics as a terrain of political struggle goes back at least as far as the debates over aesthetics and politics in Europe in the 30s, for example in Brecht's concept of realism in art:

> With the people struggling and changing reality before our eyes, we must not cling to 'tried' rules of narrative, venerable literary models, eternal aesthetic laws....Realistic means: discovering the causal complexes of society / unmasking the prevailing view of things as the view of those who are in power

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[38] T. B. , Preface to *Modern Fiction Studies* Vol. 35, No. 1 (Spring 1989) p. 5
[39] Michael Wilding, *Political Fictions* (London: RKP 1982) p.11

> / writing from the standpoint of the class which offers the broadest solutions for the pressing difficulties in which human society is caught up / emphasizing the element of development / making possible the concrete, and making possible abstraction from it.[40]

The kind of realistic literature suggested here requires a new language and a new aesthetic, one that is capable of rendering reality in a form that everybody, not just the privileged few, can master. This is sometimes difficult for writers and critics to accept. For example, Pablo Neruda underwent a shift in his aesthetic concerns in the 1930s, stating that:

> It was a great effort for me to sacrifice obscurity to clarity, for obscurity of language has become the privilege of a literary caste....I have resolved to become more and more simple in my new poems, more simple each day.[41]

Similar ideas prevail in African literature. This kind of aesthetic is evident in works of fiction like Sembene Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood* and Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*, novels in which the collective subject is situated in such a way that it acts meaningfully and with a chance of success. The same idea informs the second part of Serote's novel *To Every Birth its Blood*, and takes shape in his poetry from *Behold Mama Flowers* onwards.

It would thus seem that the aesthetic thrust of resistance literature is towards bridging the conceptual divide between art and politics. This artificial dichotomy has enabled Literature and the ideology of practical criticism to maintain a dominance for many years. The dominance rests on the claims to universality and intrinsic unity between form and content of a Literary text, properties which are only accessible to the analytic processes of practical criticism. But along with the emergence of resistance in South African literature has come an assault on these foundations of literary study.

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40 Theodor Adorno et. al., *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 1977) pp. 81 - 82

41 In Michael Chapman, *South African English Poetry: A Modern Perspective* (Johannesburg: Ad Donker, 1984) p. 189

THE CHALLENGE TO CRITICISM

> Critical approaches are not simply intellectual constructs existing in some purely abstract realm. *They are positions people hold*, positions that serve particular interests and satisfy certain needs.[42]

Over the last twenty years or so, the positions held in literature departments by exponents of practical criticism and its associated ideology of liberal humanism have been gradually undermined by materialist-orientated scholars. This is a worldwide trend in literary studies. For example, John Barrell in *Poetry, Language and Politics* has given a clear account of the weaknesses and the politics of practical criticism. As he points out,

> ..certain texts have been defined as literary in a way that has had the effect of defining a kind of utterance which can be used at once to instantiate a political view of the world and to claim that this view is above the political; and that a particular reading-practice, a particular discourse, has been invented in terms of which that claim can be made. If we question the discourse, we are also free to question the objects it defines, and, along with the literary text, we are free to question the notion of 'full humanity' which validates the claim that such a text, because it is 'universal', is therefore not political.[43]

In South African literary studies the questioning of the discourse of practical criticism has been a feature of critical debates in English universities over the last twenty years. While generally concerned with the art/politics relationship, these debates have largely been initiated by the work of Serote and other writers already mentioned above. These often acrimonious exchanges have been adequately described elsewhere,[44] and I will merely outline the salient features in order to give a sense of the main issues and directions in criticism of recent black South African writing in general.

The positions held by those involved in debates around critical approaches to black writing

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[42] Nick Visser, "The critical situation and the situation of criticism", *Critical Arts* Vol. 3, No. 2 (1985) p. 4 (emphasis added)

[43] John Barrell, *Poetry, Language and Politics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988) p. 11

[44] See for example *Critical Arts* Vol. 3, No. 2 (1984) and Jeremy Cronin, " 'The law that says/Constricts the breath line(...)': South African English Language Poetry Written by Africans in the 1970s " *English Academy Review* No. 3 (1985)

can be broadly characterised as either idealist or materialist. Idealist positions see the text as free from the constraints of society and history, and focus on the unity and universality of a literary text. Materialist positions see the text, and other cultural artifacts of a more popular nature, as products determined by social, economic and historical forces. Criticism here would focus on the way the product relates to its determining base, and would seek to expose contradictions within the text, and in what ways the text represses the underlying conditions of its production.

The dilemma of the idealist position in approaching black political writing can be seen, for example, in this statement from Colin Gardner:

> Faced with red-hot writing from a burning or molten situation, can we even be certain what 'literature' is, or what the task of criticism is, or what relationship should exist between literature and criticism and reality?[45]

An example of the materialist position in relation to idealism is the following from Michael Vaughan:

> ...a new black township literature has emerged, whose aesthetic impetus is imbricated with Black Consciousness and populist precepts. Liberal criteria for the evaluation of aesthetic quality, grounded in the concept of a sensitive and humanist individualism, and backed by the authority of a universalist aesthetic order, have been treated with somewhat scant regard by the exponents of this new literature.[46]

While these statements are by no means fully representative, they do indicate the nature of critical debate between these two schools of thought. Generally speaking, these critical debates have concerned themselves with the following issues: 1) the relevance of the English Great Tradition in a South African context, 2) if Western literature is being studied, what is the validity of the method of practical criticism and what critical approach(es) would replace it, 3) the demystifying of the liberal humanist world-view and its accompanying universalist aesthetics, 4) the construction of a world-view grounded in historical

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[45]Colin Gardner, "Mongane Serote's 'City Johannesburg': Approaches to a Poem" in Michael Chapman (ed), *Soweto Poetry* (Johannesburg: McGrawHill, 1982) p. 200

[46] Michael Vaughan, "A critique of the Dominant Ideas in Departments of English in the English-Speaking Universities of South Africa" *Critical Arts* Vol. 3, No. 2 (1984) p. 45

materialism and a consequent redefinition of aesthetic criteria.

In addition to this, the study of a work of African literature makes the questions of critical approaches and aesthetic criteria more complex. For example, are Eurocentric critical theories such as Marxism and structuralism relevant to a study of African literature ? Is there an Afrocentric critical method for evaluating texts produced on this continent ? What critical approach would adequately meet the historical challenge posed to inherited notions by the literature of resistance ?

Debates around such issues began in earnest at the 'Poetry '74' conference held at the University of Cape Town. Mike Kirkwood put forward the notion of 'art for liberation' and questioned the concept of 'English South African culture' in his polemic against Guy Butler.[47] These were popular points of debate in the burgeoning Black Consciousness movement, but had not been previously aired at any major gathering of (mainly) white academics. Kirkwood's views were given added weight by the presence of Serote, Mtshali, James Matthews and Sipho Sepamla at the conference - but it was to be the last time for many years that black poets would be present at such occasions.[48]

Tim Couzens pointed the the way towards a materialist 'sociological' approach to black poetry, and emphasised the importance of historical specificity in his paper at the same conference.[49] And the negligible amount of criticism at the time of black South African poetry is indicated by the paucity of entries under this heading in the bibliography to *Poetry South Africa* (a selection of papers from the conference).

From a late 1980s perspective, it seems as if the events of Soweto 1976 gave real impetus to the revisionary scholarship of materialist literary critics and historians, and further

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[47] Mike Kirkwood, "The Colonizer: a critique of the English South African culture theory" in Peter Wilhelm and James Polley (eds), *Poetry South Africa* (Johannesburg: Ad Donker, 1976)

[48] Serote's views on the conference, which coincided with the assassination by parcel bomb in 1974 of SASO leader Onkgopotse Tiro, are in his article "Feeling the Waters" in Michael Chapman (ed), *Soweto Poetry*

[49] Tim Couzens, "Black poetry in Africa" in Peter Wilhelm and James Polley (eds), *Poetry South Africa*

weakened the hold of the liberal humanist paradigm in the fields of literature, sociology and history. In 1977 a new journal, *Work in Progress*, was launched, and Tim Couzens, Isabel Hofmeyr and Kelwyn Sole[50] all put forward powerful arguments for a 'new conceptual framework' and 'comprehensive theory' - grounded in historical materialism - for black South African literature. Sole's article in particular is important when approaching Serote's early work, for he points out the necessity of going beyond the printed page when examining Black Consciousness texts - print 'filters out' much of the dynamic ethos and processes of performance which inform the final published product.

But around the same time as the *Work in Progress* articles appeared, Dr. A.G. Ullyatt published an article in Contrast magazine which drew sharp responses from other critics.[51] Ullyatt's main concern is "that black poets in South Africa persist in using almost every possible occasion to castigate the prevailing system of government without regard for any of the basic precepts of poetry."
This approach once more exposed the limitations of liberal humanism and practical criticism in dealing with political texts, and these limitations were made clear in the responses to Ullyatt's article.

Of these, the most comprehensive was that of David Maughan Brown, who argues that "materialist literary criticism .... seems to provide the answer to the glaring inadequacies of much Western criticism of African literature, so many of which found a comfortable home in Ullyatt's article."[52] Maughan Brown however does not argue the merits of a Marxist analysis of African literature, but concentrates instead on presenting the case for a black criticism and a 'black aesthetic'. His article is important since it brings debates on South

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50 Tim Couzens, "Criticism of South African Literature", *Work in Progress* No. 2 (Nov. 1977); Isabel Hofmeyr, "Problems of Creative Writers: A Reply", *Work in Progress* No. 2 (Nov. 1977); Kelwyn Sole, "Problems of Creative Writers in South Africa: A Response", *Work in Progress* No. 1 (Sep. 1977)
51 A.G. Ullyatt, "Dilemmas in Black Poetry" *Contrast* No. 44 (1977)
52 David Maughan Brown, "Black Criticism and Black Aesthetics" in Michael Chapman (ed), *Soweto Poetry* p. 48

African black writing into line with the wider context of debates in criticism of African literature - debates which are concerned with the idea of black or African aesthetics, and the applicability to African writing of Eurocentric critical models.[53]

But black critics in South Africa have generally not indulged themselves in polemics about critical approaches, and have in most cases firmly rejected the views of white critics. The approaches of critics such as Njabulo Ndebele, Mafika Gwala, Mbulelo Mzamane, Sipho Sepamla and others[54] are largely 'participatory', and concerned with the ideological issue of how black writing can best serve the interests of the liberation struggle - with the important exception of Es'kia Mphahlele, who has always taken a more 'universal' and myth-critical approach.[55]

Of the black writers who have participated in the art/politics debate, Njabulo Ndbele has been consistently prominent both as a writer and critic. As early as 1973 his views were

> ..at variance with many of the criteria associated with liberal humanism. In 'Artistic and Political Mirage' Ndebele acknowledged the vividness of Mtshali's descriptions, but noted as serious limitation the poet's apparent unwillingness to confront the fact of a reality which, far from being monistic, is definitely seen to be alterable by virtue of man's social actions.[56]

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[53] An overview of these debates can be found in David Attwell, "The British Legacy in African criticism" *English in Africa* Vol. 11, No.1 (May 1984)

[54] The very brief mention of black critics here is by no means an attempt at a 'marginalization' of these views. The problem of the relationship between art and politics has always been an issue only for white academics, while black writers generally take for granted the necessary unity of art and politics. See:
Sipho Sepamla, "The Black Writer in South Africa today: Problems and Dilemmas" *New Classic* No. 3 (Wattville, 1976)
--- "The thrust of black writing since the mid-sixties: A subjective view" in Ezekiel Mphahlele & Tim Couzens (eds) *The Voice of the Black Writer in Africa* (University of the Witwatersrand, 1980)
Mafika Gwala, "Black Writing Today" *Staffrider* Vol. 2, No. 3 (Johannesburg, 1979)
Mbulelo Mzamane, "Literature and Politics among Blacks in South Africa" *New Classic* No. 5 (Wattville, 1978)
Njabulo Ndebele, "Turkish Tales, and some thoughts on S.A. Fiction" *Staffrider* 6, 1 (1984)
--- "The rediscovery of the ordinary: Some new writings in South Africa" *Journal of Southern African Studies* 12, 2 (1986)

[55] Es'kia Mphahlele, *Voices in the Whirlwind* (London: Macmillan, 1973)
--- "The Voice of Prophecy in African Poetry" *English in Africa* Vol.6 No.1 (March 1979)
--- "Mongane Serote's Odyssey: The path that breaks the heels" *English Academy Review* No. 3 (1985)

[56] Michael Chapman, *South African English Poetry: A Modern Perspective* p.192

In the article mentioned by Chapman, Ndebele points to the work of Serote as being the right direction for black writers to follow - i.e to adopt a 'resistance' as opposed to 'protest' stance in their work. Ndebele's critical work over the last decade is of special significance to the debates over art and politics. As Michael Vaughan has shown, Ndebele does not take sides within this debate, but achieves a new position on it by advocating the necessity for a conjunction between art and politics.[57]

With regard to debates in English universities though, it was clear that by the mid-1980s materialist-orientated literary critics, sociologists and historians had established themselves, and it seemed that the arguments over the issues outlined above were over. Several papers at two important conferences[58] had shown that materialist approaches offered an effective route to understanding the complexities of black South African writing in relation to social forces and realities. And while pointing to some possible new points of departure within the liberal framework, Colin Gardner in his 1985 article seemed unable to go beyond the questions he had posed some years earlier:

> What opportunity for detachment is offered by our present civil war, or by the recent South African army attack in Botswana - an attack, by the way, in which Thami Mynele, a close friend of Serote's and the illustrator of most of his published works, was killed? ...Finally, what is, or should be, or could be, the role of poetry itself at such a moment of crisis? And what is the role of criticism? Or has it a role?[59]

A convincing reply to Gardner was given by Jeremy Cronin in the same issue of the *English Academy Review*.[60] Cronin sees the debates around black poetry as being between the

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[57] Michael Vaughan, "The Writer as Storyteller?" African Studies Institute seminar paper no.226 (March 1988)

[58] These are: the conference on Literature and Society in Southern Africa held at the University of York in September 1981, and the colloqium "Publisher-Writer-Reader" at the University of the Witwatersrand in September 1982. The York conference proceedings have been published in the *Journal of Southern African Studies* 9, 1 (October 1982) and in Landeg White and Tim Couzens (eds) *Literature and Society in South Africa* (Cape Town: Maskew Miller Longman, 1984). The proceedings of the colloqium "Publisher-Writer-Reader" are edited by Susan Gardner and published by the Department of Comparative Literature, University of the Witwatersrand (1986). Significant articles and papers are listed in the bibliography to this dissertation.

[59] Colin Gardner, "Irony and Militancy in Recent Black Poetry", *English Academy Review* 3 (1985)

[60] Jeremy Cronin, " 'The law that says/Constricts the breath line(...)': South African English Language Poetry Written by Africans in the 1970s", *English Academy Review* No.3 (1985)

formalist and sociological schools of thought (i.e idealist vs. materialist), and in his view these debates have thrown up a number of theoretical obstacles which have impeded further investigation of this poetry. Cronin's way out of the 'theoretical antinomies' is to adopt a sociolinguistic approach whereby a "*close analysis* of the poetry *in terms of* its social and historical significance" can be undertaken.

Cronin's approach does point towards a new direction in studying black poetry, and this will be used in the later discussion of Serote's texts. But his ideas seemed to go unheeded in some quarters, for in 1987 an article by Stephen Watson appeared in *Upstream* magazine which stimulated debates that had much in common with those in *Contrast* a decade earlier.[61]

Watson castigated the work of Serote and his contemporaries for what he termed its "still-born quality" and "stupefying intellectual poverty", and relegated it to the minor position of a "modest part of contemporary South African poetry in English." Criticism was similarly dismissed - "all those learned, earnest articles in Michael Chapman's *Soweto Poetry*, celebrating this poetry, now look stupid at worst, premature at best."

In reply, Kelwyn Sole[62] pointed out Watson's "faulty assumptions" and "unconscious use of racially exclusive categories of thought." Sole finds "little difference in his [Watson's] personal predilictions from a discourse hegemonic in university English departments in this country until very recently - a liberal, anti-theoretical and anti-political impulse first seriously assaulted by Black Consciousness poetry and drama in the early Seventies." In Sole's view, Watson's approach is not "sufficiently problematised" and he suggests that Watson take "into account the political, stylistic and cultural context from which this poetry arises and to

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61 Stephen Watson, "Shock of the Old: What's Become of 'Black' Poetry', *Upstream* Vol. 5, No. 2 (Autumn 1987)

62 Kelwyn Sole, "The Shock of the Old?: More Likely Nostalgia for the Past" *Upstream* Vol. 5, No. 4 (Spring 1987). Lionel Abrahams intervened in the debate on Watson's side in a letter in *Upstream* Vol. 6, No.1 (Summer 1988)

which it addresses itself."

The preceeding discussion gives an outline of the directions in "metacriticism" (criticism about criticism) - debates concerned with the relationship between art and politics, and arising from the challenge issued by the emerging voice and aesthetic of resistance in South African writing over the last thirty years. In summary, one could say that the emergence of the new black poetry is coterminous with the rise of materialist-orientated scholars in the arts and social sciences at English-speaking universities, who have used the new poetry and its 'sociological' nature as ammunition for their assaults on the literary bastions of liberal humanism. The liberal humanists are usually attacked by the materialists (and with good reason) for the inability of 'traditional' methods of criticism such as practical criticism to come to terms with the social and political significance of texts from writers like Serote.

It would appear that materialist approaches have gained ground over the last two decades, and from a theoretical point of view these have much to offer in terms of understanding the complex set of relationships between literature and society. But in their obsessions with context and exposing the faulty assumptions and false consciousness of the idealists (or 'formalists'), the materialist (or 'socio-historical') critics tend to lose sight of the actual texts and are thus unable to say anything meaningful about symbolism and aesthetics. Nor (with the exception of Jeremy Cronin) has anything resembling an informed close reading of South African resistance poetry been forthcoming from materialist critics (even though Tim Couzens pointed to this possibility in the mid-Seventies).[63]

Idealist approaches are primarily concerned with aesthetics, but with demise of liberal humanism and practical criticism these approaches are open to charges of "irrelevance", and also fail to account for the political impulses behind the writing and performing of resistance literature. But these approaches do offer ways of understanding the textual and formal

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[63] Tim Couzens, "Criticism of South African literature" *Work in Progress* No. 2

dynamics of black writing, and cannot be lightly dismissed.

In my own view, there are merits and shortcomings on both sides of the debate. While it is important to formulate new approaches to the poetry, it is also imperative to avoid the pitfalls of a rigidly idealistic approach (being apolitical and ahistorical) on the one hand, and the reductionistic determinism of materialism on the other. My own formulation of a new approach is not intended as yet another intervention in the overcrowded terrain of metacritical wrangling, but instead seeks new areas of exploration. I have thus attempted to construct a critical approach to Serote's work that would in some way combine idealism and materialism without conflating these views or lapsing into a chaotic and diffuse eclectism.[64]

TOWARDS A CRITICAL APPROACH TO RESISTANCE LITERATURE

> Criticism will always have two aspects, one turned towards the structure of literature and one turned toward the other cultural phenomena that form the social environment of literature.[65]

This dissertation is primarily concerned with investigating the relationship between aesthetics and resistance in the writing of Mongane Wally Serote. In terms of the above quotation from Northrop Frye, aesthetics would correspond to the 'structure of literature', and resistance would be the 'cultural phenomena that form the social environment' of Serote's work. But in transferring Frye's paradigm into an African context it is important to take note of the views of African critics on the function of criticism and the role of the critic. For example, Abiola Irele has stated

> ...we must see the critic himself as the active and intelligent mediator between the writer's consciousness and the responses of his larger audience of readers. If

[64] A full list of the considerable body of textual criticism on Serote and other black poets is given in the bibliography. I have decided not to discuss this here, as most of the theoretical stances have already been described. I do however refer to this criticism where it has informed or added to my own readings of Serote.

[65] Northrop Frye, *The Critical Path* (Brighton: Harvester, 1983) p. 25

> we accept the unifying role of the critical intelligence, we must expect the critic himself to possess as complete an awareness as possible of the entire range of all that has gone into the literary work, and his activity as one which brings into sharp focus the the various directions within the work as well as the relations outside the work itself which have determined, or at least shaped, the imaginative process which brought it into being. This means that the critic's intuition....must consist to a certain extent of some form of knowledge, of a common sensibility that unites him with the writer and that relates him instantly to his work.[66]

An approach to Serote along the lines suggested by Irele would meet the need of approaching his work with respect to the broader horizons of African cultural expression. But this approach raises problems when applying it in a South African context. For example, to what extent can a white South African critic claim a unifying common sensibility with a black township writer like Serote, given the very real (if externally imposed) cultural and class divisions that exist in South Africa? Obviously it would be naive for the white critic to claim direct experiential understanding of the material conditions that inform Serote's work. But, as Wole Soyinka suggests :

> Critical responses are in themselves an index of ... attitudes and are, even more relevantly, a reflection of those world-views which separate and profoundly affect the relations of art and life in differing cultures. A ground common to all fortunately makes comparative references possible: the creative man is universally involved in a subtle conspiracy, a tacit understanding that he, the uncommisioned observer, relates the plight of man, his disasters and joys, to some vague framework of observable truths and realities.[67]

In the South African context, the system of apartheid in all its cruelly elaborate manifestations makes up the "vague framework of observable truths and realities" that constitutes Serote's external references. This socio-political framework can be a common reference point for both writer and critic, if they both share a common desire to see it dismantled and replaced by a new social order.

There are guidelines, then, for a critical approach which is Afrocentric and that locates

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66 Abiola Irele, *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology* (London: Heinemann, 1981) p. 32. Irele's view has been elaborated upon with regard to South African literature by Peter N. Thuynsma in his paper "South African literary criticism: Beyond the exotic?" (Presented at the Grahamstown Festival, July 1985)

67 Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* p. 44

Serote's poetry in the broad context of African literary expression. Within more specific circumstances though, his writing is part of a worldwide literature of resistance - a literature that arises from national liberation struggles and resistance movements against Western imperialist domination of Africa, Central and South America, and the Middle and Far East (the "Third World"). With regard to criticism of this literature, Barbara Harlow has pointed towards the need for

> ...a criticism which must account not only for the poetic values in the verse but for its historical relevance as well, come to terms not only with its ideological persuasion but with its literary significance also, and with the dynamic impetus of the poetry's engagement, at once immediate and symbolically mediated, with a historical reality.[68]

Bearing in mind Harlow's prescription and the other points raised above, my own approach to Serote's poetry is to examine it from two differing but hopefully complementary perspectives.

The first is to take a materialist approach to Serote with the intention of exploring the ways in which resistance is present on a aesthetic level as a symbolic act. Here I use some elements of the interpretative model suggested by Fredric Jameson in *The Political Unconscious*.[69] This model enables an exploration of the social and historical context, as well as the changing ideological directions of Serote's poetry. It would be a valuable exercise to explore Serote's entire output from this perspective, but for clearer focus I have limited this section to a discussion of some important poems from Serote's first phase of literary activity.

Secondly, I will attempt to account for what Harlow calls the symbolic mediation of Serote's engagement with a historical reality. To my mind, this is equivalent to exploring the mythological dimensions of Serote's work. Here there are no existing models to apply,

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[68] Barbara Harlow, *Resistance Literature* p. 70

[69] Although Jameson does not discuss texts of resistance or African literature, his model has been applied in an African context by Abdul JanMohamed in his book *Manichean Aesthetics* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1983)

although some critics have made important contributions in this area.[70] In this section I discuss Serote's two 'epic' works *No Baby Must Weep* and *Behold Mama Flowers*, the poem "Time has run out", and *The Night Keeps Winking* and *A Tough Tale*, the two long poems written in the 1980s.

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70 Eskia Mphahlele "The Voice of Prophecy in African Poetry" *English in Africa* Vol. 6, No.1 (March 1979) and "Mongane Serote's Odyssey: The path that breaks the heels", *English Academy Review* No.3 (1985)
Francis Faller, '" Past, Present and Future Vision: A Comparative study of three long poems by Neruda, Paz and Serote", *English Academy Review* No. 5 (1987)

CHAPTER 2

RESISTANCE AND THE POLITICAL UNCONSCIOUS: SEROTE'S EARLY POETRY AS A SOCIALLY SYMBOLIC ACT

> ...all literature...must be informed by what we have called a political unconscious, that all literature must be read as a symbolic meditation on the destiny of community.[71]

The debates in South African literary criticism over the relationship between art and politics reveal the problems in constructing a critical approach to the work of Serote. Sociological and materialist approaches seem to have some promise, but with the exception of Abdul JanMohamed's *Manichean Aesthetics*, none have to my knowledge employed *The Political Unconscious* by Fredric Jameson as a model for analysing the aesthetics of resistance in black South African literature. In my reading towards a suitable critical approach a statement from Jameson seemed to point at a fundamental theoretical truth, with important implications for literary criticism:

> ...ideology is not something which informs or invests symbolic production, *rather the aesthetic act is itself ideological*, and the production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal "solutions" to unresolvable social contradictions.[72] (emphasis added)

Notions of a 'timeless' and 'universal' aesthetic, and rigid distinctions between 'private' and 'public' poetry, collapse in the face of this kind of thinking. Jameson also emphasises the key role of ideology in literary criticism, and while his investigations are largely concerned with western literary and theoretical works, his concept of the 'political unconscious' seemed to me to offer the most effective route to a fuller understanding of resistance literature in general, and Serote's work in particular. But before discussing Serote's early poetry from this perspective, I

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[71] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (London: Methuen, 1983) p.70
[72] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* p. 79

would like to briefly discuss some theoretical underpinnings of terms like 'resistance', and give an outline of Jameson's concept of the political unconscious as a model for a materialist approach to Serote's work.

THE DIMENSIONS OF RESISTANCE

There are many forms and forces of exploitation and oppression, and equally as many, if not more, ways of resisting domination by a particular class or racial group. In his introduction to *In Resistance*, Gary Okhiro argues that:

> ...struggle is the core of history and the principle dialectic in that struggle is between oppression and exploitation, on the one hand, and resistance on the other. Resistance thus constitutes a fundamental theme of history .... resistance in the face of oppression is a self-evident truth .... the cause of slave revolt was slavery.[73]

This is basically a paraphrase of one the central tenets of Marxism, and generally true, but historical and socio-political circumstances will necessarily determine the extent, strategy, and effectiveness of the resistance of a particular group in a given time and place.

Resistance is undoubtedly a fundamental theme of South African history. Vernon February shows the presence of resistance in South Africa as early as 1672, when two colonists were threatened by a Khoi with the following words: "Duytsman een woort calm, ons U kelum" (If white man one word speaks us you kill)[74] - and indeed the history of South Africa can be viewed as the history of black resistance to white conquest and domination:

> This resistance has taken many forms which naturally underwent profound modifications in the years following the arrival of the first colonists led by Jan van Riebeeck in 1652. Each form of resistance represented a specific reaction and attempted solution to the political, material, and organizational problems generated by white hegemony; each expressed simultaneously continuity and rupture with the

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[73] Gary Okihiro (ed), *In Resistance* (Amherst: University of Massachussets, 1986) p.1

[74] Vernon February, *And Bid Him Sing* (London: Kegan Paul International,1988) p. 89. The article also deals with the creole nature of Afrikaans, and has important implications for the notion of Afrikaans as a language of resistance. See for example the work of Hein Willemse and Sipho Sepamla's poem "Come Duze Baby".

practices of the past.[75]

Although a full survey of black resistance in South Africa is outside the scope of this dissertation, this history is one of the master codes of Serote's work. A critical approach to literature located within this master code would deal with the idea of literature as a form of resistance, showing how in both political and literary terms Serote's work is a *socially symbolic act* of resistance.

The qualification of 'symbolic' with 'socially' echoes the subtitle of *The Political Unconscious*, and also points to the problem of art's relationship with reality. An act of resistance that was merely symbolic would be ineffective if it did not have an impact in the 'real' or social world, but to what extent can literature claim any effectiveness in terms of changing the material world? This question is discussed more fully later in the chapter.

The characteristics of resistance literature have already been discussed. In the case of Serote, we will have to closely examine the ideologies of specific resistance movements (Black Consciousness and the African National Congress) and the interfaces of Serote's subjectivity with these broad ideologies, shifts in the poet's ideology over the past twenty years, and the artistic realisation of these processes in the actual texts. But first the concept of "resistance" will have to be clearly described and defined, lest it remain a vague and undifferentiated term with little analytic power.

In *Resisting Novels*, an exploration of ideology and literature, Lennard Davis discusses resistance as both a psychoanalytic and a political term.[76] Resistance in the psychological sense is a term in Freudian analysis. Freud says that resistance:

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[75] Robert Fatton, *Black Consciousness in South Africa: The Dialectics of Ideological Resistance to White Supremacy* (Albany: State University of New York Press,1986) p.1
[76] Lennard Davis, *Resisting Novels* (London: Methuen, 1987)

> means opposition. All those forces within the patient which oppose the procedures and processes of analysis, i.e. which hinders the patient's free association, which interferes with the patient's attempts to remember and to gain and assimilate insight, which operates against the patient's reasonable ego and his wish to change.[77]

While this is a useful insight, Davis does not extend his own view of psychological resistance far enough, for it is important to realise that in the process of psychoanalysis resistance is inextricably linked with repression:

> A violent opposition must have started against the entry into consciousness of the questionable mental process, and for that reason it remained unconscious as being something unconscious, it had the power to construct a symptom. This same opposition, during psychoanalytic treatment, sets itself up once more against our effort to transform what is unconscious into what is conscious. This is what we perceive as resistance. We have proposed to give the pathogenic process which is demonstrated by the resistance the name of *repression*.[78]

The notions of resistance and repression have important political connotations, and are also essential to an understanding of the political unconscious. There is in psychoanalysis a dialectic between resistance and repression, similar to the concept of class struggle that in Marx's view informs the movement of history:

> The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles: freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman - in a word, oppressor and oppressed - stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large or in the common ruin of the contending classes. [79]

In psychoanalysis the manifestation of resistance in the individual is a symptom of underlying pathology - the individual whose ego organization is weak will find a neurotic solution to certain forms of inner repression. In the same way, societies generate ideologies to rationalise asymmetrical power relations which have been repressed, distorted or elided in language. The writer or critical theorist can thus lead society to self-awareness by exposing the roots of its

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77 Lennard Davis, *Resisting Novels* p. 12

78 Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (Harmondsworth: Penguin,1973) p. 335

79 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The Communist Manifesto". In Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* p.20

legitimating ideology. A poem or political theory which performs this kind of analysis can be considered a symbolic act of resistance against collective repression.

While the main thrust in terms of resistance in Serote's work is towards exposing the roots of the dominant ideology of apartheid, there is a change in the way this manifests in the texts. A large part of Serote's early work (*Yakhal'inkomo*, *Tsetlo*, and the first part of *To Every Birth its Blood*) is concerned with the process of self-analysis, and political analysis is largely through metaphoric process and the portrayal of suffering and oppression in a township situation. Political and ideological analysis becomes more explicit and militant in later work, with the growth in Serote's political consciousness due to the circumstances of exile, events such as June 16 1976, and his later work as a member of the African National Congress.[80]

Psychological resistance and political resistance have a dialectical relation in the social world. Politically progressive forces will have to work to overcome the psychological resistance of groups who are in some sense wedded to their oppression. Political resistance is thus partly concerned with defeating psychological resistance through analysis and action. This is also true for the individual in an oppressed situation - for example in Black Consciousness thinking a key idea is that the first step on the road to liberation begins with the inward-looking process of overcoming the inferiority complexes inculcated by oppression. A central theme in the writings of Steve Biko is the notion of psychological liberation as a prerequisite for political freedom:

> On his own, therefore, the black man wishes to explore his surroundings and test his possibilities - in other words to make his freedom real by whatever means he deems fit. At the heart of this kind of thinking is that the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed. If one is free at heart, no man-made chains can bind one to servitude, but if one's mind is so manipulated and controlled by the oppressor as to make the the oppressed believe he is a liability to the white man, then there will be nothing the oppressed can do to scare his powerful masters.

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[80] For Serote's own view of this process, see Essop Pahad's interview with Serote (May,1989). (Included as an appendix to this dissertation)

> Hence thinking along the lines of Black Consciousness makes the black man see himself as a being complete in himself.[81]

This attitude certainly informs Serote's early work, but as suggested earlier there is a development away from a concern with psychological liberation to the more concrete practicalities of political struggle.

In the political sense, resistance is either armed or passive and refers to the refusal of oppressed groups to meekly submit to ruling class power. Political resistance implies a rejection of the *status quo* and a sense of solidarity against oppressive structures. James Scott has defined the term more closely:

> ...resistance includes any act(s) by member(s) of a subordinate class that is or are intended either to mitigate or deny claims (for example, rents, taxes, prestige) made on that class by superordinate classes (for example, landlords, large farmers, the state) or to advance its own claims (for example, work, land, charity, respect) vis-a-vis those superordinate classes.[82]

Although there are the inevitable problems associated with attempts to define broad concepts, Scott points out that this definition allows for both individual and collective acts of resistance, and does not exclude those forms of ideological resistance (such as protest or resistance literature) that challenge the dominant definition of the situation and assert different standards of justice and equity. This is important when applying the concept to Serote's work, which is from the beginning a literature of challenge and defiance against the systematic repression of the apartheid state.

Scott goes on to discuss the apparent dichotomy between *real* resistance, on the one hand, and token, incidental, or even epiphenomenal activities on the other. In this view:

> *Real* resistance is (a) organised, systematic, and cooperative, (b) principled or

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[81] Steve Biko, "Black Consciousness and the quest for a true humanity" in Aelred Stubbs (ed), *Steve Biko - I Write What I Like* (London: The Bowerdean Press, 1978) p. 92.

[82] James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak* (New Haven: Yale University Press,1985) p.290

> selfless, (c) has revolutionary consequences, and/or (d) embodies ideas or intentions that negate the basis of domination itself. Token, incidental, or epiphenomenal activities by contrast are (a) unorganized, unsystematic, and individual, (b) opportunistic and self-indulgent, (c) have no revolutionary consequences, and/or (d) imply, in their intention or meaning, an accommodation with the system of domination.[83]

Scott points out that these divisions are important when analysing various forms of resistance in relation to one another and the system of domination in which they occur. However, he goes on to show in his analysis that the apparent dichotomy fundamentally misconstrues the very basis of the economic and political struggle conducted daily by subordinate classes.

In this view the institutions of repression play a part in setting the parameters of resistance; and to the extent that such institutions are effective they may preclude all but token or informal acts of resistance. This is arguably the case in South Africa, where resistance (at all levels of class division) oscillates from organised 'legitimate' activity to violent confrontations to stubborn and sporadic acts of petty resistance. This oscillation may in some cases be due to changes in the social organization of the resisting groups, but it is more likely to be due to changes in the level of repression. If only radical political activity or armed struggle is seen as 'real' or 'true' resistance, then we simply allow the structure of domination to define for us what is and what is not resistance. If one starts to look at what it means for real people to reject, refuse, or resist subjection of themselves or others, as Scott does in his exhaustive study of a peasant community in Malaysia ".... it becomes apparent that the binary division between resistance and non-resistance is an unreal one."[84]

Closer to home, this view informs the new historiography of resistance in Southern African studies. For example, Leroy Vail and Landeg White have noted that

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83 James Scott,*Weapons of the Weak* p.292
84 James Scott,*Weapons of the Weak* p.viii

> ...resistance studies have been extended to include everything from foot-dragging and dissimulation to social banditry, to arson, to poaching, to theft, avoidance of conscription, desertion, migration, and riot. The new resistance is, in short, any activity that helps frustrate the operations of capitalism and its creatures.[85]

To this can be added the acts of resistance that take place in the symbolic or ideological domain, such as works of literature, popular performance, songs, chants, slogans and the like.

These kinds of arguments provide a strong foundation for the use of the term 'resistance' as a category for literature that challenges the social order. But in South African literary criticism there is a tendency to distinguish between resistance and protest. Some critics have seen the ideological shifts in black South African literature as some of kind of development from 'protest' to 'resistance', but this approach tends to mask the political thrust of Serote's work. To paraphrase Terry Eagleton, resistance in black South African literature is like politics in South African sport - it is there from the beginning.[86] It is more accurate to conceive of Serote's work as resistance literature.

In approaching resistance literature, it is useful to introduce a working distinction between aesthetic ideologies and socio-political ideologies within texts. Jeremy Cronin offers the work of H.I.E Dhlomo as an example of disjuncture between these types of ideology in the same text - where the overt African nationalist socio-political ideology (an ideology of resistance) is mediated, and sometimes 'hijacked', by an aesthetic ideology and an aesthetic practice based on 19th century English romantic views.[87] The same point can be made with regard to *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum* by Oswald Mtshali.[88]

Linking this notion to the categories of 'protest' and 'resistance', it could be said that 'protest'

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[85] Leroy Vail & Landeg White, "Forms of resistance: Songs and perceptions of power in colonial Mozambique (unpub. seminar paper, Rhodes University, 1983)

[86] Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983) p. 119

[87] Jeremy Cronin, "Ideology and Literary Studies in South Africa" (mimeo, UCT, 1985)

[88] Njabulo Ndebele, "Artistic and Political Mirage: Mtshali's Sounds of a Cowhide Drum" in Michael Chapman (ed.) *Soweto Poetry* (Johannesburg: McGrawHill, 1982)

poetry is undeniably political, but has a subdued and minimal impact due to the disjuncture between aesthetic and socio-political ideologies. Resistance poetry, on the other hand, would be characterised by a confluence and mutual reinforcing of aesthetic and political ideologies, and would play an effective part in the context of broader political initiatives. In the case of Serote, although the socio-political thrust of his work is broadly speaking always one of resistance, there are disjunctures and contradictions in aesthetic ideologies. This is seen for example in the novel *To Every Birth its Blood* where the "irruption of history" into the process of production of the text leads to an instability of structure and a certain degree of "ideological fluidity".[89]

The concept of resistance, then, has political and psychological dimensions, and is important in understanding both the historical dialectics of society and the psychodynamics of the individual. In literature, it can function as an umbrella category which subsumes other descriptions such as protest, indictment, political literature, or committed literature (literature engagé). In literary criticism, a coherent model for analysing a literary text as an act of resistance is offered by Fredric Jameson in his formulation of the political unconscious. While not pretending a full understanding of Jameson's extremely complex dialectical thinking, I will endeavour to give an outline of his theory, and then apply this to an examination of Serote's early work.[90]

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[89] Nick Visser,"Fictional Projects and the Irruptions of History: Mongane Serote's *To Every Birth its Blood*" *English Academy Review* No. 4 (1987)

[90] My discussion of Jameson draws on William C. Dowling, *Jameson Althusser Marx* (London: Methuen, 1984) and Abdul JanMohamed's application of Jameson's theories in *Manichean Aesthetics*.

THE POLITICAL UNCONSCIOUS

Marx and Engels laid the foundations for Jameson's concepts by showing the necessity of understanding the relation between ideas and the material world:

> We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real-life process we demonstrate the the development of the ideological reflexes and the echoes of this life process. The phantoms formed in the human brain are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises. Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence.[91]

Marx and Engels thus stress the notion that ideas must be bound to material developments, and that those structures of intellectual and cultural life - the 'superstructure' - are ideological because such systems embody the beliefs and myths of certain dominant classes. It is useful to link this idea to Freud's theories of art and culture, bearing in mind his notion of repression mentioned earlier.

As Lennard Davis has pointed out, the base/superstructure model evolved by Marx and Engels to explain the workings of history and society is not all that different from Freud's view of art as a sublimation of instinctual drives - where art is a kind of reflex and stands in dynamic relation to the base of libido which is displaced upwards. Herbert Marcuse explains this process:

> Under the law of the aesthetic form, the given reality is necessarily sublimated: the immediate content is stylized, the "data" are reshaped and reordered in accordance with the demands of the art form, which requires that even the representation of death and destruction invoke the need for hope - a need rooted in the new consciousness embodied in the work of art.[92]

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91 Lennard Davis, *Resisting Novels* p.29

92 Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension* (London: Macmillan, 1979) p.7

The conscious mind thus works in superstructural relation to the dynamically repressed. With regard to ideology, Freud's application of the unconscious to culture and history further opened the notion that no idea is what it seems, that all ideas and social formations have an unconscious component.[93] In the area of literary theory, these key ideas of Marx and Freud find their most sophisticated elaboration in Jameson's conceptualization of the political unconscious.

Building on from Althusser's notion that "ideology is eternal, exactly like the unconscious", Jameson is able to construct his 'doctrine' of the political unconscious. Referring to Marx's definition of the fundamental dialectic of history cited earlier (the 'uninterrupted narrative' of the struggle between ruling and oppressed classes), Jameson states:

> It is in detecting the traces of that uninterrupted narrative, in restoring to the surface of the text the repressed and buried reality of this fundamental history, that the doctrine of a political unconscious finds its function and its necessity.[94]

The political unconscious is thus an historicised revisioning of Freudian theory, and the unconscious is now seen as the collective denial or repression of underlying historical contradictions by human societies.[95] Jameson goes on to show that from this perspective the distinction that is conveniently made between cultural texts that are social and political and those that are not, is something worse than an error. In this view, 'individual consciousness' is only a meaningful construct in that it implies collective consciousness or a total social system, in the same way that a sentence is only coherent within the larger system of language. Individuality at the level of consciousness itself is a pathological manifestation of estrangement from the collective:

> ...[it is] a symptom and a reinforcement of the reification and privatization of contemporary life. Such a distinction reconfirms that structural, experiential, and conceptual gap between the public and the private, between the social and the

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93 Lennard Davis, *Resisting Novels* pp.32-35

94 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* p.20

95 It is important though to relativise the notion of a 'political unconscious' - for after ploughing one's way through Jameson's text it is quite easy to forget that other very powerful notions of the unconscious exist, for example Jung's 'collective unconscious' and Poincaré's 'mathematical unconscious'.

> psychological, or the political and the poetic, between history or society and the "individual", which - the tendential law of social life under capitalism - maims our existence as individual subjects and paralyzes our thinking about time and change just as surely as it alienates us from our speech itself....The only liberation from such a constraint begins with the recognition that there is nothing that is not social and historical - indeed that everything is "in the last analysis" political.[96]

Of course, this idea is nothing new in most contemporary African literature - where alienation is an alien concept due to the impossibilty of conceptualising the individual as separate from the community, and where the concept of 'art for art's sake' has failed to take root for the same reason. Many African writers and critics have emphasised the idea of African literature as a 'political' literature -for example Achebe states that in Africa

> ... art is, and was always, in the service of man...There is no rigid barrier between makers of culture and its consumers. Art belongs to all, and is a 'function' of society.[97]

As we have seen, this is also a central assumption of resistance literature, and it is certainly a cornerstone of Serote's work. As he says:

> I believe there is no difference between producing a pair of pliers and producing a poem. They both contribute to the broad definition of culture, and ultimately that is what is important. There is no writing for the sake of writing.[98]

If there is 'no writing for the sake of writing', this raises the question of the function of literature in society, and it is here that the doctrine of the political unconscious provides an answer. But in order to understand the operation of the political unconscious in the symbolic domain of literature, the concept of hegemony must be briefly explored.

Antonio Gramsci redefined and refined the Marxian concept of ideology by introducing the idea of hegemony - the notion that a ruling class does not always 'impose' its ideology on subordinate classes but that the ideology must be willingly accepted. Gramsci makes ideology

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[96] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* p.20
[97] Chinua Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (London: Heinemann, 1968) pp. 19, 22
[98] Michael Chapman, 'Interview with Mongane Serote' in Michael Chapman (ed), *Soweto Poetry* p.113

more concrete and tangible by shifting the discussion of ideology from a focus on domination to a more complex situation in which the consciousness of the oppressed permits them to accept the domination that shapes their perceptions. The role of the intellectual or writer in a revolutionary struggle is to 'conscientize' the subordinate classes into an awareness of their passive acceptance of dominant ideology or hegemony, and to replace old hegemonic forms with new ones more appropriate to liberation and equality.[99]

From Serote's early participation in the Black Consciousness movement to his present position in the cultural wing of the ANC, his work has always been informed by this perception of the role of the writer. But the aesthetic structures through which the conscientization is mediated are necessarily modified by the processes of history, and the more personal circumstances of exile and shifting ideological affiliations.

In applying the concept of hegemony to literature, Abdul JanMohammed (following Jameson and Eagleton) distinguishes between the ideological functions of hegemonic and nonhegemonic (or 'counter-hegemonic') texts:

> In the case of hegemonic literature that is justifying an established ascendancy, the ideological function of the text, in its existence as a symbolic act, is to "solve" contradictions in order to secure a coherent world, but in its existence as a determinate object the ideological function of the same text is to preserve the contradictions it wishes to solve.....because [a nonhegemonic group] is as concerned with defining and clarifying its values and priorities as with "subverting" the ascendancy of the dominant group, the primary ideological function of [nonhegemonic] texts as acts and objects is to bring to consciousness the deep contradictions afflicting the subjugated group and thereby to "solve" these contradictions by making them available to conscious, discursive analysis.[100]

A more straightforward way of saying this is that the ideological function of a hegemonic text is

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[99] Discussion of Gramsci in Lennard Davis, *Resisting Novels* pp.39-40

[100] Abdul JanMohammed, *Manichean Aesthetics* p. 267

to repress the political unconscious, while the function of nonhegemonic or resistance literature is to restore to the collective consciousness those repressed historical contradictions that make up the political unconscious. But here literature must confront the paradox of its status as a symbolic act, since both the processes of preserving and 'solving' contradictions take place within the symbolic domain of experience.

In hegemonic and counter-hegemonic (resistance) literature, the text is both a symbolic *act* and a *symbolic* act. The text is a genuine act in that the writer wants to do something to the world, but the work is 'merely' symbolic in that is h[illegible] no direct impact on the material world.[101] Marcuse gives a succint view of the text's potential effect as a socially symbolic act:

> Art cannot change the world, but it can contribute to changing the consciousness and drives of the men and women who could change the world.[102]

A hegemonic text can indirectly influence the material world by reinforcing certain dominant beliefs and attitudes (and in the process contribute substantially to the writer's social status and bank balance). The physical consequences of writing are perhaps more apparent the case of nonhegemonic texts or resistance literature, where the work can contribute to the process of raising political awareness, but the writer may be assasinated, imprisoned, banned, or forced into exile. Serote and many other South African writers, both black and white, have experienced these kinds of reactions to their work.

In the case of hegemonic literature, the function of a political criticism is to make visible the way in which the ideological structures of the text register the strain of repressing the political unconscious, or "to refuse the spontaneous presence of the work - to deny that 'naturalness' in order to make its real determinants appear."[103] (A non-political criticism would deny any repression, and point instead to the 'unity' and 'universal meaning' of the work). In

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101 See William Dowling, *Jameson, Althusser, Marx* p.122
102 Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension* p.32
103 Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology* (London: Verso, 1986) p.101

approaching a nonhegemonic text, the function of the (nonhegemonic) critic would be to illuminate the ways in which such texts make historical contradictions and repressed realities available to conscious analysis. (Hegemonic criticism would seek to contain and marginalise the potential effectiveness of these texts by denying them any aesthetic value - see chapter 1 for examples).

In Jameson's model, any study of resistance literature

> ....remains ineffective if it is limited to the merely 'sociological' perspective of the pluralistic rediscovery of ...isolated social groups; only an ultimate rewriting of these utterances in terms of their essentially polemic and subversive strategies restores them to their proper place in the dialogical system of social classes.[104]

A proper rewriting of Serote's texts in Jameson's terms must take place within the totality of society, taking into account the limitations imposed on any individual's attempt to conceive of something that is necessarily beyond the boundaries of individual consciousness. In this view, interpretation of a text is on three levels or within three concentric and ever-widening interpretative 'horizons'.

In Jameson's framework, the first horizon is the political and historical context of the work. In the case of Serote, individual texts must be analyzed in relation to political ideologies of resistance and specific historic events, in order to show the interfaces of Serote's subjectivity with the wider collectivity. The main aim here is to examine the ways in which Serote's work resists the dominant ideology of apartheid, and in so doing discloses the presence of those social contradictions which necessarily exist in the manichean structure of the South African social formation.

The concept 'manichean' refers to the dualism of Mani, founder of Manicheism in about 250AD. Manicheism became one the most influential of the Christian heresies, and although

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104 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* p. 86

quite complex in its mythology, basically teaches

> the existence of two eternal principles, that of spirit, light, and truth, and that of matter, darkness, and falsehood. These two principles are personified as God and the Prince of Darkness, and although they are both eternal, only the principle of light is divine. The kingdom of God consists of light, force and wisdom working together in serene harmony; the kingdom of darkness is chaotic, noisy, and confused.[105]

When this kind of thinking informs a political ideology, the ruling class or race equates itself with the divine principle, and relegates the subordinated classes/races to the realm of unredeemable darkness. The use of the concept as a tool of analysing the ideological and social formations of colonial societies was introduced by Franz Fanon in his important works *Black Skin White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth.* In Fanon's analysis the European colonizer sees himself as God, and Africa as the repository of evil:

> The colonial world is a Manichaean world. It is not enough for the settler to delimit physically, that is to say with the help of the army and the police force, the place of the native. As if to show the totalitarian character of colonial exploitation the settler paints the native as a sort of quintessence of evil....the native is declared insensitive to ethics; he represents not only the absence of values, but also the negation of values. He is, let us dare admit, the enemy of values, and in this sense he is the absolute evil.[106]

The specific form of Manicheism which underlies the ideology of apartheid has been traced by Abdul JanMohamed. Although the ideology (or political mythology) has undergone modifications over the years, at the core is the neo-Calvinist notion of predestination of the Afrikaner - the Afrikaner is chosen by God, and the African is a demonic agent sent to test him. Apartheid as a social programme is thus the implementation of the divine plan, and in order to maintain this divinely legislated social order the Afrikaner is willing to repress blacks as ruthlessly as necessary:

> The sense of superiority gained from this manichean polarization allows him to live happily amongst a host of moral and social contradictions: while claiming privileged access to Christian compassion, he denies humanity to the blacks; while worshipping justice, he practices racial discrimination; while claiming to be civilized, he tortures

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105 Jeffrey B. Russell, *The Prince of Darkness: Radical Evil and the Power of Good in History* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1989) p. 84

106 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967) pp. 31-32

> people who attempt to exercise their political rights; while arguing that he is developing Africa, he systematically retards African development, and exiles, tortures, and murders African intellectuals; while pretending to be independent from the blacks and promoting "disinterested" theories of "separate development," he depends entirely on the exploitation of cheap African labour for his comfort and wealth; and while zealously fighting godless communist totalitarianism, he has in fact created the most ruthless, authoritarian, and systematically inhuman society in the contemporary world.[107]

It can be argued though that this kind of analysis underplays the role of capitalism and western imperialism in allowing the average white South African to live quite happily amongst a morass of social contradictions. It is perhaps also unfair to lay the entire historical burden of responsibility for apartheid and its inherent Calvinistic manicheism entirely upon the Afrikaner, although he must undoubtedly shoulder most of the blame for its ideological elaboration into a particularly harsh and brutal system of political repression since 1948. In this respect, Robert Fatton has described the South African political economy as a 'Volkskapitalisme', developing because of the active ideology of racism encroaching upon the material base of society, and requiring for its emergence in the 30s and 40s:

> a conjuncture of economic and cultural forces resulting in three different but interrelated phenomena: the dissolution of the process of multiracial proletarianization induced by British-led industrialization; the subsequent re-creation of the organic unity of the Afrikaner 'nation'; and the cultural and ethical differentiation of the Africans as an exploitable periphery.[108]

Broadly speaking, the ideologies of both the African National Congress and the Black Consciousness Movement are ideologies of resistance against the above forces and phenomena, although varying markedly in specifics and praxis. It is beyond the bounds of the present analysis to trace in detail the history and changes in ideological emphasis and political strategy of these resistance movements, but these will be touched on where they are relevant to Serote's work.

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107 Abdul JanMohamed, *Manichean Aesthetics* p. 84
108 Robert Fatton, *Black Consciousness in South Africa* p. 48

The first horizon of Serote's work, then, is the ideology and history of black resistance to apartheid over the period 1969 to the present.[109] The ideological function of his texts, as both socially symbolic acts and determinate objects, is initially to disclose and resolve the contradictions listed above, by describing the marginality of black life under apartheid and bringing to consciousness the political structures which keep black people suppressed. But as the processes of history interface with the personal life of the writer, the contents of Serote's own political unconscious become more conscious. The ideological thrust of his work takes on new directions, to point now to the political action needed to make concrete the psychological liberation already achieved in the initial 'inward-looking' process.

The second horizon of the text in Jameson's model is constituted by the tension and struggle between classes, or the social order in its broadest sense. Within this horizon Serote's entire body of work must be approached by examining it as an individual utterance in the antagonistic system of class discourses. This dialogue between classes is made possible by the unity of a shared code. Jameson's example of this is the English Civil war:

> where the 'antagonistic dialogue' between a hegemonic Anglicanism and a suppressed Puritanism shattered into a vast and discordant heterogeneity of militant sects ... each of which defined its political relation to all the others in the religious terms of prophecy, biblical interpretation, radical theology, and the like.[110]

In this historical situation, religion is operating as the shared code within which the antagonism between opposing discourses is fought out. A similar process informs the current 'civil war' in

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[109] Again, it would be beyond the scope of the dissertation to chart these in detail, and tease out all the implications, but important processes and events here are the emergence of the BC movement, the restriction of its activities with the banning of certain key figures in 1974, the Soweto rebellion of 1976, the ultimate banning of BC organisations in 1977, the death in detention of Steve Biko in 1977, growing guerilla activity by the ANC, the implementation of a 'passive revolution' by the SA government to counter 'total onslaught' together with massive clampdowns inside the country and cross-border strikes against insurgents, the emergence of mass based organisations such as COSATU the UDF, uprisings in black townships in 1984-1985, the imposition of the state of emergency in 1986, increasing polarization between black and white on the one hand, but increasing convergence and unity between resistance organisations on the other.

[110] William C. Dowling, *Jameson Althusser Marx* (London: Methuen, 1984) p. 129

South Africa, where the antagonistic dialogue is broadly speaking between a hegemonic Calvinism and a suppressed African humanism, which has shattered into a polarised system of contending ideologies. Instead of religion, however, the shared code is *race,* and the possibility of even an antagonistic dialogue between classes is severely limited by the monological character of apartheid discourse. Here Graham Pechey has defined apartheid as a

> stridently racist dialogue inimical to any dialogism ... a politics of permanent crisis whose curiously apologetic postures take their character from a primal failure which can never be acknowledged. Its direct coercion can silence discourse only piecemeal and contingently, in a killing or a gaoling. It is proof that that seemingly purest of monologisms - a discourse of purely unilateral instrumentality subserving naked repression - is always unrealisable this side of a genocidal final solution.[111]

The symbolic action of Serote's work is to resist the monologism of apartheid, and restore to meaningful dialogue the suppressed voices of the black majority in South Africa. This is initially done through a redefinition of self and society, by negating the stereotyped and negative images of black culture propounded through the ideological institutions of the apartheid state. Ultimately though, in the same way as Alex la Guma, Serote responds to the absolute manicheanism of apartheid with absolute negation, and his work advocates a total destruction of the apartheid system.[112]

Within the second horizon of literary interpretation, the object of study is the 'ideologeme', or minimal unit around which class discourses are organized. As Jameson conceptualises it:

> The ideologeme is an amphibious formation, whose essential characteristic may be described as its possibility to manifest itself either as a pseudoidea - a conceptual or belief system, an abstract value, an opinion or prejudice - or as a protonarrative, a kind of collective fantasy about the "collective characters" who are the classes in opposition.[113]

In Serote's work, this minimal unit is in broad terms the notion of resistance. But the

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111 Graham Pechey, "On the Borders of Bhaktin: Dialogization, Decolonization" in *The Oxford Literary Review* No. 9, 1-2, (1987) p. 80

112 Abdul JanMohamed, *Manichean Aesthetics* p. 278.

113 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* p. 87

ideologeme changes over time. Resistance in Serote's early work coalesces around the ideas of psychological liberation and making the positive the concept 'black', to counter negative European stereotypes. Another strong idea here is the portrayal of suffering as a direct result of the political system. As Serote's political consciousness changes and develops, resistance becomes more concrete and clearly defined, and begins to include the necessity of armed struggle, as well as changing the emphasis from race to class. The process of analysing his work within this second horizon will explore the way in which these 'core ideas' are transformed into poetry.

The third horizon of Jameson's model is History in its broadest sense, the untranscendable horizon which makes meaning possible. This is the realm of what Jameson calls the ideology of form. Here a promising area of inquiry is into Serote's use of myth as a form of resistance, and a separate chapter is devoted to a discussion of Serote's texts within this furthest horizon. What follows is an examination of Serote's early work, within the methodological limits of the first and second horizons as outlined above.

SEROTE'S EARLY POEMS AS SOCIALLY SYMBOLIC ACTS

In Jameson's interpretive model the first horizon of the text is the narrowly political, and it is the emergence of Black Consciousness (BC) as a political force that informs the ideological direction of the first phase of Serote's work, although this is not clearly discernable in the first poems. Talking about his beginnings as a writer, Serote says:

> Basically I felt there were things I wanted to say. My background of Alex made me feel extremely disenchanted, like everybody else. I wanted to use writing as a medium to express this disenchantment. Alexandra was for me a definition of the way blacks lived in our country as a whole.[114]

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[114] Interview in *Staffrider* Vol. 4, No. 1 (1981) p. 30

Mongane Wally Serote's first published works were two poems which appeared in 1969 - "Cat and Bird" in *The Classic* and "This Oldwoman" in *New Coin*.[115] "Cat and Bird" metaphorically expresses Serote's disenchantment, there are no explicit social or political references:

> Soft steps,
> Expressed fully by the teeth,
> Meeting each other through the road of flesh,
> And blood, the last sweat of the bird
> Dripped.
> The cat slid across the green grass,
> Glowing hunger in its dark eyes.
> Into the dry, dusty leaves
> It hid.

On the surface, the poem is a rather simplistic description of an everyday encounter between two age-old adversaries, but the metaphors 'road of flesh' and 'sweat of the bird' are unusual, as are the 'dark eyes' of the cat. 'Road' and 'sweat' suggest work, and associations of exploitation/suffering can be made - the cat of white capitalism preying on the bird of black labour. But this reading can be inverted: here the cat becomes the threat of emerging and growing black resistance to the bird of white domination, the cat hiding in the 'dry, dusty leaves' - a prominent image in Serote's early work. 'Road' here would have connotations of distance, another prevalent image in Serote, as is the associated image of blood.

Perhaps it is a bit much to demand this kind of political meaning from a seemingly innocuous poem. But placing the poem in the ideological framework of emerging BC thought, as well in the overall context of Serote's work, shows the validity of this kind of reading. It is also interesting to note that this poem was not included in *Yakhal'inkomo* but was part of Serote's

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[115] *The Classic* Vol. 3, No. 2 (1969) p.17
New Coin Vol. 5, No 2. (1969) p.9

second collection *Tsetlo*, where Mbulelo Mzamane refers to the piece as a 'political fable'.[116] Gordimer's remark that the poetry of Black Consciousness was both 'hiding-place and megaphone'[117] is also relevant here - this poem tending very much to be allusive rather than openly confrontational, or propagating an ideology, as the later poems do. The poem is also interesting in that the encounter between cat and bird is indicative of the manicheanism that underlies South African society. As Fanon has said,

> The settler's work is to make even dreams of liberty impossible for the native. The native's work is to imagine all possible methods for destroying the settler. On the logical plane, the Manichaeism of the settler produces a Manichaeism of the native. To the theory of the 'absolute evil of the native' the theory of the 'absolute evil of the settler' replies.[118]

In terms of Jameson's critical model, this primary manicheanism would inform the ideologeme of resistance in Serote's work.

"This Oldwoman", published at around the same time as "Cat and Bird", is also suggestive of a manichean view, and introduces other elements of Serote's ideological and thematic preoccupations. Women are a powerful symbolic and literal presence in Serote's work, and the 'oldwoman'[119], although 'worn and torn' is still an object of beauty for the poet - but the beauty is 'foreign' to him. There are suggestions of a deep alienation here, another prevailing theme in the early poems, and the first part of *To Every Birth its Blood*. But the woman is also associated with history:

> Me talking with her,
> I feel the bitter winter cold:
> It's like driving in a car
> Watching untouched natural scenery unfold

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116 Introduction to Serote's *Selected Poems* (Johannesburg: Ad Donker, 1982) p. 7
117 Nadine Gordimer,*The Black Interpreters* (Johannesburg: Spro-Cas/Ravan,1974) p. 52
118 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* p.73
119 This was changed to 'old woman' for inclusion in the collection *Yakhal'inkomo*, p11. The whole poem was in fact substantially revised - references are to the revised version.

(Me think angrily rushing past, the car windows remaining behind).

And when I stop and think,
The prize: a frozen past.
This old woman stalks up the street now
Like the stranger that takes a glance at me
From his car, and me from mine,
When the traffic light turns: Red!
This old woman.

Serote feels alienated from both his community and the past, which is 'frozen' - and at this stage feels a nameless anger at his condition. A pointer to the source of this feeling is the 'stranger'. No clues are given as to his identity, but he is associated with the red traffic light - suggesting barriers and division, the great divide between black and white - and another portrayal of an encounter is presented.

I have discussed these first poems to show how they contain embryonic kernels of Serote's main themes, and indicate towards the aesthetic of resistance which develops over time. The poems are also important for another reason. In 1969, Serote was detained under the Terrorism Act and spent nine months in solitary confinement. These poems were written before Serote's detention, and "Cat and Bird" was actually used as an instrument of interrogation on Serote - the extremely bizarre situation of the poet being tortured by his own poem.[120] There is an anger and militancy in poems written after his release - for example "What's in this Black 'Shit'" - which can only be attributed to this kind of first-hand experience of the core brutalities of the apartheid system. In addition, it is likely that the experience of detention played a part in Serote's decision to become actively involved in the emerging BC movement.

The notion of a 'frozen past' in "This Oldwoman" also suggests Serote's very real sense of

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120 see interview with Serote, May1989 (Appendix)

isolation from a living literary tradition into which he could write. This is mentioned in the *Staffrider* and ICA interviews cited earlier, and the same issue arises in a panel discussion at University of Texas in 1975 - where Serote also mentions other important preoccupations in connection with his early work:

> When I started writing, it was as if there had never been writers before in my country. By the time I had learned to write, many people - Zeke, Kgotsitsile, Mazisi Kunene, Dennis Brutus - had left the country and were living in exile. We could not read what they had written, so it was as if we were starting right from the beginning. From around 1969 - 1974 a whole new group of people started writing: the newspapers described us as a 'new wave of poetry', whatever that means. At the head of this group was James Matthews, who set the standard of how we were going to deal with the things around us. There was also a group of students, the South African Student's Organization - SASO - which was very influential in determining what people were going to write about. At that time many people were responding to literary criticism in the newspapers; their writing was being influenced by the standards created by the newspapers. Then SASO, BPC, BCP and other black organizations came out with their own magazines, through which we could publish; they gave us a platform from which we could speak directly to the black community.[121]

As well emphasising his literary rootlessness, Serote also points to his rejection of white liberalism and commitment to a black audience, and the influence of Black Consciousness in the form of SASO on his writing. The next section of this chapter explores aspects of Serote's early poetry (*Yakhal'inkomo* and *Tsetlo*) in relation to Black Consciousness ideology/philosophy - the emergence of the movement being a highly significant political process in the early 70s and thus crucial in defining the first 'horizon' of Serote's first literary phase.

Serote was an active participant in organizations associated with the Black Consciousness movement from 1970 - 1974. As a writer he worked with CULCOM, the cultural commitee of SASO/BPC. Here he worked with Strini Moodley and Saths Cooper, who were later to become key figures in the movement, and helped to form the South African Black Theatre Union

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121 Bernth Lindfors (ed.) *Contemporary Black South African Literature: A Symposium* p.36

(SABTU). Serote then worked with the cultural groups Mihloti and MDALI before leaving for Columbia University on a Fulbright scholarship in 1974. Serote's time in America was the beginning of his long exile, and the start of his ideological break with BC. But at this first stage, BC ideology is clearly the dominant strain in Serote's thinking and writing.

The Black Consciousness movement was made up of several organisations engaged in promoting the cause of black liberation. Prime mover among these was the South African Students Organisation (SASO), which was founded as a result of the break away by black students from NUSAS in 1968. The philosophy of Black Consciousness crystallised through attempts to name and describe the impulses and ideas that had fuelled the breakaway and promoted black solidarity.

The whole area of studies on Black Consciousness is fraught with controversy, and there are many definitions of what it was and is, and what it meant then and means today, and differing evaluations of its influence and impact on historical and political processes of the 70s and 80s. For the purposes of this study, I have found Robert Fatton's study *Black Consciousness in South Africa* to be the most useful, as it focuses on Black Consciousness as an ideology of resistance. As Fatton points out,

> The process of making a revolution requires not only organization but also a process of ideological diffusion whereby the hegemony of the dominant classes is disarticulated and ultimately displaced by a new philosophy of emancipation. The Black Consciousness Movement effected precisely such disarticulation and displacement and it implanted into black South Africa a new ideological terrain.[122]

To the extent that literature can aid in effecting the disarticulation of the hegemony, this would be the ideological function of Serote's early work. The first phase of his work also assisted in the implanting into black South African literature of a new ideological terrain - in terms of opening up possibilities and pointing the way to the aesthetic structures required to articulate the

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[122] Robert Fatton, *Black Consciousness in South Africa* p. 125

new ethos of resistance inspired by Black Consciousness.

According to Baruch Hirson, the major themes of Black Consciousness included

> a liberation from *psychological opression*, the building of a *new awareness*, the establishment of a *new basic dignity*, the framing of a *new attitude of mind*, a rediscovery of the *history of the people*, and a *cultural revival*.[123]

Culturally speaking, the thrust of BC ideology was contained in the notion of 'conscientization', and art (in particular poetry) was an essential part of the process of raising awareness, and effecting the psychological liberation that was the precondition for progress in the struggle against oppression. Speaking of his part in this programme, Serote says:

> We tried as much as we could to introduce poetry readings. People were not used to reading poetry publicly. We wanted to conscientize writers and the black public. At that time we had defined our audience as mainly the black community.[124]

The notion that poetry, and especially performed poetry, can be instrumental in raising consciousness probably derives from the 'counter culture' and Black Power movements in America in the 1960s,[125] which had a strong influence on BC thinking, and also has antecedents in African oral tradition. But Serote's statement does point to an important aspect of BC ideology - that there was a definite 'line' for writers to follow. This is set out in more detail in the following extracts from CULCOM documents, which are worth quoting from at length, for they explain the role of poetry in BC's cultural programmes:

> Culture could be said to be the sum total of the day to day experience of a people. It is the expression of their feeling, experiences and aspirations and their social involvement which must be geared towards making them self-reliant and independent.
>
> What could be done is conduct a revival service of the good of the past that has been

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123 Baruch Hirson, *Year of Fire, Year of Ash* (London: Zed, 1979) p. 196

124 *Staffrider* interview, Vol. 4 No. 1, (1981) p.31

125 I have explored the potential of perfonned poetry as a means of raisng consciousness in an Honours dissertation "Poetry in Performance: Bob Dylan and Jim Morrison" (Wits 1985). From a broader perspective, and an important ons with respect to its status as a resistance movment, Black Consciousnes in South Africa is a facet of worldwide counter culture and student uprisings of the 60s.

tarnished and buried. Relevant art and other pursuits should not be apologetic but should aim at killing the myth that Blacks are incapable and non-human. Drama, poetry and other relevant writing could be used as instruments of empowering the people.

[Because of the negative psychological effects of colonialism] ....we believe that in order to liberate the people we first have to inculcate into the people a sense of pride, dignity and consciousness, a sense of awareness, self-assertion. This can be done by redirecting Art. We believe that art has a purpose, and its purpose is action. It contains the energy which could change things. Therefore, we are committed to liberating the people through the different manifestations of culture.

Black Poetry and Literature

1. The commision felt that it could not stipulate a set of rules which would govern the style poetry should adopt as this could destroy originality.
2. It was suggested that CULCOM .... could only direct the themes of poetry and gear it to changing the system and liberating the people.

[These suggestions and recommendations with regard to poetry were formally adopted as follows]:

1. We should get poets together to form workshops.....
2. Poetry reading sessions should be conducted widely as a means of conscientisation.
3. There sh dd be no rigid standards as to how poets should express themselves as this alienates them.
4. We should discourage concern for commercial gains as this contributes to market poetry,
5. We should re-direct protest poetry to suit our ultimate goal - liberation.[126]

Like any other overtly ideological statements about culture and art, the above are radical and rhetorical, and are problematic in certain aspects - for example the easy and glib notion of 'the people', and an unproblematic view of the idea that art has the power to effect changes in the material world. But the document is important in that it supports the idea that BC was from the outset an ideology of resistance, committed to 'liberating the people', and that poets working within this ideological framework are necessarily writing resistance poetry. The shift from protest to resistance in poetry is implied in the last statement (dated 1971) - and this can be seen in Serote's work when poems in *Yakhal'inkomo* (1972) and *Tsetlo* (1974) are compared with the two earlier poems already discussed, although the shift in emphasis is not always clearcut or

[126] SASO documents (1971).

absolute.[127] For example, Richard Rive in his article "Black Poets of the Seventies" suggests that:

> "Yakhal'inkomo" is the cry of the cattle at the slaughter house. It is a negative and recipient concept. "Tsetlo" is a bird which leads you to sweet honey, to a dangerous snake or to something unusual. It leads you on. It is positive and hits back.[128]

While Rive seems to have missed the fact that 'Yakhal'inkomo' is also associated with jazz saxophonist Winston Mankunku Ngozi, and therefore has positive/resistance connotations when linked to the notion of the 'jazz aesthetic', he is generally correct in pointing out that *Yakhal'inkomo* is transitional is ideological terms - marking the shift from the poetry of Black Protest to the poetry of Black Consciousness (resistance).

This transition is apparent in the opening poem of the collection, "The Actual Dialogue":

> Do not fear Baas.
> It's just that I appeared
> And our faces met
> In this black night that's like me.
> Do not fear -
> We will always meet
> When you do not expect me.
> I will appear
> In the night that's black like me.
> Do not fear -
> Blame your heart
> When you fear me -
> I will blame my mind
> When I fear you

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[127] Note also that the ideology only imposes guidelines on content, and not on form - which in itself is problematic if one assumes the necessary dynamic interrelatedness of content and form. This has important implications for understanding resistance aesthetics in Serote's work. Phases one and two are characterised by a highly original and creative aesthetic and style, but one which is informed by an externally imposed ideological content. In phase three, Serote seems to be subordinating aesthetic originality to an externally imposed aesthetic ideology.

[128] *English in Africa* Vol.4, No.1 (March 1977)

In the night that's black like me.
Do not fear Baas,
My heart is as vast as the sea
And your mind as the earth.
It's awright Baas,
Do not fear.

In keeping with BC ideology, Serote is pointing to race as the major factor in the South African situation, and is developing the ideas of manichean division and encounter between black and white. Here the influence of Negritude on BC thinking is apparent in the opposition between the black heart and white mind.[129] This is not merely lazy or clichéd writing however, for it is possible to read this as an *ironical citation* of the stereotyped image of black people held by whites:

> The black continues to represent himself to the white in the white's own image of him, in the white's own clichés of black generosity of nature, an image to be found in *Othello* and before, as well as in Césaire. And *it is this image of the black* that the white need not fear. The ironical citation of it, however, undermines it, and so threatens the white.[130]

The irony and undermining is sharply reinforced by the deliberate switch into black township English in the use of the word 'awright'. This also indicates that from now on the 'actual dialogue' will be held on Serote's 'turf', in his way of using the language, and on his own terms - a possible reason for placing the poem at the opening of the collection.[131]

The poem also illustrates the dialogical system of antagonistic class discourses mentioned in the discussion on theory, and Serote's way of resisting the monologism of apartheid discourse.

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129 for a discussion of the Negritude connection, see Temba Sono, "Some concepts of Negritude and Black identity" SASO newsletter (June 1971).

130 John Haynes, *African Poetry and the English Language* (London: Macmillan, 1987) p. 70

131 There has been much debate over the idea of 'audience' of the early poetry from writers like Mtshali, Sepamla and Serote - whether their writing was intended mainly for liberal whites or was in fact 'authentically' addressing the black 'community'. I feel that this will always remain a matter of conjecture, but I would suggest that this poem and others like "City Johannesburg" indicate that Serote does have a white readership in mind. But their are other poems, such as "Hell, Well, Heaven" and "My Brothers in the Streets" which clearly address a black audience, and follow the line that poetry should take according to CULCOM.

There are two 'dialogues' or conversations in the poem - the imaginary conversational situation set up in the poem between the black speaker and the white 'Baas' (who is only present by his absence), which is necessarily antagonistic, and the 'actual dialogue' between the poet and the reader. The meaning or interpretation of both dialogues depends on whether the reader is black or white.[132]

Resistance is evident the poem in that the black speaker in the imaginary discourse has usurped the dominant conversational role - usually held by the 'Baas' in South African class discourse - by placing himself in the role of reassurer. There is also a 'hidden agenda' here - in overtly reassuring the baas and telling him not to fear, the speaker is drawing attention to his own blackness and to the baas's fear, adding an extra layer of meaning to the clichéd comparison of black and night, and concealing an intention to *foster* anxiety in the baas.[133] The black speaker implies that he is no longer afraid, and is quite prepared to confront the baas with this new attitude:

> We will always meet
> When you do not expect me

Here the tone of resistance is continued in the implicit threat that the white baas's complacency is going to be continuously shaken in the future, and that white will not succeed in shutting black out, or repressing him, from consciousness.

From a psychological perspective, the black apparition may be seen as some kind of 'return of the repressed' - the baas's own unconscious addressing him - in much the same way as the black corpse functions in Nadine Gordimer's novel *The Conservationist*, (written around the same time). But the poem can also be read as Serote's plunging deep into his own unconscious, and overcoming the introjected fear of the white baas - in the process discovering his authentic

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[132] The terms black and white are used in the sense as defined in Black Consciousness ideology - where 'white' is a state of mind or ideological position and not a racial category.

[133] I am drawing on John Haynes' very able discussion in *African Poetry and the English Language* pp. 65 - 74

black self and effecting the psychological liberation that is a key component of the resistance ideology of Black Consciousness. N. Chabani Manganyi explains this process in several of his important essays on the psychology of Black Consciousness, for example in "The Making of a Rebel":

> For us the purgation that accompanies authentic self-knowledge was instrumental in getting us out of the trance of being pariahs and victims ....the false consciousness lures both him and his master into a restive kind of complacency ...to free themselves from this, blacks have turned blackness into a virtue and are making assertions and demands on its behalf. [134]

What is important here is Manganyi's description of the process of 'purgation' necessary to achieve psychological liberation, which in this first horizon of literary meaning reveals itself as a strong political and ideological strain in Serote's work. The main element in this process would be the purging of all traces of inferiority and submission inculcated by years of deference to white rule.

The poem was written in 1970 or 1971, when Serote was starting his active involvement with BC. An important ideological component of BC was the uncompromising rejection of white liberalism, and this comes through in the poem, although there is also a suggestion of Serote's vacillation between the liberal ideological position of reconciliation and the idea of aggressive resistance to white domination.

Mbulelo Mzamane reads the poem in its political context, and suggests that Serote is propagating the idea that the 'actual dialogue' should be between black and white and not white and other whites outside South Africa - i.e. a plea for political understanding between the races, and an identification of fear as the obstacle preventing this.[135] This is certainly an important 'ideological marker' in phase one of Serote's work, where there is often a vacillation between

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134 Noel Chabani Manganyi, *Looking Through the Keyhole* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1981) p. 69
135 John Haynes, *African Poetry and the English Language* p.70

the poet's anger at white abuses of power and his desire for reconciliation and healing.[136] But there is also a strong rejection of the white liberal position, as in the poem "Hippie or Happy":

> ..You follow Christ - I hear; you pot I'm told.
> The newspapers say it, you know,
> And you just want to walk around,
> And they say you have certificates;
> Maybe you are a piece of art walking around
> Made by time,
> Whose arms are guns,
> Whose face looks mad.

Here Serote shows quite graphically that in spite of their token gestures of protest against the system (like smoking 'pot'), most white liberals are inextricably tied to the system of domination, and thus will prefer to 'walk around' instead of engaging in real political action. Similar sentiments are expressed in "They Do It":

> ...They dapple the house
> With the black of an Indian or the black like mine,
> Then they smile. Broader.
> The image of 'crocodile tears'
> See?
> To repeat is when I continue
> Poetry of monotony
> So let's stop, we need a change.

A main tenet of Black Consciousness ideology was to extend the concept of 'blackness' to all oppressed groups, and thus Asians and 'Coloureds' were integrated into the movement provided they accepted their blackness. This idea is evident in the poem. But white liberals are castigated for their hypocrisy in gestures towards nonracialism, like the presence of 'token' blacks at parties, and the rejection of this position is clear in the closing line. But this also points towards the need for a new poetry, a new aesthetic that would powerfully convey the emerging

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136 For an interesting discussion of Serote's work from a theological perspective see A. S. van Niekerk, *Dominee, are you listening to the drums?* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 1982)

voice of resistance.

The voice of resistance is not always audible in this first phase, and it is also problematic to assume that there is a smooth development of the new aesthetic.[137] But there are certain poems which can serve as 'markers' of Serote's political thinking, and which show that the primary ideological function of resistance literature is to probe out and raise up the repressed contents of the political unconscious into to the realm of conscious awareness.

A key poem here is "What is in this black 'shit'". Jeremy Cronin has analysed in detail the linguistic functioning in the poem of the word 'shit', where in the movement of the poem the interjection shifts from literal and metaphorical meanings to become an *act* - an act of resistance against the pass officer, and by implication the apartheid system itself. This illustrates the notion of a socially symbolic act mentioned earlier, and at this historical moment the 'dethroning of the individual apartheid functionary' can only be symbolic, for the idea of organised resistance and 'material dethroning of the whole system' has yet to take root in collective consciousness.

The poem is also a useful paradigm of the process of the political unconscious becoming conscious. 'Shit' in the poem can be read as signifying white racist discourse, which in being internalised by the old woman and the father in the poem leads to acceptance of their oppressed position. In the case of the father, having to continually swallow and repress this 'shit' results in him venting his frustrations upon his daughter:

....
This 'Shit' can take the form of action:

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137 It would be interesting to chart this emerging voice historically, discussing specific poems in relation to devlopments in BC ideology and important events such as the strikes of 1973, the 'Frelimo' rally in Durban in 1974 and the subsequent banning of key figures in the movement. But none of Serote's early poems are dated, and one would therefore have to take a broader view. It is also not possible to assume a straightforward development from *Yakhal'inkomo* through *Tsetlo* to *No Baby Must Weep*. Several poems in *Tsetlo* were written before publication of the first collection, and according to his publisher, Serote worked on *No Baby Must Weep* from about 1972-1974 (interview with Adriaan Donker, September 1989)

My younger sister under the full weight of my father
And her face colliding with his steel hand,
....
I'm learning to pronounce this 'Shit' well
Since the other day
At the pass office
When I went to get to employment,
The officer there endorsed me to Middelburg,
So I said, hard and with all my might, 'Shit!'
I felt a little better;
But what's good, is, I said it in his face,
A thing my father wouldn't dare do.
That's what's in this black 'Shit'.

The poet, however, is in the process of purging himself of contamination, and refuses to internalise white racist discourse. He symbolically resists the racist connotations of 'shit' by violently flinging the word into the face of the pass officer, and in dialogical terms reclaims a discursive space that has long been denied him.

Two points seem to be emerging from the discussion so far. First, within the first horizon of this phase of Serote's work, the texts must be read as socially symbolic acts of resistance - where the symbolic action of this resistance is largely informed by the ideology of Black Consciousness. As Jeremy Cronin has pointed out,

> This ideology fostered a particular poetic practice in which the problem of language and its material effects on the consciousness and behaviour of radically oppressed individuals was highlighted. It gave rise to a political, restorative and therapeutic practice upon language.[138]

Second, within the second horizon the restorative and therapeutic practices on language have the effect of overcoming the monologism of apartheid discourse and reclaiming an oppositional space for the black voice in the antagonistic system of class discourses.

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[138]Jeremy Cronin, " 'The Law that says/Constricts the breath-line(...)': South African English Language Poetry Written by Africans in the 1970s" *English Academy Review* 3, 1985 p. 44

A detailed poem-by-poem reading of *Yakhal'inkomo* and *Tsetlo* would be necessary to firmly establish the points already made. But it seems safe to assume at this stage that the ideologeme of resistance is constituted in these texts by the processes of psychological liberation and making positive the concept 'black'. Resistance is also evident in the process of Serote exposing and undermining the ideological structures of government by portraying the effects of apartheid in terms of spiritual, moral and physical destruction in the lives of township inhabitants. This can be clearly seen in "City Johannesburg", a poem which contains most of the important features of Serote's early work.

As Colin Gardner has shown, "City Johannesburg" is open to a variety of readings. The poem is one level "a personal lyric - a cry of suffering, and frustration, and indignation." On another level the poem may be read as "a perceptive analysis of the working of advanced capitalism within South Africa's apartheid system."[139] From another perspective, Mbulelo Mzamane has drawn attention to the way in which Serote appropriates the role of the traditional *imbongi* or *seroki* (praise-poet) in order to rebuke white employers of black labour.[140] This view seems to point towards some kind of opposition to white hegemony. But to what extent can this poem be read as an act of resistance?

A reading of "City Johannesburg" as a resistance poem would benefit from a prior discussion of the politics of technology, or the ways in which technical systems such as cities embody the political ideologies of the ruling class.[141] In a complex argument, and one which is difficult to

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139 Colin Gardner, "Mongane Serote's 'City Johannesburg': Approaches to a poem" in Michael Chapman (ed.) *Soweto Poetry* (Johannesburg: McGraw-Hill, 1982)

140 Mbulelo Mzamane, "The uses of traditional oral forms in black South African literature" in Landeg White & Tim Couzens (eds.) *Literature and Society in South Africa* (Cape Town: Maskew Miller Longman, 1984)

141 This in turn would be situated within the broader context of our current ecological and environmental crisis, and from a literary perspective the relationship between literature and the environment is important here. See Stanley Frielick, "The Environment in English African Literature" Paper presented at the 'Green Congress' (HSRC, Pretoria, March 1990).

compress, Langdon Winner has written a persuasive analysis of the relationship between politics and technology. As he puts it:

> The issues that divide or unite people in society are settled not only in the institutions and practices of politics proper, but also, and less obviously, in tangible arrangements of steel and concrete, wires and semiconductors, nuts and bolts .... the adoption of a given technical system unavoidably brings with it conditions for human relationships that have a distinctive political cast - for example, centralized or decentralized, egalitarian or inegalitarian, repressive or liberating.[142]

In this view the physical infrastructure of a city such as Johannesburg would be inextricably linked to the political ideology of apartheid. In the same vein, labour historian Mike Davis has argued that "these current designs for fortified skyscrapers ...signal the coercive intent of postmodernist architecture in its ambition, not to hegemonize the city in the fashion of the great modernist buildings, but rather to polarize it into radically antagonistic spaces."[143] These polarized spaces can be clearly seen in the physical layout of South African cities - surrounded by the black townships which in a way lay siege to the cities that have been constructed against them.

In "City Johannesburg" Serote describes the city as a locus of both repression and death. The city is a closed space, and a 'pass' is needed to enter it if one is black and resident on the periphery. The carrying of the 'pass' is so internalised that it becomes identified with life itself:

> My hand pulses to my back trousers pocket
> Or into my inner jacket pocket
> For my pass, my life

The oppressive presence and unnaturalness of the city is mediated through its personification as a creature which inhales and exhales the daily mass of black workers. Technology, with its "neon flowers", "electrical wind", and "cement trees", has displaced nature to the extent that the

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142 Langdon Winner, *The Whale and the Reactor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986) p. 29
143 Mike Davis, "Urban renaissance and the spirit of postmodernism" cited in Barbara Harlow, *Resistance Literature* p. 15

city parasitically embeds itself into the consciousness of the poet in a totalitarian way:

> I can feel your roots, anchoring your might, my feebleness
> In my flesh, in my mind, in my blood,
> And everything about you says it,
> That, that is all you need of me.

In this poem Serote is beginning to develop the binary opposition between death and life, repression and resistance, that will characterise his long poems and the novel *To Every Birth its Blood*. At this stage however the emphasis is on identifying the causes and roots of the oppressive system, which is ultimately equated with the overpowering force of death:

> Jo'burg City, you are dry like death,
> Jo'burg City, Johannesburg, Jo'burg City.

Resistance is present on a symbolic and rather abstract level, but the ending is important for a white audience in that it has resonances with English romantic and urban wasteland traditions. The symbolic action of inverting the dominant view of technology as 'progress' and something inherently beneficial to humankind by naming it as a death force may not be politically effective in terms of mobilising 'the people'. But the political effect of a poem depends largely upon its reception. The poem is surely intended for a white reader, as the ironic 'salute' in the opening line suggests, and Serote is again reclaiming a dialogical space for the repressed black voice. By equating the literal presence of death in Alexandra (or in any black township for that matter) with the symbolic death-like qualities of (white) Johannesburg, Serote begins to bring the marginalised zones of black experience into the light of discursive analysis. It is in this dialogical struggle that Serote's early poetry becomes a socially symbolic act of resistance.

CONCLUSION

The general aim of this chapter was to outline a possible theoretical basis for discussing Serote's work as resistance literature. Jameson's interpretive model seems to offer an effective method for this kind of discussion, but a full examination from this perspective would entail a closer reading of the texts in relation to the ideology of Black Consciousness and the history of the early 70s in South Africa. The notion of the political unconscious is particularly relevant here, as this was a time when the awakening power of black and African nationalism began to confront the repressive forces of white ruling class consciousness on all levels of the complex South African social formation.

For Serote, the inward-looking process of arriving at self-knowledge and psychological liberation is one of symbolically resolving the political contradictions embedded in his own unconscious - both by participating actively in a cultural resistance movement and writing a new kind of powerful and self-assertive poetry. But even at this early stage of his development as a political writer, Serote felt the need to define a new aesthetic that could extend the processes of resistance set in motion by the ideological interventions of Black Consciousness into a more militant and revolutionary mode of cultural politics. In other words, the struggle in South Africa needed a new and unifying mythology of resistance that could articulate the aspirations and drive towards liberation of the oppressed classes, and situate this process within a broader historical and political context.

This transitional stage is apparent in several poems in *Tsetlo*,[144] but is perhaps most evident in "Mode of Broken Pieces". This is the longest of the early poems, and here Serote gestures towards the aesthetic structures and mythological themes that emerge in *No Baby Must Weep* and *Behold Mama Flowers*. The poem is structured around the recurring refrain:

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144 See for example "A Poem on Black and White" (p.11), "Durban" (p.32), "A Wish to Eye God" (p.41), and "Sunset" (p.62).

I
picked pieces of my bro-
ken heart early one morning
...

The poem narrates, in images of death and decay, a journey through South Africa in which the poet attempts to piece together the fragmented experience of life under apartheid. Serote begins to seek out the roots of oppression by extending his consciousness into a wider political and historical arena:

why?
did white people have blue eyes?
because now
District 6 dapples them
pitched in a black heart red with blood like leaping flames
glowing in song and warmth
as afro-american horns crack in the air
saying the hour is disastrous because everybody is fighting
on the dump heap
where white people throw refuse thought about us

Signs of the apocalyptic vision of final confrontation between black and white that develops in the later poems are evident here. These lines also signal the influence of modern jazz musicians such as John Coltrane and Miles Davis on Serote's literary style,[145] as well as pointing to the urgent need for black unity in the political struggle. The poem ends with a reference to a guerilla attack on civilians by members of the Palestine Liberation Organisation:

in Ale-
xandra

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[145] This is already apparent in the structure of earlier poems such as "Hell, Well, Heaven", as Jeremy Cronin has pointed out in " 'The Law that says/Constricts the breath-line(...)': South African English Language Poetry Written by Africans in the 1970s". See chapter 3 of this dissertation for a further discussion on this point. For a survey of performance culture in black urban areas see David B. Coplan, *In Township Tonight* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985) and Kelwyn Sole, "Oral Performance and Social Struggle in Contemporary Black South African Literature", *TriQuarterly* 69 (Spring/Summer 1987)

Dis-
trict
6
chatsworth and black east west south and north
I picked the pie-
ces
of my bro-
ken
hea
rt
below a 'civilised progress'
giving
Lod airport.

Even though the form of the poem is minimalist and highly fragmented, the 'broken pieces' of black experience are symbolically integrated and placed in the context of liberation struggles in other parts of the world. The implication is that the contradictions inherent in the Western ideal of civilisation through 'progress', which lead to events such as the Lod airport massacre, are very much part of the South African reality.

The militant challenge of resistance literature to dominant aesthetic criteria clearly manifests in the form of the poem. Serote extends and develops this challenge into a fully-fledged literature of resistance in his later works, and the discussion now turns towards an exploration of these works from a myth-critical perspective.

CHAPTER 3

RE-VISIONING HISTORY: SEROTE'S USE OF MYTH AS A FORM OF RESISTANCE

> If history is the sentence of our imprisonment, then history, recoded, can become the password of our release ...the re*vision*ing of history is, therefore, a revolutionary act.[146]
>
> The poetic and the revolutionary impulse are interdependent ...poetry is the human protest against the dehumanizing elements in society ...the imagination, which conceives the forms of human society, is the source of the power to change that society.[147]

Time and space are ineluctable restraints on human consciousness. Every poet confronts these limitations, attempts to transcend them, and redefines them in a unique way. When the poem begins to probe the underlying nature of the poet's reality - diagnosing causes, prescribing remedies, revisioning history, explaining the inexplicable - the poet is making myth. This process is the foundation of any culture, and indeed the creating of myth is an essential part of human existence:

> Mythology can be mediatory, even therapeutic, by enabling man to suffer the intolerable, gaze on the terrible, and sing of the ineffable; his great achievements as well as his remarkable disasters .... pass into the poetry of myth, and become a compatible element of his ordinary existence.[148]

Myth and poetry are closely related, and this relationship has often been the subject of academic investigation.[149] The word 'myth' however, is highly problematic for materialist

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146 William Irwin Thompson, *The Time Falling Bodies Take to Light* (London: Rider/Hutchinson, 1981) pp.8 & 247.

147 Northrop Frye, *The Critical Path* (Brighton: Harvester, 1983) p.84

148 Eldred Jones, "Editorial" *African Literature Today 11* (London: Heinemann, 1980) p. 2

149 See for example John B. Vickery, "Literature and Myth" in Jean-Pierre Barricelli & Joseph Gibaldi (eds) *Interrelations of Literature* (New York: Modern Language Ass. of America, 1982) As he points out: "Where the dynamic and viable forces of myth are located in modern national literatures is one of the tantalizing questions facing the contemporary student of the relation between myth and literature." (p. 86.)

literary critics and historians. From this critical viewpoint, myth is usually associated with depoliticization and falsification of history, or the idealist concepts of universality and timelessness. But certain aspects of Serote's work seem to suggest that myth is an appropriate analytical category. So at the risk of sinking in "the quicksands of the possible relation between myth and history",[150] this chapter aims at a meaningful discussion of Serote's long poems in terms of this relationship, and an exploration of the poet's use of myth as a form of cultural resistance.

The previous chapters have argued that Serote's work is inseparable from the historical process of resistance to apartheid in South Africa. From a broader perspective his work would share a context with literature linked to national liberation struggles and resistance movements against Western domination in other parts of Africa and the 'third world'. With regard to the historical aspects of resistance literature, Barbara Harlow has pointed towards the need for "a criticism which must account [for].....the dynamic impetus of the poetry's engagement, at once immediate and symbolically mediated, with a historical reality."[151]

Harlow's own criticism generally falls short of her own rather absolutist prescriptions, but her work is important in establishing critical guidelines for texts of resistance. The kind of criticism Harlow calls for would be difficult to realise in practice, as this would have to be based on theory that enabled a synthesis of idealism and materialism.[152] Given the history

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150 David Attwell, "Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters*: Suggestions on Context and History" *English In Africa* 8, 1 (March 1981) p.71 ff

151 Barbara Harlow, *Resistance Literature* (New York: Methuen, 1987) p.70 (see Ch. 1 of this dissertation)

152 For example, the kind of approach taken by Jay Cantor in *The Space Between: Literature and Politics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981) See also Fredric Jameson "the simultaneous recognition of the ideological and Utopian functions of the artistic text..." *The Political Unconscious* (London: Methuen, 1981) pp.289-299

of critical debates around black poetry in South Africa this kind of synthesis seems to be some way off.

The general intention of this chapter is to point to possible areas of discussion with regard to this kind of theoretical project, by focusing on the ways in which Serote's long poems both engage with and symbolically mediate the historical reality of South Africa.[153] Here I would argue that the 'symbolic mediation' of 'historical reality' is another way of talking about myth. By writing long 'lyrical' poems Serote is necessarily participating in myth-making activities, and his experience of history is mediated through myth. It is important though to describe the kinds of myths being created by Serote, and to evaluate their political effectiveness. In order to do this, the problematic relationship of poetry to materialist criticism will be discussed, and the concept of myth will be more clearly defined. But this entails a brief discussion of the relationship between literature and history.

LITERATURE AND HISTORY

In the loose application of Fredric Jameson's interpretative model used in the previous chapter, the third semantic horizon of a given text is constituted by the "ideology of form". It is within this furthest horizon that history becomes the ultimate determining 'force' in shaping a text. As Jameson puts it:

> With this final horizon, then, we emerge into a space in which History becomes the ultimate ground as well as the untranscendable limit of our understanding in general and our textual interpretations in particular.[154]

Jameson goes on to show that, in spite of attempts by non-Marxist critics to deprioritise History, it is in fact the master interpretive code which subsumes all the others.

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153 These are the poems "No Baby Must Weep" (1975), "Behold Mama, Flowers" (1978), "Time has run out" (1979), and "A Tough Tale" (1987).

154 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* p. 100

Furthermore, in his view there is nothing to be gained by indulging in polemic debate as to the ultimate priority of one interpretive code over the other.

While it is not the concern of this chapter to engage in such debate, it is necessary to give an alternative view - for Jameson's absolutising of history denies the potential of myth as a form of consciousness which is able to transcend the limitations of material being. In African literature, Wole Soyinka's *Myth, Literature and the African World* offers an example of an alternative in terms of a myth-critical approach. From Soyinka's perspective, attempts such as Jameson's to subsume literature and interpretation under some omni-determining master code would be aberrations typical of a certain European intellectual tradition:

> This process of intellection requires the propagandist knack of turning the unprovable into an authoritative concept, indoctrinating society into the acceptance of a single, simple criterion as governing any number of human acts and habits, evaluations and even habits of understanding ....it is the responsibility of today's African intellectual not only to question these criteria, but to avoid the conditioning of the social being by the mono-criterion methodology of Europe.[155]

Leaving Soyinka's own ideological preoccupations aside, this statement has implications for the debates over the relation of literature to history. The main question here is to what extent literature is determined by the historical process. This will probably always be a contentious issue. Northrop Frye for example argues against Jameson's historical determinism from a perspective that, although part of the European intellectual tradition, has correspondences with the views of Soyinka.

Frye's book *The Critical Path*, an essay on the social context of literature and literary criticism, points out the limitations of deterministic approaches to literary texts. These

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[155] Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) p. 137

approaches are characterised by the impulse to find the ultimate meaning of literature in something that is not literature, for example history or some other equally abstract social 'force'. Marxism, according to Frye, takes a social view of literature that (in theory) is broad enough to see literature as an active part of the socio-historical process. In practice however, Marxism operates as merely one more determinism, which avoids every aspect of literature except one allegorical interpretation of its content.[156]

In Frye's view of literature, every poet has his own distinctive structure of imagery which usually emerges even in his earliest work, and which does not and cannot essentially change. He focuses on the importance of structural elements in the literary tradition - conventions, genres and the recurring use of certain images or image clusters (the 'archetypes'). The use of recurrent images is a prominent feature of Serote's work, and it is important to trace the patterns and development of these when examining the resistance mythology created by the poet over the last two decades.

With regard to the relationship between literature and history, Frye has pointed out that:

> criticism must develop a sense of history within literature to complement the historical criticism that relates literature to its non-literary historical background ... [criticism] must develop its own form of overview, on the basis of what is inside literature rather than outside it. Instead of fitting literature into a prefabricated scheme of history, the critic should see literature as a coherent structure, historically conditioned but shaping its own history, responding to but not determined in its form by an external historical process.[157]

From this perspective the study of literature through its larger structural principles is ignored by most social critics. The result is a superficial treatment of literature, a method which is largely a process of 'teasing' things out of a text that seem interesting for non-

156 Northrop Frye, *The Critical Path* p. 19
157 Northrop Frye, *The Critical Path* p. 24

literary reasons. In addition, socio-historical criticism is always "affirming the consequent" - the material determinants of a text are known in advance of reading it, and the analysis merely confirms what is already known.[158] Perhaps the true test of historical materialism as a literary theory is whether it can predict a text from a given set of material circumstances and social forces.

In Frye's approach, literature is all about something else, even when social protest is its explicit theme. This statement would appear to be contrary to the ethos of resistance literature, and is definitely in conflict with the ideas of Jameson. But a full study of any literature has to deal with myth, the 'something else' that always escapes the categories of rationality.

Substantial portions of *The Political Unconscious* are devoted to Jameson's rescue of Marxist criticism from the crude reductionism of determinism and his attempts to enfold the myth/archetypal criticism of Frye in the embrace of historical materialism. In discussing Serote's work, the limited application of Jameson's model (the first two horizons) to Serote's early work is adequate for discussing the ideological and social aspects of these poems. But as Serote moves into exile and a new political consciousness, he begins to use myth and the long lyric or epic form as a strategy of literary resistance. A critical approach that denies the concept of myth will fail to do justice to these texts. I have thus attempted to construct an approach combining certain aspects of Jameson, Frye, and Soyinka, in order to come to terms with the full historical and literary significance of what might be called Serote's major works.

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158 "The silences, or contradictions of the text speak; from them we learn that George Eliot was petit-bourgeois, and that the petite-bourgeoisie could not resolve certain contradictions, say certain words, fill certain silences. But this was known, of course, before we read George Eliot." Jay Cantor, *The Space Between: Literature and Politics* p. 5

POETRY, MYTH, AND CRITICISM

The typical objections voiced by materialist critics against myth can be seen in Kelwyn Sole's paper on Black Consciousness writers.[159] He identifies two camps of black writers of political inclination: a cultural nationalist group on the one hand and those who adopt elements of a class analysis on the other. (In this view Serote would belong to the latter camp, but it could be argued that in the course of his writing Serote has displayed allegiances to both causes.) It is the writers with cultural nationalist leanings - like Es'kia Mphahlele, Mothobi Mutloatse and Ingoapele Madingoane - who regard myth as an essential part of political literature. Following Roland Barthes, Sole then suggests that myths are a form of depoliticised speech - "smoothing out contradictions between objects so that they fit into a seemingly natural literary universe." Sole cites Madingoane's *Africa, My Beginning* as an example, where Africa is 'mythologised' as a continent of internal harmony and humanity disrupted only by the outside forces of European colonialism.

The underlying thrust of Sole's criticism is to aid the necessary process of writers to "move beyond weaving an impenetrable curtain of nationalist sentiment and black collectivity" and establish a "politicised literature which will be meaningful to lower class black people." In Sole's view a great deal of Black Consciousness-based literature has failed in the latter task, and remains an idealist literature characterised by "the myths of a far-distant utopian past and hopeful future, chronicles of individual experience which are supposed to be relevant in themselves, and endless harping on injustice without alternatives being posed." While this is valid criticism - and any account of Serote's long poems would have to evaluate their political qualities on these grounds - Sole's view of myth is not without problems.

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159 Kelwyn Sole, "Culture, Politics and the Black Writer: A critical look at prevailing assumptions" *English in Africa* 10, 1 (May 1983)

There is a danger in taking the rather narrow concept of myth espoused by Barthes and displacing this onto black writing. Wole Soyinka, for example, has argued strongly against the tendency of the [Nigerian]'leftocracy' to take on the "mantle of abuse from European leftist criticism as it automatically attaches to the sheerest idealist suggestiveness in any form of literature."[160] The paradoxes of the Barthesian approach are clearly identified by Soyinka:

> Every essay in Barthes's collection, *Mythologies*, is....an unconscious act of linguistic vengefulness: even as language takes off the mask of petit-bourgeois mythology of everyday objects and activities, it clothes them anew in the garb of bourgeois intellectualism, ...is [Barthes] not part of a new ideo-mythical *langue* which merely occludes the real possibility of an understanding and transmission of a proletarian culture[161]

Soyinka's views have their own inevitable problems, and it would also be fanciful to speculate that anything like a 'leftocracy' might be operating in South African literary criticism. There seems to be a tendency though for some local scholars to work from the assumptions of Western leftist criticism and either ignore the idealist/mythical aspects of writers like Serote or dismiss them as 'contradictions'. In Soyinka's analysis, the ideological function of materialist criticism in its search for the causal historical and socio-economic network of society in every work of art is "only a further attempt to protect the hegemony of appropriation by the intellectual critic class *in particular*, and this is especially true when such criticism chooses to ignore the *received* function as manifested in effect."[162]

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[160] Wole Soyinka, "The critic and society: Barthes, leftocracy and other mythologies" in Henry Louis Gates (ed.), *Black Literature and Literary Theory* p.48

[161] Wole Soyinka, "The critic and society: Barthes, leftocracy and other mythologies" pp. 34, 54

[162] Wole Soyinka, "The critic and society: Barthes, leftocracy and other mythologies" p. 38

Sole does point out with regard to *Africa, My Beginning* that this poem was (in performance) one of the most popular works of the late 70s in Soweto, and that the symbols used in the poem had much emotional meaning for Madingoane's audiences. But in Sole's view these symbols are often extremely generalised and abstract - a conclusion arrived at through the process of counting the number of times 'africa' is used in the poem. There is surely more to criticism than this, and while Sole has made valuable contributions to the study of contextual and political issues in black poetry, an informed strong reading of these texts has not yet been produced by materialist critics.

It is also interesting to note that with regard to criticism of Serote, scholars working from a materialist paradigm seem to be solely concerned with his prose (*To Every Birth its Blood*), while critics who are more idealistically inclined tend to concentrate on the poetry.[163] Novelistic discourse - narrative - seems to be more readily accessible to the analytic methods of historical materialism and sociological criticism than Serote's poetry, which tends to resist appropriation by this particular critical discourse. A possible reason for this might lie in the very nature of poetic language.

In a powerfully argued defence of poetry against the totalizing tendencies of the 'sociological idea', J.P Ward has noted that as the evolution of the sociology of literature has proceeded, the pre-eminence of the lyric poem as the prototype of the literary object has declined. It is difficult to compress Ward's arguments into the confines of this chapter, but his main assumptions are as follows. What makes poetry is no underlying 'essence', but rather a

> certain deflection of language from what we expected, or the capacity of a word-arrangement to hold compelling meaning without the normal everyday

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163 Es'kia Mphahlele, "Mongane Serote's Odyssey: The path that breaks the heels" *English Academy Review* Vol.3 (1985) and Francis Faller, "' Past, Present and Future Vision: A Comparative study of three long poems by Neruda, Paz and Serote" *English Academy Review 5* (1987)

> reference. In every poem, language is arranged *not* to address a listener or support a social configuration such as a group or institution, and yet also that language thereby becomes arresting and intelligible. The tension this entails comes from a tripartite paradox; namely, a) language is social, b) poetry is language, c) yet poetry is not social, not accountable by the sociological idea ....Poetry truncates the very thing that in all other cases language strives to achieve.[164]

There could be problems in applying this to resistance poetry, where in many cases the poem is obviously addressing a particular group, and also attempting "to hold compelling meaning" precisely through the use of normal everyday reference.

Ward's ideas are still relevant to the present study though, in particular the notion that the fundamental characteristic of a poem is that *it signifies only itself*. With regard to political poetry, or poetry that clearly deals with social matters, Ward has pointed out that it is usually the constraint on the social (and not the social itself) that is the dominant presence in the poem. Further, and most importantly for the present argument, Ward suggests that the political vision of the poet of the socially collective world is generally towards a utopian future. In other words, the poetry of resistance inevitably makes use of myth to negate the dominant mythologies of the ruling class and to convey a vision of the ideal society that is the goal of the revolution.

This is a not a purely idealistic view of poetry. With regard to cultural production in general, Fredric Jameson has suggested that

> *all* class consciousness - or in other words, all ideology in the strongest sense, including the most exclusive forms of ruling-class consciousness just as much as those of oppositional or repressed classes - is in its very nature Utopian ...insofar as as it expresses the unity of a collectivity; yet it must be added that this proposition is an allegorical one. The achieved collectivity or organic group of whatever kind - oppressors fully much as oppressed - is Utopian not in itself, but only insofar as all such collectivities are themselves

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164 J.P Ward, *Poetry and the Sociological Idea* (Brighton: Harvester, 1981) p. 202

> *figures* for the ultimate concrete collective life of an achieved Utopian or classless society.[165]

With this proposition in mind, the mythologising of past and future that is a feature of Serote's long poems can be understood from a materialist perspective - but with the qualification that as well as projecting the figurative unity of a collectivity, Serote is also engaged in constructing a political mythology, a counter-mythology to the dominant mythologies of capitalism and apartheid.[166] Serote's counter-myth is also in response to a felt need for the formulation of a new and unifying African mythology. As Es'kia Mphahlele has pointed out:

> Political styles demand a redefinition of a people's culture from time to time, and we have been too busy surviving. Our literature in the last thirty years reflects this. We have lost sight of the myths that could stabilize our spiritual and mental life and save it from the religion of the desperate, the poor, the helpless, the downtrodden, that the missionaries left us hanging onto while a pretty noisy and powerful segment of the western world was asserting a completely different set of claims for Christ from what we had been hoodwinked into believing.[167]

The sense in which myth is used as an analytic category in discussing Serote's long poems is this broad notion of a counter-myth, or the use of myth as form of resistance. In this respect Thomas Knipp has suggested that a working out of the complexities of the historical myth or counter-myth provides a basis for a hermeneutic for much African poetry. Knipp suggests that the counter-myth of African poets can be construed as a conjugation of a process moving through time, consisting of five 'tenses':

> 1) The rich black past in which a secure black identity was and can again be rooted. This rich past exists in a double sense: first as history, as a record of past glories; and second as the culture of the people from which the poet was torn by the process of westernization.

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165 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (London: Methuen, 1981) p.291

166 It is also important to consider the complex relationship between myth and ideology. For example Ronald Grele has suggested: "Myth sets the stage for the drama and ideology puts it on the road." (in discussion at the History Workshop, University of the Witwatersrand, February 1990.)

167 Es'kia Mphahlele "The Voice of the Black Writer in Africa" *Senate Special Lectures 1980* (Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand Press, 1980) p. 8

2) The cynical conquest of the continent and its culture by greedy and rapacious Europeans.
3) The period of bondage when whites exploited Africa and during which the black personality was purified by redemptive suffering.
4) The rebellion and triumph of resurgent blacks against often decadent, always exploitative white domination.
5) The productive and creative future in which African glory returns and African leadership enriches the quality of life not only for Africans but for all the human family.[168]

It would be a useful project to trace the historical development of black poetry in South Africa in terms of this schema, allowing for the necessary differences in ideology and class affiliation between poets. In the case of Serote these 'tenses' are present to some extent and with varying degrees of emphasis (and the necessary modifications by specific circumstances), and are evident in the ways in which history is mediated and the future imagined in the long poems.

Leonard Thompson's discussion of black political mythology in South Africa has parallels with Knipp's framework. In this view, black South African resistance has over the years been creating a liberatory mythology (which ironically is similar to the anti-imperialist element dominant in early Afrikaner nationalism). Thompson distinguishes three tendencies within black resistance mythology: 1) A version giving precendence to the African tradition of *ubuntu*, including Christian pacificism and the ideas of Mohandas Ghandi, 2) a version which stresses African cultural identity, shaped by the Pan-Africanist Congress and the Black Consciousness movement, 3) the Marxist myth of an end to exploitation and suffering through the collective revolutionary action of 'the people'.[169] It is possible to situate different phases of Serote's work within each of these versions - as Serote moves into a radical and rhetorical aesthetic position in his journey through history and exile.

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[168] Thomas R. Knipp, "Myth, History and the Poetry of Kofi Awoonor" in Eldred Jones (ed) *African Literature Today* No. 11 (London: Heinemann, 1980) p.43
[169] Leonard Thompson, *The Political Mythology of Apartheid* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985) p. 243

The discussion of Serote's use of myth as a form of resistance would also be in line with with the 'positive hermeneutic' of Jameson's approach. This is to demonstrate the ways in which a given cultural object projects "its .. Utopian power as the symbolic affirmation of a specific historical and class form of collective unity."[170] The use of myth in Serote's long poems must be read as this kind of symbolic affirmation, in the context of the broader counter-myth and artistic articulation of the political processes of resistance.

To re-vision history is to redefine time, and a useful entry point into Serote's uses of myth is through a discussion of the changing temporal concepts and chronological frameworks in the long poems. Broadly speaking, this is a process of moving from a circular to a linear perception of time - for both Serote the individual and the symbolic collectivity projected in his writing. With regard to this process, Elias Canetti has observed that:

> A new power which wants to assert itself must also enforce a new chronology: it must make it seem as though time had begun with it ... For a civilization, as for an individual, periods when the awareness of time is lost are periods of shame ... which are forgotten as soon as possible.[171]

The period of white domination is a time of shame for blacks, and in order to sunder the false time of white minority rule Serote must develop a vision of a new social order and a new non-shameful experience of self and time.[172] This new chronology gradually takes shape in Serote's work from *No Baby Must Weep* (1975) onwards, and achieves a concrete linearity in *A Tough Tale* (1987). The following discussion outlines the main features of this process.

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170 *The Political Unconscious* p.291

171 Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973). Cited in Kelwyn Sole, " 'This time set again': the Temporal and Political Conceptions of Serote's *To Every Birth its Blood.*" (Paper presented at the History Workshop, University of the Witwatersrand, 1990) p.17

172 Kelwyn Sole, " 'This time set again': the Temporal and Political Conceptions of Serote's *To Every Birth its Blood.*" p.17

TIME IS THE INGREDIENT OF DISCOVERY

In his first published poem Serote conceives of history as a 'frozen past'.[173] It is the process of defrosting and retrieval of this 'frozen' history that to a large extent informs the long poem "No Baby Must Weep". This process takes place within language itself - it is a dialogical quest for a new mode of speaking that will enable the recoding and revisioning of history and negate the destructive discourse of apartheid. This is expressed in the poem:

> time
> that is the ingredient of discovery
> ....
> because after this day, the moment that comes must be brand new
> like a baby
> so our broken tongues
> and long-soiled lips
> can grope for new words because old ones have broken this
> earth to pieces
> look at the eyes of the people
> their faces
> and their gaits

The need to 'grope for new words' has already been expressed in the poem 'Black Bells',[174] where "the tension that drives this poem forward is the desire to express in words the treachery of words ... the whole poem enacts the struggle to burst out, to smash down 'Whitey's' world of meaning, and achieve another discourse."[175] 'No Baby Must Weep' is the realisation of this discourse in the form of the long lyrical poem - although

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173 "This Oldwoman" *New Coin* Vol.3 No. 2 (1969) p.9
174 *Yakhal'inkomo* (Johannesburg: Ad Donker, 1972) p.62
175 Jeremy Cronin, " 'The law that says/Constricts the breath line(...)': South African English Language Poetry Written by Africans in the 1970s " *English Academy Review* No.3 (1985)

even at the level of aesthetic form the poem resists and rearranges the conventions of this genre.

The overall 'narrative' of the poem is the relating of a journey through history that is both literal and symbolic - it is literally a journey through the individual memory of the poet (as told to his mother) which is interwoven with the symbolic journey of a river down to the sea. It is the journey that connects and integrates the fragments of memory and experience, and enables the (symbolic) resolution of some of the contradictions of existence.

The notion of fragmention is carried through the recurring images of the broken and wounded body,

> who am i
> lost like this
> broken like this
> ....
> that half-face
> one-eye
> half-nose
> half-mouth
> silent and loaded with sadness

The myth of the body divided is widely used in resistance literature, and has its roots in oral performance. Pablo Neruda has described it:

> There is an old theme, a "body divided," that recurs in the folk poetry of all countries. The popular singer imagines his feet in one place, his kidneys somewhere else, and goes on to describe his whole body, which he has left behind, scattered in countrysides and cities. That's how I felt in those days.[176]

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176 in Barbara Harlow, *Resistance Literature* p. 45

The period Neruda is referring to is Chile in the 1940s, when he was writing his long epic poem "Canto General", and moving from house to house to avoid detention by government authorities. In the poem, the dismemberment of poetic identity is reconstructed in ties of solidarity with the people themselves.[177] Serote's experiences during the writing of "No Baby Must Weep" could have been similar, as this period was for Serote a time of moving around the country - both in his work as a Black Consciousness cultural organiser, and to avoid the increasingly severe state repression of the movement.

But the connections and ties of solidarity are not to be found in the kind of textual unity and patterning of images displayed in the conventional long lyric. Integration and resolution occur instead on a symbolic and mythical level. The journey through personal history is also a "poetic submersion of the particularity of the individual subject/narrator into the collective experience of the black masses"[178] - a process which is mediated symbolically through the recurring images of the river and its dissolution in the sea of collective experience. Through the interfacing of individual history with collective experience some kind of liberation can be envisioned:

> i can say one day
> this flower
> will stand in the bright bright sun
> this flower will have no petals
> one day
> ah
> africa
> is this not your child come home

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177 Barbara Harlow, *Resistance Literature* p. 45

178 Alex Levumo, "Mongane Serote's No Baby Must Weep" in Michael Chapman (ed.) *Soweto Poetry* (Johannesburg: McGraw-Hill, 1982) p. 76

The political meaning of this vision of liberation is not clear, and the 'effectiveness' of the poem as political writing is debatable.[179] It does however show that this was a time of uncertainty and transition for Serote. It is difficult to date the actual time of writing of the poem - the only clue in the text is a reference to the assasination of Onkgopotse Tiro in 1974 (p.30). This was a time when state repression of Black Consciousness was on the increase, and also a period when Serote was becoming aware of the limitations of Black Consciousness as a political force. Both of these factors contributed to Serote's decision to go into exile - and the ending of the poem must be read with this in mind.

Serote's first major literary project in exile was the long poem "Behold Mama, Flowers".[180] Through meetings with other South African exiles and black American activists such Angela Davis in the period 1974-1978, Serote seems to have come to a deeper understanding of issues such as the relationship between race and class, the need for political action based on class analysis, and the need to contextualise the South African struggle within in a broader view of resistance in Africa and America. As he has said,

> "Behold Mama, Flowers" also tries to examine the whole of Africa and I must say that the romanticism and sentimentality that I had when I left South Africa was extremely childish when I began to understand some of the issues that the African continent was raising.[181]

Serote's move towards class analysis and awareness of the broader context of exploitation and domination is a constant theme in the poem, for example:

> how can i forget
> that even the skies winked and blinked as the soil fell,
> on men digging gold beneath the earth
> ah,

---

179 Serote himself is aware of this problem - in the poem:
"like me writing poems/ hoping they will be read/ rubbish..." (p.27)

180 Dated as written in 1975, but only published in 1978. Serote also began to work on *To Every Birth its Blood* at around this time.

181 Interview with Mongane Wally Serote (May 1989)

i will defy the chains of the rand with its frozen face
i will defy the chains of the dollar with its frozen eagle in flight
....
i know that the world has stopped spinning
it is held in white palms
africa, what are we going to do now..

Serote no longer has to 'grope for new words', as the internalising of the discourse of class economics has given his poetry a firmer political grounding - in terms of analysing the forces of domination and clarifying his own experience (although there is still no certainty about what is to be done). But rather paradoxically the mediation of history through myth becomes a stronger feature of this poem in comparison with "No Baby Must Weep".

There are two main aspects in this process. Firstly, the poem is Serote's attempt to come to terms with the issues raised by the African continent - by implication, the entire history of suffering and exploitation under Western domination. An historical canvas as large as this can only be poetically depicted through the use of myth, and the main way in which this is done in the poem is through Serote's own (politicised) version of a creation myth.[182]

The retelling of the story of creation is cast in manichean terms, but Serote inverts the Western myth of Africa as the dark devilish continent and the colonisers as bringers of light. In the poem, Africa dropped from "god's back pocket" as he was creating the world, but this was seen by the devil, who later came in the guise of the coloniser and stole the continent for himself. But the retelling of a creation myth does not lead to any kind of resolution, rather it increases the poet's sense of existential anguish and alienation:

life and the earth rolling on and on and on
like a tennis ball which slipped out of a childlike throw
on and on

182 "Behold Mama, Flowers" pp.50 -56. It is difficult to discern Serote's exact meanings here.

god knows where to
and there is a screaming silence somewhere
god
what's happening

Serote then locates this myth in personal experience - a meeting with the artist "Skunder Boghossian" in Washington. Some kind of knowledge of the wider historical context of oppression is reached here, again with the idea of learning/discovering through time:

time teaches us
time took me that day
...
and i began to pick up pieces of the continent
...
god
help the continent, it fell from your back pocket
children want to rest
screaming sirens turned them into children who can't smile anymore
...
is all this life about all this
tears sweat and blood
look at the continent, the continent, the continent
sweat blood tears blood
is that what we must master

The second use of myth is in the attempt to create a new and inspiratory mythology of resistance through the naming of heroes. At various places in the poem Serote invokes such figures as Tshaka, Dingaan, Luthuli, Sobukwe, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, George and Jonathan Jackson, Cabral, Mondlane, Tiro and Lumumba. This is a common feature of epic poetry throughout world history. As Mircea Eliade has pointed out:

> The anhistorical character of popular memory ... refuses to preserve the personal, historical elements of a hero's biography ...the historical character of the persons celebrated in epic poetry is not in question. But

> their historicity does not long resist the corrosive action of mythicization.[183]

Serote however does not locate his heroes in some timeless and unspecific space, although the language of poetry and the form of the epic or long lyric makes a degree of mythicization unavoidable. The named heroes are constantly grounded in relation to both individual and collective experience of the forces of oppression - through the mention of specific 'ordinary' people such as

> when phaladi trembled in the street
> his heart pouring blood out like an angry fountain
> and his scream tore the night, fighting with death
> ...
> tell me where is henry dumas
> ah, my brother
> i won't get into names; the list, my brother, will
> grow and grow like death

and the constant references to the poet's family, anonymous children, and 'brothers' and 'sisters' in the struggle. Textually, the inseparability of individual from communal experience is shown through the almost random interchanging between 'i' and 'we' in the narrative voice (although in places the 'i' is clearly the voice of the exiled poet addressing his audience at home). In this way the hero is a collective construct, and the figure for the concrete collective life of the yet to be achieved 'new' society suggested in the closing lines of the poem:

> i can say
> your dignity is locked tight in the resting places
> in the places where you shall drink water
> around the fire where you shall laugh with your children
> i can say otherwise
> your dignity is held tight in the sweating cold hands of death

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183 Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1965) p.43

the village where everything is silent about dignities
i will say again
behold the flowers, they begin to bloom!

The kind of liberation suggested here is more specific than the rather vague dissolution of the individual subject in "No Baby Must Weep". Serote clearly identifies where the obstacle to a new and dignified society is located - in the 'hands of death'. In the same way as the first part of *To Every Birth its Blood*, the power of the apartheid regime is constantly associated with the force of death in "Behold Mama, Flowers". This is resisted and symbolically overcome by the forces of life - mediated symbolically in the organic regeneration of the flowers with no petals of "No Baby Must Weep" into the blooming flowers of this poem.

TIME HAS RUN OUT

Serote's poem "Time has run out" first appeared in *Staffrider* in November 1979.[184] While this is not a long poem in the 'epic' style of those already discussed, it raises similar kinds of questions regarding the poetic use of myth to convey a political ideology and view of history. More importantly, here Serote foregrounds the apocalyptic vision that is a subtext in the previous poems.

The notion of apocalypse is introduced in "No Baby Must Weep":

i am the man you will never defeat
i will be the one to plague you
...
i will be your shadow, to be with you always

184 There are different versions of this poem - references are to the one in Tim Couzens & Essop Patel (eds), *The Return of the Amasi Bird* (Johannesburg : Ravan, 1982)

and one day
when the sun rises
the shadows will move, heaving like a tired chest
there shall be millions of shadows
and the earth shall be cold
and the river will freeze
and the plants will refuse to grow
and the earth shall be dark
and we will be alone

An implicit warning to the 'bans' and sounding of a note of resistance is present in an earlier poem "The Actual Dialogue" - "we will always meet/ when you do not expect me".[185] The idea of resistance is now more developed, but at this stage the actual confrontation is merely metaphoric and in a mythical future.

There is a more concrete notion of the necessity for confrontation through action in "Behold Mama, Flowers":

i look back/
my footprints are pools of blood
on the terrible sand
there is the hill now
it broke your grandfather's back -
...
i will come there, and unload my suitcases
these suitcases, full of wounds
i will unload them
and i will be terrible, the stars will pop like bursting ballons
the sun will lick
and like i once said, the moon will tumble down

185 *Yakhal'inkomo* p. 9

The failures of the past and sufferings of the present are redeemed through the unleashing of apocalyptic revenge, but this is a rather undifferentiated view of political action. Given the mythological mediations necessitated by the poetic form though, this view can be understood, and must also be read in terms of the inevitable limits operating upon an individual poet's ability to foresee the future.[186]

Nick Visser has pointed out the effects of the 'irruption of history' into the process of production of *To Every Birth its Blood*.[187] While these disruptive effects are not readily apparent in the structure of Serote's longer poems,[188] a comparison of "Time has run out" with the earlier poems reveals a similar "movement through Black Consciousness towards a recognisably non-racial democratic position"[189] (although this is only completed with the publication of *A Tough Tale* in 1987). As in the novel, there is no simplistic shift from Black Consciousness to an ANC position in the poem. To the extent that ideological analyses of poetry are possible, there are signs of Serote moving away from Black Consciousness thinking as early as "No Baby Must Weep."[190] But the strong sense of imminent apocalypse and acceptance of the necessity of armed resistance in "Time has run out" seem to indicate that events such as Soweto '76 and the death of Steve Biko had a major impact on Serote's political thinking and poetic preoccupations.

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186 See Ezekiel Mphahlele, "The voice of prophecy in African poetry" *English in Africa* 6, 1 (1979). As he points out: "The voice of prophecy hardens into apocalyptic tones in the heroic poetry of any time of political conflict, whether between black and white or black and black." (p. 35)

187 Nick Visser, "Fictional Projects and the Irruptions of History: Mongane Serote's *To Every Birth its Blood*." *English Academy Review* 4 (1987) p.73

188 There is however a three year delay between Serote's stated time of writing "Behold Mama, Flowers" in 1975 and its publication in 1978. It would be interesting to see if the manuscripts showed any changes over this crucial historical period.

189 Nick Visser, "Fictional Projects and the Irruptions of History: Mongane Serote's *To Every Birth its Blood*." p.73

190 For example, his disenchantment with the programme of conscientization through poetry is shown in the lines "shit/ i am fucking tired/ shitlessly tired of talking, writing hoping people can hear.."

These events are prominent in the textual development of the poem, which is again a journey through collective memory and history. But Serote is now in full control of the discourse of liberation and resistance, and the metaphorical flowers and long intensely subjective passages of the earlier poems are now direct and unambiguous statements of necessity:

> ask us the price of liberation
> and we ask ourselves nothing nice now
> ...
> can someone teach us how to mount the wound, the fight.
> time has run out -
> period.

Having travelled through history in his long poems, Serote now stands at its edge.[191] The hourglass image of time running out poses the question of what will restore its flow, and it is clear that at this stage Serote sees no alternative to the inevitably violent and revolutionary transformation of society - the 'word of wisdom' asked for in the poem is not forthcoming, and any possibility of dialogue is negated by the finality of the closing 'period'. The full stop at the end of the poem also metaphorically signals an end to the cyclical and mythological perception of time present in the previous long poems, and a movement into a linear and more overtly ideological consciousness.

NOW WE ENTER HISTORY

"Time has run out" marks a transitional phase in Serote's life and work. As the necessity for organised mass resistance became more urgent - in response to the climate of intense repression created by the state in the aftermath of Soweto '76 - Serote returned from

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191 "We will have to come right up to the edge to find out where we are, and who we are. At the edge of history, history itself can no longer help us, and only myth remains equal to reality." William Irwin Thompson, *At The Edge of History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971) p. 163

America in 1978 to work with the MEDU Art Ensemble in Gaberone. Here he completed the novel *To Every Birth its Blood* in 1980, and another long poem *The Night Keeps Winking* (1982). Ideologically speaking, with this poem Serote seems to have made the shift from Black Consciousness to a Marxist revolutionary position within the African National Congress.

The general pattern of development of Serote's work in the 1980s is indicative of a general process - where "as mythology is moved into history, it becomes ideology."[192] As the decade moves on, and the demands of political and cultural commitment become more pressing, Serote's literary output diminishes in quantity and takes on a deeply ideological tone that separates it from his earlier work. In fact, Serote's main role in this decade is that of a cultural activist and polemicist - a significant change from the impassioned poetic visionary of the previous decade.

But changes in form, content, and ideological stances of writers are occasioned by the demands of history and necessity. As Michael Chapman has noted:

> Some of us may regret that Serote set out almost ruthlessly in the course of the 1970s to excise his own recognisable art. We can nonetheless respect his conviction that at certain moments people are called on to act in the public world even when they might want to contemplate, and to speak in the sanctioned phrases of the 'movement' even when, temperamentally, their human voice is plaintive in its concern.[193]

Here Chapman identifies an important dilemma for the politically commited artist, and one which is fundamental to the relationship between aesthetics and resistance. Serote's intention might be to write works which would function as inspirational myths for the

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[192] Ronald Grele, in discussion at the History Workshop 1990 (University of the Witwatersrand). This statement embodies a complex dialectic between myth and ideology, and it is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss this in more detail - save to point out that a more comprehensive examination of Serote's uses of myth would be based in this kind of dialectic.

[193] Michael Chapman, "A Tough Task for the Critic" *Upstream* Vol. 6, No. 3 (Winter 1988) p. 28

masses of oppressed and struggling people in South Africa, but his ideological commitment to a particular party line might prevent the full emotional and creative artistic expression of this myth. It is important to assess to what extent the adherence to 'sanctioned phrases' compromises the potential impact of Serote's use of myth as a form of resistance.

The ideological shifts taken by Serote are indicated by a surer grasp of the linear chronological progression needed to bring about revolution and the establishment of a people's democracy in South Africa. To some extent, this moves the poetry out of the 'pure' mythological domain of cyclical time and into the ideological 'real' world. But this does not diminish the apocalyptic and mythic nature of *The Night Keeps Winking* and *A Tough Tale* .

Serote's work and life have become more deeply informed by a broadly Marxist and revolutionary ideology during his long period of exile. With regard to the mythological dimensions of this world view, Ernest L. Tuveson has examined the millenarian and apocalyptic structure of Marxist thought. Here Tuveson shows how in Marx's view of history, "the series of historical ages is a long preparation for the ultimate Armageddon, the one great conflict in which the opposition of classes is violently solved."[194] Generally speaking, Serote's re-visioning of history in his long poems is a gradual process of redefining this apocalyptic view of revolution in the South African context.

As Tuveson points out, the apocalyptic interpretation of revolution gives the practical revolutionary a number of advantages over other prophets. Firstly, in this view revolution is inevitable and victory for the oppressed classes is certain - the logical outcome of a

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[194] Ernest L. Tuveson, "The millenarian structure of *The Communist Manifesto*" in C. A. Patrides & Joseph Wittreich (eds.) *The Apocalypse in English Renaissance thought and literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984) p. 385

predetermined historical process. Secondly the revolutionary act is given a definite shape, and the destruction rather than the conversion or re-education of the ruling powers becomes the method and the goal of revolution. And lastly, the process of revolution becomes closed rather than open. The revolutionary act is not merely a reform or improving change, it is the final solution and the absolute answer - to both the existential dilemma of the alienated individual and the collective problems of humanity in general.[195]

The myth of a new society created through revolutionary action by the proletariat is the informing vision of "The Night Keeps Winking" and "A Tough Tale". In the earlier poem however this myth is not fully articulated, but Serote's movement towards this ideological position can be seen in the rewritten and extended version of "Time has run out" which forms part one of "The Night Keeps Winking".

Here Serote retains the substance and spirit of the original version of the poem for some seven pages, and then adds in a new seven page closing section. In the same way as the original poem, the first part is important from a mythological perspective for the establishing of an oppositional myth to the one of the core myths of apartheid - the battle of Blood River and the sacred covenant or vow.[196] In his poetic re-visioning of history, Serote uses the events of Soweto '76 to resist the core apartheid myth of predestined and God-given racial superiority (and its specific modification in the early 80s into the ideology of 'total onslaught'):

.....
ask blood river
.and Soweto will answer:

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[195] Ernest L. Tuveson, "The millenarian structure of *The Communist Manifesto*" p. 385
[196] For a full analysis of the the political and religions dimensions of this myth, see Leonard Thompson, *The Political Mythology of Apartheid*

School children took the streets one day. There will never be another Soweto. There are many kinds of deaths, and Soweto knows them all; South Africa too, and Southern Africa. You cannot kill children like cattle and then hope that guns are a monopoly. We made love in strange places in ghettoes. We gave birth in these holes. We learnt from the pain and sorrow of having lost our children to so many and such cruel deaths as malnutrition or murder or madness, dying while throwing spears or stones and being shot dead.

We must now claim our land, even if we die in the process. Our history is a culture of resistance.

Ask Mozambique
Angola
Zimbabwe
Namibia
Ask South Africa
Yes-
from blood river
to Sharpeville to Soweto
we know now
that oppression has at last been unmasked....

The entire history of conflict in Southern Africa has been reduced and mythically transformed into a dialectical clash between the murderous forces of oppression and the resistance of the exploited masses. The ideology of 'total onslaught' is confronted by the seemingly indestructible counter-culture of total resistance, which is set in the context of the historical and revolutionary progression towards liberation of South Africa's neighbouring states.[197]

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197 The publication of *The Night Keeps Winking* coincided with the cultural gathering and conference on "Culture and Resistance" held in Gaberone in July 1982. This was a seminal event for resistance art and culture. Attended by many exiled ANC artists and activists, it was the precursor of several such festivals to be held in the 1980s, and unequivocally set out the ideological and aesthetic criteria for artists to adhere to - " The artistic path must of necessity be dictated by the experiences and destiny of the people who are relentlessly striving for liberation. It is incumbent upon artists to contribute to the changing social reality of their environment. Such change will inevitably lead to a positive transformation of our culture."

The threat implicit in the closing line of the earlier version of "Time has run out" takes on concrete form in the new section added on to the poem (which begins after the line "can someone teach us how to mount the wound and fight" on p. 7). The new ideological strain that emerges in part 2 of *To Every Birth Its Blood* is a dominant influence here. In the novel, the Movement (a symbolic term for the ANC) becomes the political means for the implemen ion of the revolution and the entry into and reclamation of history by the nation of the oppressed. As Kelwyn Sole has noted:

> The Movement is, without fail, referred to as purposeful and correct. In its active and militant opposition, the Movement unmasks the truth about South African oppression and sets in motion a process of polarisation whereby more and more of the country's inhabitants choose one side or another, until the final apocalyptic confrontation looms near.[198]

In literary terms, the Movement is constantly associated with organic life forces and processes which are purifying and restorative - in dialectic contrast to the images of death and decay which mediate the harshness and brutality of the apartheid system. This binary opposition between death and life is a continual thread in Serote's work, and is one of the key 'archetypes' (in Frye's sense of the word) in his resistance mythology.[199] In the poem this opposition is starkly and unambiguously stated:

> now
> the night and the blood and us
> are here again

Editorial, *MEDU* newsletter (Festival Edition, 1982). See also Cynthia Kross, "Culture and Resistance" *Staffrider* Vol. 5, No. 2 (1982)

198 Kelwyn Sole, " 'This time set again': the Temporal and Political Conceptions of Serote's *To Every Birth its Blood.*" p.14

199 In his most recent elaboration of this view -"To hold onto life, apartheid has to be a master at making death, and the more it senses its end, the more it devises more effective ways of making death - hence the oppressed accepting death to gain freedom. The dying expressions on the face of apartheid have become an inspiration for the oppresssed to seek more effective means of eventually dropping it dead, no matter what the cost may be..." Mongane Wally Serote, "Now we enter history" in Willem Campschreur & Joost Divendal (eds.), *Culture in Another South Africa* (London: Zed Books, 1989) p. 17

oppression and Revolution
pus and bl
one stinks
the one screams
But,
no screams ring forever
nor does pain last forever
something will always be done...

Having constructed a binary opposition, Serote must now move towards its symbolic resolution in order to complete the myth. This is achieved by the forward progression into linear time and the inevitability of victorious revolution, which disrupts and displaces the meaningless monotony of white capitalist chronology:

something will always be done
the night knows this
this night which makes a day
which goes to make the night
knows lots about a mass no
this bright eye of the night
is knowledgeable about hideous nights
when it keeps forming and forming
giving way to the dawn
it winked and winked
long ago
it winks and winks now
as we design our day
and the day designs us
and new men and women are born

The poetic metaphors for the linear time of revolution and liberation are the recurring ones of the 'new dawn', and the 'new day'.[200] The inexorable progress towards this new time is conveyed by the repeated references to the 'bright eye of the night' which keeps

[200] See also the poems "The Breezing Dawn of the New Day", "No More Strangers", and "There Will be a Better Time" in Mongane Wally Serote, *Selected Poems* (Johannesburg: Ad Donker, 1982)

winking. In this image the time of oppression and suffering - the night - is also a time of learning and formation of a new consciousness, which enables the 'design' of a new day after the final confrontation. 'The night keeps winking' has undertones of menace, and suggests both the idea of enlightenment through adversity and the slow but inexorable progress to the classless society:

> where everyone will read and write
> where man child and woman are eager to learn
> not to oppress
> or exploit one another
> where the day and the night
> unfold.

In this new time the normal rhythms of day and night are restored through the will and the actions of the people. The retrieval and restoration of history (through the correct political and revolutionary process) thus depends on the total destruction of the ruling system, which maintains power by stopping time:

> I said
> blue flames are leaping to the sky in my country
> where our masters pray
> know God
> lay their hands on the Bible
> and within a laager hail their strength and their ability to stop time
> .....
> inside this hour
> an intensely long and dragging movement
> we know
> our morning is coming
> ....
> still we move
> our will as stubborn as time
> our eye as vigilant as the stars like a bird through the wind,
> we move through time

our hands.

The clichéd images of stars and a bird are pressed into political service to convey the inexorable progression towards the morning of the new day. Oppression is the thief of time - but time is now retaken into the hands of the people, in the process of entering history.

The remaining two sections of "The Night Keeps Winking" are continued variations on the themes already described, and the ending is a statement of the apocalyptic revolution which the whole poem has been moving towards:

> today in
> orlando
> moroka
> booysens
> soekmekaar
> dube
> sasol
> durban power station
> new canada
> red, blue, green and yellow flames scream to the silent sky.

All possibility of dialogue is negated as the instruments and instutitions of white capitalism are consumed by the inferno of revolution. The lines refer to actual ANC attacks on strategic police, military and industrial targets, but also gesture towards a symbolic resolution of the dialectical conflict between oppressor and oppressed. In comparison with the endings of earlier poems such as "No Baby Must Weep" and "Behold Mama Flowers", this is a far more concrete expression of necessary political action, and on a prophetic level prefigures the upsurge of popular protest that swept South Africa during the years 1983 - 1986.[201]

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201 For accounts of this period, see Martin Murray, *South Africa: Time of Agony, Time of Destiny* (London: Verso, 1987) and Richard Manning, *"They Cannot Kill Us All"* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987)

This turbulent period was also a time of changes for Serote, and he moved to London in 1986 to work at the UK office of the ANC for the Department of Arts and Culture. Since then, his only published literary work is the long poem "A Tough Tale", and much of his creative energy has been devoted to the demands of exile cultural politics. Here his primary concern has been the definition and practical elaboration of the social structures necessary to implement a new people's culture.[202]

"A Tough Tale" is conceptually similar to the binary structure of *To Every Birth its Blood*, where the conflict between the forces of oppression and resistance is symbolically resolved through the restorative and purifying organic forces of the Movement. But the poem - free from the irruptions of history that create ideological fluidity in the novel - is more coherent, and begins to explore the practicalities of creating the new society that is to emerge from the final confrontation between the polarised forces of evil and good Serote has outlined this process in a number of articles and speeches which clearly show the ideological foundations of "A Tough Tale" - for example:

> This is the story about two forces, one fighting for the oppression and exploitation of the majority, and the other fighting for the majority to become free, non-racist and democratic. It is a story of how a people can degenerate to the lowest form of human life. It is also a story about how a people can emerge in glory as they release their power for creativity to utilize the the individual and collective talent and put these to the use of all. To the glory of humanity! [203]

"A Tough Tale" is the telling of this story in poetic and mythical form. It is the culmination of the process of reclaiming history and creating a mobilising mythology of resistance

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[202] See for example Mongane Wally Serote, "Power to the People: A Glory to Creativity" in Kirsten Holt Petersen (ed.) *Criticism and Ideology* (Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1988)
-- "Now we enter history" in Willem Campschreur & Joost Divendal (eds.), *Culture in Another South Africa*
-- "Cultural Resistance, Mobilisation and People's Freedom" (mimeo, London Nov. 1989)

[203] Mongane Wally Serote, "Power to the People: A Glory to Creativity" p.194

which Serote begins with "No Baby Must Weep" in the early 70s, and is now able to articulate in direct and uncompromising terms.

The poem develops the linear chronological consciousness which begins to emerge in previous poems, as the people move from being objects of history to becoming its masters:

> we carry it through
> one step at a time
> we hear each pulse of the heart and each blink
> of the eye
> ....
> remember, oh comrade
> that history which ever seemed to discard us
> which forever threw us on the banks of the river
> taught us
> that with warm hearts, and clear minds
> with clean hands and unsparing tongues
> with eyes which have sight and can see
> we can take it in our arms to destroy oppression
> and exploitation

Having sharpened their perception through struggle and the lessons of the empty time of suffering under white domination, the people who have made the correct political choice can now re-enter the stream of history. The moment of liberation is near, and victory is certain no matter what the cost:

> we have told our tale
> in blood
> we will wait as time unfolds
> and we hold it in the palms of our hands
> for we are gods
> who make children
> who make the hour of the day
> whose word will be final about our destiny

....
one morning
my people will hang on a sunrise
....
we shall have buried Apartheid-
how shall we look at each other then,
....
what shall we look like when that sunrise comes?
what shall we do with its first minute
first hour
first day?

Here towards the end of the poem, the final apocalyptic confrontation is imminent, and the new day and new chronology is at hand. Serote can now glimpse into a post-apocalyptic future of a new country based on a non-racial democracy and socialist economic principles, and emerging from the victorious struggle of the people:

the masses, the workers, the students, the
  learned
defend and built the ANC, Sactu and the SACP
with many painful days
which
like the hour-arm on a clock
takes time to come and go,
we organise ourselves
and so engrave hope and optimism
on our future

CONCLUSION

Serote is the only black South African poet of the last twenty years who has consistently explored and articulated the potential of myth as a form of resistance.[204] The preceding discussion has largely been a response to Serote's resistance mythology as a coherent structure, and an attempt to sketch the outlines of a possible myth-critical approach to resistance literature in general. There is however much work still needed to establish the full significance of Serote's poetry from this perspective.

A point of departure here would be a full analysis of binary oppositions as primary structural devices in Serote's texts. The structuralism of Claude Lévi-Strauss is a useful approach, where he has argued that binary oppositions are fundamental to human language and cognition.[205] Myth, as a deep structure of cognition, is patterned along the symbolic resolution of the binary oppositions that are part of collective human experience (e.g. Masculine/Feminine, Day/Night, High/Low and so on).

In the case of Serote, the binary oppositions created by the political peculiarities of South Africa become the core structures of his long poems and the novel. The main opposition here is the dialectical one of oppressor/oppressed, which is symbolically mediated through the opposition of death/life, and symbolically resolved through the inevitable final victory of the forces of life. This main opposition gives rise to several others which are reccurring features in Serote's entire body of work - silence/action, individual/collective,

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[204] The only other South African poet who comes to mind here is Breyten Breytenbach, and it would be useful project to compare the different mythologies of the two poets - who share broadly similar political affiliations, but who differ markedly in their poetry.

[205] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (Paris, 1963)

weakness/strength, suffering/liberation, alienation/integration - all of which must be traced and described in a full discussion of Serote's uses of myth.

Another important area of exploration is the concept of archetype as set out in Northrop Frye's framework. The repeating images and motifs that are a strong feature of Serote's work are the means whereby Serote's aesthetic of resistance is given form. To take one example, the moon in Western literature is generally a romantic image of mystery and transcendance, often associated with the 'White Goddess' and the visionary quest.[206] In Serote's poetry the moon is the 'bright eye of the night', and symbolises both constant witness to the brutalities of apartheid and the guiding light towards the practical knowledge necessary for the implementation of revolutionary action.

The idea of archetypes can also be linked to Lévi-Strauss's concept of the 'mytheme' or structural unit of myth, and Jameson's concept of the 'ideologeme' or minimal unit around which antagonistic class discourse is organised (see chapter 2). Another parallel here is Stephen Henderson's notion of 'mascon' images. 'Mascons' are a "*mas*sive *con*centration of black experiential energy" and are "not really images in the literary sense of the word; rather they are verbal expressions that evoke a powerful response in the listener because of their direct relationship to concepts and events in the collective experience."[207] Serote's mascons of "dongas", "dust", the "journey, the "river", the "train", and his use of political slogans and naming of popular heroes, are charged with powerful meaning in the black South African context. An exploration of the pattern of development of these mascons

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206 See Robert Graves, *The White Goddess* (London: Faber & Faber, 1961)

207 J.U. Jacobs, "The Blues: An Afro-American Matrix for Black South African Writing" *English in Africa* 16 No.2 (October 1989) p. 11. Jacobs' article also raises the idea of the 'jazz aesthetic', or the use of modern jazz structures such as polyphony and improvisation as aesthetic equivalents for writing. This is especially relevant to Serote's work, and I have explored facets of Serote's use of jazz forms in an earlier essay on *To Every Birth its Blood* (Honours seminar paper, 1985). For the political implications of jazz, and its potential as a literary structuring device see: Frank Kofsky, *Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), and William J. Harris, *The Jazz Aesthetic* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1985)

would be necessary to further establish the full dimensions of Serote's mythology of resistance.

The concept of a heroic mythology of resistance also raises the thorny issue of the influence of African oral performance on Serote, and the extent of any possible continuity of traditional oral modes of cultural expression into contemporary urban black culture. This is a highly problematic area, and the conflicting positions taken in this debate are characterised by statements such as "the oral tradition is lodged deep in the soul of every African writer";[208] and "it is possible to find some common concerns in the traditional and modern poetry ... but such similarities can only be explained on the basis of the poet's personal feelings, they do not reflect an imitation of the oral tradition."[209]

This kind of uncertainty makes a detailed examination of Serote's own position with regard to orality/literacy interactions difficult, but I have explored aspects of this elsewhere.[210] Perhaps the most important to note here is that Serote's earlier work does show certain affinities with oral modes, especially in the range of 'voices' that are present in *Yakhal'inkomo*, *Tsetlo*, and *No Baby Must Weep*. As Serote's work becomes more ideological and nationalist in content however, the diversity and mythic richness of the range of voices is suppressed in favour of the single monotone of the ideological authorial voice.

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208 Mbulelo Mzamane, "The uses of traditional forms in black South African literature" in Landeg White & Tim Couzens (eds.) *Literature and Society in South Africa* (Cape Town: Maskew Miller Longman, 1984) p. 152

209 Isidore Okpewho (ed.), *The Heritage of African Poetry* (Essex: Longman, 1985) p. 49

210 Stanley Frielick, "Winged Words/Caged Texts: Oral Tradition and Teaching African Literature" in Edgart Sienaert and Nigel Bell (eds.) *Oral Tradition and Education* (Natal University: Oral Documentation and Research Centre, 1988)

This movement away from affinities with oral performance and into an increasingly abstract and linear nationalist consciousness has important implications for the mythological status of Serote's work. As James P. Carse has noted:

> Myth provokes explanation but accepts none of it. Where explanation absorbs the unspeakable into the speakable, myth reintroduces the silence that makes original discourse possible.[211]

From the previous discussion of Serote's use of myth, it seems clear that the general direction of his poetry over the years is a movment away from the rich resonance and original discourse of *No Baby Must Weep* and *Behold Mama Flowers* into the more explanatory and almost propagandistic style of *The Night Keeps Winking* and *A Tough Tale*. This undoubtly results from the demands of adhering to a political and aesthetic ideology that is perceived as correct and necessary for the processes of total resistance and cutural revolution. But almost paradoxically, it could be argued that this kind of shift in aesthetic concerns actually compromises the potential political effect of the poetry.

Njabulo Ndebele is one the few critics in recent years to have pointed out the weaknesses of overtly political art in its obssession with the spectacle and surface symbols of oppression.[212] In this respect, his criticism of *To Every Birth its Blood* is equally applicable to Serote's later poetry:

> ...the problems of the South African social formation are complex and all embracing; ... they cannot be reduced to a single, simple formation. In fact, one novel has already attempted an infusion of the ordinary into the spectacle. Serote's *To Every Birth its Blood* attempts to deal with the ordinary concerns of people while placing these problems within the broad political situation in the country. In the end though, the spectacle takes over and the novel throws away the vitality of the tension generated by the dialectic between the personal and the public.[213]

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211 James P. Carse, *Finite and Infinite Games* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987) p. 139

212 Njabulo Ndebele, "*Turkish Tales* and Some Thoughts on SA Fiction" *Staffrider* Vol. 6 No. 1 (1984), and "The Rediscovery of the Ordinary" *Journal of Southern African Studies* Vol. 12 No. 2 (April 1986)

213 Njabulo Ndebele, "The Rediscovery of the Ordinary" p. 156. Kelwyn Sole makes a similar point - "The 'true consciousness' of authorial ideology eventually suppresses the arbitrariness of individual life

If Frye is correct in pointing towards the imagination as the source of social change, then a successful political poem must go beyond the surfaces and arouse and rearrange the unconscious impulses that fire the imagination into action. A clear and firm poetic statement of this position in African literature has been made by Wole Soyinka:

> ....."My tongue
> Does not readily marry slogans,"
> Said the poet. I heard it echo
> In the mind's secretive dialogue with itself.
> Better a wait in tense silences,
> Glimpsing a promise of the future Word,
> The poem unsung, the verse that kneads
> Abandoned clay, and brings to pulse
> The dream feast of all humanity
> ....
> But if phrasemongers have indeed usurped the world,
> And dreams come packaged, handy like a sausage roll,
> The poet chooses: DANGER - DREAMS AT WORK.
> Now mark *my* slogan well.[214]

The use of slogans and the repetitive overuse of the surface symbols of oppression eventually have a numbing effect on the imagination. A truly effective mythology operates beyond the surfaces, upon the unconscious (political or collective) in both the individual and society, where the real changes in attitudes and consciousness necessary for political transformation can take place.

Over the course of two decades Serote has indeed constructed a mythology of resistance that is relevant and purposeful for his chosen constituency. Whether this has any

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experience Serote is striving to give expression to, and the Movement ends with a weight of transforming potential it cannot adequately bear" - in " 'This time set again': the Temporal and Political Conceptions of Serote's *To Every Birth its Blood.*" p. 23

[214] Wole Soyinka, "My Tongue Does Not Marry Slogans" in *Mandela's Earth and other poems* (London: André Deutsch, 1989) pp. 50-56

significance beyond these narrow parameters is an open question. The recent and rapid changes in the South African political climate, and the collapse in Eastern Europe of Marxism as a workable political ideology, underline the urgent need for local writers to evolve a new and unifying mythology that can fulfill the cultural needs of an extremely diverse population in a 'new South Africa'.[215] According to Serote, the direction of the black South African poet in the 1980s was to serve the liberation struggle.[216] It remains to be seen what form and direction a new South African poetry will take in the 1990s.

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[215] For example, "We need to reclaim our right to a positive mythology, one where values such as non-violence, respect for diversity and grassroots democracy replace the worn-out values of power politics. I am not suggesting that we merely attempt a resurrection of some or other pseudo-historic utopia, but that we create a new hybrid mythology. A mythology in which the best values of our age are celebrated, ritualised and respected by all people .... We will need to reclaim the life-affirming myths of our past and present in order to build a new post-Apartheid culture." - Dave Lewis, "Reclaiming celebration .... and resisting the culture of death" *Kagenna* No. 2 (Cape Town, 1990)

[216] Michael Chapman, "Interview with Mongane Serote" (1980) in Michael Chapman (ed.) *Soweto Poetry* p. 115

CONCLUSION

This study has suggested that the term 'resistance literature' is an appropriate analytical category for examining the work of South African writers who stand in opposition to the dominant culture of white capitalism. In this respect literature and aesthetics are a terrain of struggle, and writing becomes an important cultural weapon in the ideological and symbolic domain of art and its meanings. The challenge posed by South African resistance literature to dominant aesthetic criteria and literary standards is of critical importance to local literary studies.

Bearing this in mind, the dissertation has attempted to give some indications of the possible literary and political significance of Mongane Wally Serote's poetry. The formulation of a suitable critical approach was a secondary aim of the project, but owing to the general confusion and lack of consensus in this area there is perhaps an overemphasis on theory at the expense of close readings of Serote's texts. In addition, as Serote moves into an overtly ideological mode that tends more towards repetitive rhetoric than poetry, it becomes more difficult to evaluate the 'literary' qualities of his work.

I have however generally taken into account the need to "do justice to [Serote's] poetry as an evolution of perception and style",[217] by outlining and applying a critical approach that could possibly integrate the literary ideologies of materialism and idealism. A succesful synthesis here would be necessary for a full understanding of the complex relationship between aesthetics and resistance, an understanding that could go "beyond the assertions by liberal-Marxist academics as to the superior 'truth' of worker-consciousness and class analysis."[218]

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[217] Michael Chapman, "The Liberated Zone: The Possibilities of Imaginative Expression in a State of Emergency", *English Academy Review* No. 5 (1988) p. 42

[218] Michael Chapman, "The Liberated Zone: The Possibilities of Imaginative Expression in a State of Emergency" p. 42

On a more personal level though, I have had a very real sense of being overtaken by history during the writing of this dissertation. I began my research in June 1986, shortly after the imposition by the state of a countrywide state of emergency. At this time, the upsurge of mass-based resistance that had been steadily increasing since 1983 was at its peak, and this gave a sense of relevance and urgency to my academic work. The dissertation was completed in June 1990, shortly after the lifting of the emergency in most parts of the country.

But the major 'irruption of history' into the writing of this project was the sudden lifting of political restrictions on black resistance organisations in February 1990. Through this move the political, historical, and theoretical justifications of total resistance have been seriously undermined, with important implications for local artists. Albie Sachs for example has recently called for writers and painters to "shake off the gravity of their anguish and break free from the solemn formulas of commitment."[219] This kind of shift in ideology and aesthetics is crucial for the continued development of South African writing, and Sachs' paper in particular has aroused much controversy and debate over this issue. It remains to be seen exactly what position Serote will take in this debate, and what effect the recent change in emphasis from the politics of resistance to the politics of negotiation will have on his work. It does seem though that resistance writers, having played an historically significant role in the development of South African literature, will have to redefine and redirect their creative energies. The next few years promise to be an exciting and innovative period for all South African writers.

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219 Albie Sachs, "From Solidarity to Artistic Freedom", *Weekly Mail* Vol. 6, No. 3 (February 1990) p. 23

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APPENDIX

Interview with Mongane Wally Serote - May 1989

[This interview is the result of a joint effort by a 3rd year student Ms. Rouhana Pahad and myself. Through the intervention of Mr. Essop Pahad in London, we were able to send questions to Mongane Wally Serote, and these were answered in the following interview. (Mr. Pahad has kindly given permission for this to be included in my dissertation, but no part of this interview may be reproduced in any form without the permission of either Mr. Pahad or Mr. Serote.) The tape we received from London was of poor quality, and is inaudible in places. I have only minimally edited the transcription, and elipses indicates conversational pauses.]

Essop:

Wally, poems like "What's In This Black Shit" have extreme shock value for the white population. Was this your intention?

Wally:

No... That poem comes from the collection Yakhal'inkomo.. The significance of this is that most of those poems were written in the early 60s, and were written when one was very conscious of the fact that apartheid seemed to be taking its course according to its architects, and the effect of this was shown in the quality of life of the people - the way people lived - and the way they responded to these effects in the sense that every morning one saw queues and queues of people being marched because they didn't have permits.. and when you talk about permits its a series of permits - housing permits, residential permits etcetera.. So, it is at this point that I myself was affected by this also, and one had this very strong feeling that one had to fight this one way or another, and I think "What's in this black shit" expresses that .. deep feeling of wanting to fight and trying to articulate what one does when one fights - which is really ... the feel in *Yakhal'inkomo*.

Essop:

Wally, the earlier works are inspired by Black Consciousness.. what would be your attitude towards this... I mean in terms of the early inspiration of BC... your understanding of BC as being a state of mind?1

Wally:

Er..I think in a certain sense .. when it is said that BC is a state of mind.. it's correct. It is correct because .. to a very large extent it is an expression where people wanted to know what is the significance of being black.. when everything had been telling them that being black is equal to inferiority. So really one was trying to address -if one could say this - the mind, possibly. As human beings we know that we are like everybody else... worthwhile... And I think the whole BC philosophy was really based on this... To say this that being black does not mean to say that people are not people - because we are people we are as worthwhile as anybody else. I think this is the significance of BC, especially because it was articulated at a point when repression through apartheid was at its highest, and at the same time there was nothing articulating mass consciousness. Because of this I think it was important.

Essop:

When you joined the African National Congress, which is an illegal organisation - which means going into the underground and doing much more dangerous work, possibly meaning also a greater commitment and determination to proceed with the struggle... Did this shift in areas of your political work.. did it have any effect on your writing and if so what kind of effect - for example in terms of sharpening your own ideological perceptions of what is going on in SA, and how what is going on should be changed and could be changed ?

Wally:

Well, I think one coming from the background of BC and moving into the ANC, one constantly had to address I think two main issues regarding to struggle in SA. The first and most important was the question of unity. Us being a people who are South Africans.. how do we apply the principle of unity? And as soon as one addresses this question one

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[1]BC and ANC are abbreviations for Black Consciousness and the African NAtional Congress respectively. These organisations were generally named in full in the interview.

has to immediately address the question of non-racialism... The two in my view then lead to one other very important [question] the question of democracy. And think once one has dealt with these three ... very important reference points for our struggle.. one also develops another very important .. understanding, that in fact South Africa is part of the world. Now once one has done this you can no longer talk about 'state of mind'.. First of all the question of unity is a question that we are going to have to battle over for a very long time if we are to build a nation. Secondly once you deal with the question of non-racialism in fact that itself locates you within the world, makes you understand that all people aspire to make the world a better place .... and you have to create relations with them... and as I was saying earlier on the question of democracy - now it has become a very key issue internationally. So the ANC, by becoming a member of the ANC, one was actually becoming a member of humanity in a sense .. you were joining human beings in the world who are striving for the creation of a civilised world, so to speak. So the limitations that were put around the definitions of BC .. were at one point .. we had to exclude the re-education of certain people for the betterment of the world because of the colour of their skin .. the limitations.. but other limitations were that the BC movement was really a student movement, it has ultimately no mass base.. and thirdly, also very important, I know that with the masses we tried to have relations, but it was a student movement - we tried to have relations with workers, but it couldn't because it started as a student movement. So there were many limitations around BC. At the same time I think it is very important to note the significance of its emergence at a phase of our struggle when repression was having a field day you know - it helped people to stand up, to want to fight back, to want to express themselves and articulate their aspirations.

Essop:

Would you say that this broadening of your political understanding, your political experience, in relation to the role of the working class for example... was it at that time already beginning to be expressed in your work, or had you already been moving in that direction in any case before you came to the realisation that you can't really move ahead without moving the masses, without the working class playing such an important role?

Wally:

Er, it is very difficult to answer this because.. I want to start by saying that I think there are very very few people in SA who have not been touched and mobilised by the articulation of the African National Congress, and we are not talking about in recent times, we're talking about historically. I personally grew up in Alexandra which .. one can safely

say that it was a firm base of the African National Congress. So the seeds for aspiring for freedom to me were planted in the first instance by the parents of the African National Congress as early as in the 50s. But of course political consciousness is a development. I would say that even in the 60s when I was active as an ANC member in the underground .. which led to my detention I cannot say that I was as conscious of what the future South Africa must be as I am now - although I was active as an ANC member.. I interacted with ANC people - the consciousness grew much later when I was outside of South Africa and had much more intimate and direct contact with other figures of the movement.. at various levels. This provided a growth in my understanding and I'm sure that this has informed my writing a lot.

Essop:

You've touched on two areas which I think we can touch on now - one is the question of detention and one is the question of writing.. You were detained in 1969..

Wally:

Hm..

Essop:

Before we come to this interesting .. what happened to you in detention -were you able at all to do any writing, or were you denied paper and a pen so you weren't able to do any writing at all?

Wally:

Well, I did write when I was in detention... it was almost like plotting.. one of the biggest operations to get a pen to start with.. which I got.. and when I got that pen I used toilet paper, and I used to have rolls and rolls and rolls of writing material which I used to hide in my cell. But it is unfortunate that at one time when I was caught .. speaking to other comrades over.. you know.. the little windows where we used to talk, when they searched my cell they found these things and they disposed of.. they took them with them. So by the time I left detention I didn't have anything that I'd written.. but I did write, which helped me a lot because it made me .. harness my mind in a certain direction - trying to understand the struggle, trying to understand the condition that I was in, appreciating the presence of other people around me ...(indistinct) ..because I'd never seen them, but having discussed with them .. through the window all sorts of things .. we had developed a certain relation which .. necessarily began to even inform my writing. There are two people that I think of

very dearly .. many times .. when I think about the poems of that time. The first one was Benjamin Ramoutse, the second one was somebody who .. I do not know his name but who was a SWAPO comrade and an old man .. Both these comrades had.. when we arrived in prison .. had been in solitary confinement for almost three years. So they had absolute experience in terms of how ..the prison timetable, the prison wardens .. and they could advise on who to deal with ..among the convicted prisoners. So really when one went into prison and was able to create relations with these people.. it was almost like one has a compass, and one was no longer in foreign terrain. It was very important because ..through this we were able to undermine every plan which the regime had about us - the fact that they were putting us in solitary confinement - I mean it was to isolate us so that they are in absolute control of us ..but this undermined that - immediately. So .. many of the things I was writing about .. it was really to understand how it is possible for a person to be in solitary confinement for three years .. and this man from Namibia told me that when he arrived he could only speak his own dialect and Afrikaans, but by the time we were talking.. I mean he was speaking English, he was speaking Zulu, and Setswana - which he'd learnt under conditions of solitary confinement. And then there was .. Benjamin Ramoutse .. I remember that the first few days I used to hear this voice either singing or almost commanding all the detainees to stand up and .. I'll say fight in the sense that fight at that moment meant that one had to fight against being isolated and even being in solitude. Ramoutse used to hit on the wall, Ramoutse used to sing revolutionary songs, Ramoutse would call cells - you know.. number one number two number three number four .. because he knew there were so many cells. Eventually somehow we had no choice but to respond to his call, and when we responded we began to know ..about the ANC and other things, and how we came to be in detention, and of course for me personally it was very intense inspiration .. which one had to battle and understand.

Essop:

How long were you in detention?

Wally:

I was in detention for nine months.

Essop:

Now you were tortured once in detention.. Could you repeat please the story you said to me earlier in connection with the poem "Cat and bird" ?

Wally:

Well, I'd like to broaden this a little bit because we talked a little about BC and th' ngs like that .. You see .. by the time I joined the BC movement I was coming out of detention, and there were many things that I'd become aware of which I hadn't known before I was detained .. First .. I was absolutely shocked by the power that the security police had. In 1969, if people recall, when we went to prison I think we were among the first people to be detained under the terrorism act section 6 which was passed in '67.. So when when we went in.) prison we didn't know what this meant. Now the first shock was we kept alone in a cell. The second shock was no one had access to you but the security guard. The third was while one was outside one was reading about how people were killed by the security branch, especially people who came from the rural areas ... and you realise that actually these people had the power to snuff out your life like that ! (snaps fingers). And also you became aware of how .. first of all I mean they are using the wealth of the coun:y, the law of the country, they are backed by the state, the state empowers them to seek, find and destroy - I'd like to put it that way. I remember that my first encounter with this man .. Swanepoel .. first that I heard of him was when I looked at his picture I think it was at the market square when he was looking over the body of ..(indistinct).. I saw a picture of him in shorts looking at the first detainee to die.. and suddenly I was face to face with him in life . which I must say was a great shock to me. The first words that he said to me was .. he asked me whether when I was outside I had read that somebody called ..(indistinct).. had been killed in detention, and I happened to know because I was following this very closely as I working as a journalist. So I said yes, and he said you have just met the man who killed him, and I can show you where I killed him. Now you see ..there's a problem here, in the sense that when you sit outside of prison and you read these things - somewhere inside you.. you cannot believe it, it is not possible for you to believe that actually this has happened. Now here was a man telling me this and I had no doubt in my mind. Then of course he handed me over to the people .. there were teams of two .. I think I must have been there for seven days or seven nights because .. I began to realise after some time when I was there that .. First I began to realise that it seemed I'm seeing the same people but in different clothes, and then suddenly I realised, I could sense when they come with freshened deodorants. Then I realised that you know.. I was going day after day after day standing, being asked questions, and of course being seriously tortured and beaten. Now one moment .. you see when you come from any township .. let's say from among the oppressed -really .. what .. there's one rule - is that you don't divulge any information to the enemy or to the state. Now I was confronted with this - and they were asking me definite questions - where is so and so, what did he do, so and so and

so and so .. and, not knowing about denying everything flat - and it is not possible to do that .. but I did know. I stood there and I said I don't know this, I don't know that.. Then Swanepoel realised .. I think he must have realised that was (indistinct) .. and he said to one of the people please read what so and so said about this man, and it shocked me when I heard this, it absolutely shocked me - because I thought all the things that were related to him was secret - he must have noticed that I was absolutely shocked. I don't know where he found this poem .. which I'd written many years when I was in shorts then .. called "Cat and Bird" - and he recited this poem to me. Of course, in the (indistinct) one knew what that meant - I'd watched the cat happening onto the bird .. so I knew what it was going to be and he did it .. by the time he'd reached the last line where the cat jumps for the bird and puts its teeth into the flesh and blood breaks - he kicked me at that point..

Essop:

At this point you of course were tied, I mean your hands were tied..

Wally:

My hands were bound .. I'd been there for many days .... What I was saying is that I wanted to relate this to BC because .. you see .. once one had experienced the might of the security branch and the might of the state .. the way it was absolutely thrown on us. When I went out .. I had to look at every place that I knew very differently because suddenly I knew that if we were going to fight we were going to have to be extremely organised, very strong, and know exactly what we wanted .. So this was my problem when I was within BC - I was among students, and I was not a student myself .. and I could sense many times when they were talking that they didn't really understand what they were talking about .. and this is not negative criticism, I'm just trying to identify absolutely what was my dilemma at that time because I remember that I used to discuss with many of them .. you know we'd have to find a way of understanding - I didn't know what was that way, I wasn't as politically conscious as I am now, I was not aware of the world, I very sincerely believed that the only people that were going to fight were there inside the country, no other help - I sincerely believed this.. And continuously in my mind was .. having experienced this systematic repression .. how it expresses itself in the security branch, in the police - having experienced it I could feel its organisation. I continuously wondered what type of organisation we would need which will confront this. The only thing I'm relating that to about this .. you know a time came when what I had expected to happen happened - when the state or whoever it was who made these decisions that it was going to hit at the BC movement. And .. if then I had known that what we should have

done was to link this movement to the history of our struggle .. I think this is what I would have done, and I keep asking myself what why was it that I didn't have this consciousness to link what we were doing to the struggle of the past - because this is where I was struggling. Many of us then .. I know some people who left to join the ANC then .. but even then, when you see this very significant development one said you know they are going to look for arms somewhere.. It is my hope at the present moment that very very few people in SA would be like us then .. and when I say this I'm underlining the importance of the mass democratic movement in SA.. and of course honouring the initiatives that people took to ensure that this broad, broad - the broadest mass movement must remain - because this is how a people will begin to sense the power that can challenge the state, and this is where people get the confidence and the strength to challenge the state.

Essop:

We come to last part .. you've been saying all along about how in fact quite rightly like everybody else one develops ... Are there any specific ways in which living in exile has enabled you to further broaden your political understanding, helped you to get further contexts, and even perhaps to come into more closer touch with .. the breadth and the depth of .. mythical and much wider scale, and in that sense .. Is there a way in which in fact exile helped you and therefore .. helped to produce .. writing from you which was a more broadening form?

Wally:

Well, you know coming from among the oppressed the first and most important thing about exile is that .. first, I must say that I regard the fact that I'm in exile as an assault on my person, on my development, on my right to be in our country. But having said that, exile is no longer important for me precisely becuse I've become a member of the ANC - which has one, first and most important given me a sense of the size of the world .. which in itself, that knowledge - just to understand the size of the world negates oppression .. that knowledge that the world is so big, consists of different types of people, different political trends, and compels you to find the trend that you will align yourself with, and begin to actually have exchange with some of the people coming from those - you begin to develop a sense of the world which means .... You suddenly discover that .. you're part of the world - very important knowledge if you come from among the oppressed. And secondly, its very important for me since I've been in exile was .. for the first time in my life I met a communist, and I .. I .. I kept saying to myself, I remember, the first time I met this person I wondered what a communist has to say - and of course coming from SA you

have all sorts of different thinking about what a communist is. And the first communist that I met was Angela, Angela Davis .. in New York. I'd heard many black Americans talk very badly about communism. Of course coming from South Africa ..(indistinct) .. and the first question that I asked Angela was: can you explain to me this question of race and class .. and I had read by then many things that were challenging the way I was thinking .. but the most important thing that made me think more about communists was when Angela said, sort of attempted to relate struggle from different parts of the world to class .. for me at that time it gave me a sense .. and thought to myself if communists think in this way .. which means what they are saying is .. they are talking about human beings in the world being one - while different we're one - I found that a very interesting thought .. and I aspired from then on .. I wondered a lot about communists. After then .. you see this was my first encounter with a commnist - somebody who stood in the world and said 'I am a communist'.. Coming from SA ..

Essop:

..black and a woman..

Wally:

Yes, black and a woman ..and somebody who had fought, and by the time I met her she had been underground, she'd confronted the FBI, she'd been in prison, and I was meeting this person and I was very curious... but for me you see at that point I was battling with the thought peoples, the relationship between peoples, and I listened to her articulate this, and I remember at that time the main issue was Angola especially .. 75, '76 .. and Guinea-Bissau .. and I was very interested .. and one other perversity that I had was that I really wondered about the Soviet Union, and here was someone who described to me in full detail .. but of course you know since then I've met communists in the ANC and I've had very many discussions with them, and of course they've contributed a lot to my thinking and to my understanding of the world.

Essop:

It's very interesting what you're saying about Angela ....(indistinct)... but Angela, whom I know very well, used to always say to me how much the SA struggle - that is the ANC and the SACP had inspired her in all her struggles, and she always said .... 'well if the ANC instructs me I will go and do it' .... and its very interesting because it proves your point about the breadth of the contact and the more one knows ..and then you a South African poet got inspired by Angela Davis who in turn had been and continues to be

inspired by the struggle in South Africa... I want to proceed with this a bit in terms of meeting .. because .. in the last few years you've been in England .. you've had the opportunity to discuss with not only communists but other well-known progressive writers - people like Graham Greene, Pinter, Salman Rushdie .. and a number of others ... How has this contact helped you ..because I mean if you were not in exile the possibilities of perhaps meeting these people might not have occured .. as it is so many of our wonderful cultural workers at home at the moment are missing this .. I mean in what way has it sort of helped you?

Wally:

Well you see I started by saying that exile is an assault .. but since 1974 which is the year when my exile starts I've met many many other writers in the world .. in different parts of the world .. we've had all sorts of discussions.. and many times I've been angered by one element when this has happened .. the fact that I can't go back to SA to review, to review my knowledge against the background of where I belong.. This is what has angered me very very much. On the other hand .. of course my having been with exiles suddenly brought also forward .... made me understand the significance of ..our struggle in the sense that I've met many well-travelled, knowledgeable and informed writers .... but I always felt that the history of struggle has imparted to me a broad understanding of the world, of life, which can make me stand on any platform and be able to give a point of view, an opinion, about events in the world. So in a sense one has to find, continually fight for the relations of the two. It is true that being in exile makes one have access to the world, but also important is that this knowledge that seeks that you have close contact with .. where you come from .. The importance of this is that now for me it makes me understand .. it makes me have a sense of belonging .. and it is in this regard where I see how the ANC has enhanced my craftsmanship as a writer .. because it has enabled me to have access not only to the world but has continuously given me the tools through which I should understand this world. But as a writer I always wanted .. once I understood, once I knew .. I had to then create out of this world .. through my writing.

Essop:

Wally, how did exile affect your poems *Tsetlo* and *Behold Mama Flowers*?

Wally:

Well, *Tsetlo* was written in SA not in exile, *Behold Mama Flowers* .. the long poem .. it is one long poem and a few short ones, but the long poem is important to me in

the sense that I wrote it at a time when I was beginning to understand what I said earlier on, when I began to grapple with the understanding of the size of the world... The first thing that struck me was that first of all racism is not peculiar to South Africa - it exists in the world. Secondly, the possibility of non-racialism. Thirdly, the understanding that actually there are two political economic systems in the world, and wanting to identify .. which one to I belong to .. so *Behold Mama Flowers* for me it was the articulation of that struggle and an attempt to understand this .. And lastly to say you know.. because once one leaves ones home one also becomes very conscious of it. I then suddenly began to understand from what people were saying ..that to say I'm an African doesn't mean that I come from SA but it suddenly said to me here is a whole continent of Africa. *Behold Mama Flowers* also tries to examine the whole of Africa and I must say the romanticism, sentimentality that I had when I left SA was extremely childish when I began to understand some of the issues that the African continent was raising.

Essop:

With..this tremendous breadth of experience .. that you've accumulated over the years .. when you still write now .. I mean how much ..and you spoke earlier about relating it with the past .. how much do you still draw on the 60s for inspiration?

Wally:

Well you know... the 60s in terms of the history of our struggle have become much more important than they've ever been in our struggle now .. first when you look at the people, individuals who were active in the 60s, and secondly when you look at the movement as a whole coming from that time .. and you suddenly see how .... I mean for instance one sits down and you read the Freedom Charter ...which in fact comes from even before the 60s ..but even before that you look at the founding of the ANC ..because the rock of the founding of the ANC was this question of unity ...which is still ....in our struggle .. and continously when one reads what the founders of the ANC were saying about unity we find out how extremely relevant what they were saying then is to the present time, and you actually see how from what they were saying emerges that practice ... look at many of the documents that emerged out of the 60s - strategy and practice of the ANC - which is a document which for many many years whether we had one struggle or had not one struggle remained extremely relevant ... so the 60s ...is a period which for a very long time we are still going to search through, we are still going to be inspired by, we are still going to create as a way of understanding the significance of that period in our struggle .. because in fact that was the rock of our future.

Essop:

Wally, at the moment you are in close contact with cultural workers .. in what way has this affected your work and inspired you?

Wally:

Well.. in many many ways. I think the first and most important if one were to comment about current cultural workers in SA is the conviction among many cultural workers is that they must find a mass base for cultural expression. This is very very important .. and I'll show the importance of this .. through a criticism. I'm currently hearing that you see many South African plays ..and after some I'm going to say if I've seen one of them I've seen all of them .. and I'm asking myself what is the problem with our theatre? Well, first I think is the fact that theatre workers themselves are not organised, so that they can have a broad point of reference for their work. Secondly, it depends upon writing. It is the script that informs theatre, but it is the lives of the people which forms the script .. writers in SA have got a different period to live as individuals aspiring for what was not a reality for them, and presently I think we are paying the price for that. I am very confident that the turning point will come soon. When I read about the Congress of South African writers, when I read some of their publications, when I read in the newspaper about what they do, plus I've met some of the people - I have no doubt in my mind that the respect our people have had for literature .. will .. will be honoured. I am very confident about this, and what makes me confident is the fact that many SA writers have come to terms with the (indistinct)..they cannot write and become aloof to what is preoccupying thousands and thousands and thousands of people in SA - the masses. Many SA writers have come to use this as a point of reference, saying to themselves we must find a way in which this informs their craft, and I think this is where the turn will come. Another sector which I think is going to become very (indistinct) in expressing SA culture is filming - one senses all the time that the Film and Allied Workers organisation is battling against great odds to find a basis among the masses. They're continuously searching for the aesthetics that is informed by reality, by the life experience of the people. I think at the present moment these are the two sectors which .. I do not think I'm exaggerating or I'm wrong to think that there'll be lots of innovation, there'll be lots of freshness, there'll be lots of contribution to literature, not only in SA but in the world, I think so. Theatre too, I think will follow, because one can sense the restlessness among theatre people. Maybe they're beginning to feel that one two three pieces that were produced were very important - after that it was a repetition. They are aware of this.. and they are finding ways and means of

searching. Another sector which is part of our people in SA is painting and sculpture, which unfortunately at a certain period of our lives was divorced from our people - because it was turned into profiting and commodity. But I think that our people have always created, through painting, through sculpture, through art and craft, and the struggle, the way the struggle is articulated, is going to redefine this knowledge of our people. It is going to reinform our people about the significance .. of this art form. One can already see how the painters and sculptors are beginning to look back in their past, looking at those who created before them - which signifies another restlessness -that they are not comfortable in the present, they are seeking a point of reference from the situation .. and there have been lots of important creations in this area .. which will become a mirror through which our people look at themselves .. to gain skills again of this art.

Essop:

Wally I'm thanking you for doing this interview. Let me just add that as far as I'm concerned your work has not only had a big impact upon cultural workers in SA, but has also had a very big impact internationally .. because you know that ..very many important cultural people all over the world have taken an even greater interest in our struggle in SA ... (ending indistinct)

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Name of thesis: Aesthetics And Resistance- Aspects Of Mongane Wally Serote's Poetry.

PUBLISHER:
University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg
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