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UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG
HISTORY WORKSHOP



STRUCTURE AND EXPERIENCE IN THE MAKING OF APARTHEID

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TITLE: "time has run out - period.": Myth and History in Serote's long poems

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'time has run out - period.': Myth and History in Serote's long poems

> 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.[1]

The word 'myth' is highly problematic for materialist literary critics and historians, as it is usually associated with depoliticization and falsification of history or the idealist concepts of universality and timelessness. But certain aspects of Serote's long poems 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",[2] this paper attempts a meaningful discussion of Serote's long poems in terms of this possible relationship.

As a starting point, it seems clear that Serote's work is part of 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 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.[3]

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 called for by Harlow would be difficult to realise in practice, as this would have to be based on theory that enabled a synthesis of idealism and materialism.[4] Given the history of critical debates around black poetry in South Africa such a synthesis seems to be some way off.

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

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

[3] Barbara Harlow, *Resistance Literature* (New York: Methuen, 1987) p.70

[4] 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

The general intention in this paper 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 in the 70s.[5] 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 the writer's *experience* of history is *structured* in a mythological way in the long poems. It is important though to describe the kinds of myths being created in these poems, and to evaluate their political effectiveness. But before this the problematic relationship of poetry to materialist criticism should be discussed, and the concept of 'myth' must be clearly defined.

POETRY, MYTH AND MATERIALIST CRITICISM

The typical objections voiced by materialist critics against myth can be seen, for example, in Kelwyn Sole's paper on Black Consciousness writers.[6] 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 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

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[5] In keeping with the core period suggested by the conference, these are three poems written in the 70s - "No Baby Must Weep", "Behold Mama, Flowers", and "Time has run out"

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

Serote's long poems would have to evaluate their political qualities on these grounds - Sole's view of myth is not without problems.

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."[7] 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[8]

Soyinka's views have their own inevitable problems (and it would be fanciful to speculate that anything like a 'leftocracy' might be operating in South African literary criticism), but there seems to be a tendency 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."

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. For Sole however 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.

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

[8] ibid. pp 34, 54

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.[9] 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 paper, 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 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.[10]

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. To take an extreme case, consider the following poem (found posted on the door of the Division of African literature at Wits in 1987)

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

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[9] Es'kia Mphahaele, "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)

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

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[11]

The poem shows the contradiction which occurs at the extremes of resistance aesthetics - the poet/s 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. The aesthetic impulse here is evident in many poems of resistance, 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.

But even so, Ward's ideas are still valid - most notably 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 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 *figures* for the ultimate concrete collective life of an achieved Utopian or classless society.[12]

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[11] 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)

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

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.

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. 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.
> 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.[13]

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.

A critical discussion of Serote's long poems within this framework would also be in line with with the 'positive hermeneutic' of Jameson's marxist approach - which 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."[14] The mythologizing tendencies in Serote's long poems and *To Every Birth its Blood* 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.

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[13] 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
[14] *The Political Unconscious* p.291

TIME IS THE INGREDIENT OF DISCOVERY

In his first published poem Serote conceives of history as a 'frozen past'.[15] 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',[16] 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."[17] 'No Baby Must Weep' is the realisation of this discourse in the form of the long lyrical poem - although 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. But the connections are not to be found in the kind of textual unity and patterning of images displayed in the conventional long lyric. Rather, the integration is symbolic and mythical. The journey through personal history is also a "poetic submersion of the particularity of the individual subject/narrator into the collective

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15 "This Oldwoman" *New Coin* Vol.3 No. 2 (1969) p.9

16 *Yakhal'inkomo* (Johannesburg: Ad Donker, 1972) p.62

17 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)

experience of the black masses" - 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

The political meaning of this vision of liberation is not clear, and the 'effectiveness' of the poem as political writing is debatable.[18] It does show however 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).[19] 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".[20] 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

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

[19] None of Serote's poems are dated, and it is also not possible to assume a straightforward development from *Yakhal'inkomo* through *Tsetlo* to *No Baby Must Weep*, as some critics have done. Several poems in*Tsetlo* were written before publication of the first collection (some as as early as the mid-60s according to Serote), and according to his publisher, Serote worked on *No Baby Must Weep* from about 1972-1974. But there is no manuscriptural evidence available at this stage to confirm this (interview with Adriaan Donker, September 1989)

[20] 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.

extremely childish when I began to understand some of the issues that the African continent was raising.[21]

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,
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.[22]

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 biding his time later came 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
god knows where to
and there is a screaming silence somewhere
god

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21 Interview with Mongane Wally Serote (May 1989)

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

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 the rather obvious device of 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.[23]

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

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

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
> 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'. As in 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.[24] 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
> and one day
> when the sun rises

[24] 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)

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 'baas' 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".[25] 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

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.

Nick Visser has pointed out the effects of the 'irruption of history' into the process of production of *To Every Birth its Blood.* While these disruptive effects are not readily apparent in the structure of Serote's longer poems,[26] 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"[27] (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. To the extent that

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25 *Yakhal'inkomo* p. 9

26 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.

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

ideological analyses of poetry are possible, there are signs of Serote moving away from Black Consciousness thinking as early as "No Baby Must Weep."[28] 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.

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 now stands at its edge.[29] 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').

CONCLUSION

The above readings of the long poems are tentative, and much further work is necessary to establish the mythical dimensions of these works and their potential effectiveness as political writing. A possible point of departure here is a rigorous application of the interpretative model put forward by Fredric Jameson in The Political Unconscious - where the text is located within "three concentric frameworks which mark a widening out of the sense of the social ground of a text..."[30] But with regard to poetry, it would seem that this kind of analysis is limited, and if carried out must be informed by a strong grasp of the textual dynamics and mythological elements of the

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[28] 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.."

[29] "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

[30] *The Political Unconscious* p.75

poem. This in turn would depend on the possibility suggested earlier of synthesising the critical theories and practices of idealism and materialism. Only from the perspective of such a synthesis could the problematic relationship between myth and history be properly defined.

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