Robert Berold, ed. *South African Poets on Poetry: Interviews from New Coin 1992-2001.* Scottsville: University of Natal Press, 2003. 182 pp. No price listed (paper), ISBN 978-1-86914-031-1.

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Practicing Poetry in an Interregnum: Poets in Post-Liberation South Africa

In this absorbing series of twenty-one interviews, nineteen South African poets and four foreign guests discuss the starting points, stages, and settings of their personal, political, and poetical trajectories. Since the book's nine-year span coincides with the last two years of apartheid and with the first seven years of a post-apartheid dispensation, it is not surprising that the South African interviewees also register the exhilaration occasioned by the demise of the old order, as well as the uncertainty that stems from the contradictions of life under a new polity.

As the book's title indicates, these interviews were first published in the literary journal *New Coin.* A twice-yearly publication of Rhodes University's Institute for the Study of English in Africa, *New Coin* is one of South Africa's leading venues for the publication of local poetry. Robert Berold, the journal's editor between 1989 and 1999, collected and edited the twenty-one interviews for publication in book form. The interviewees are well known to audiences of contemporary South African poetry: Tatamkhulu Afrika, Berold, Vonani Bila, The Botsotso Jesters, Jeremy Cronin, Ingrid de Kok, Angifi Dladla, Denis Hirson, Peter Horn, Mzi Mahola, Joan Meterlekamp, Ike Mboneni Muila, Donald Parenzee, Karen Press, Lesego Rampolokeng, and Ari Sitas. The book also features conversations with four "visiting poets," Natan Zach (Israel), Miroslav Holub (Czech Republic), Philip Zhuwao (Zimbabwe), and Taban lo Liyong (Sudan/South Africa). While most of the poets are in their middle years, the interviewees range in age from veterans like Peter Horn (b. 1934), who began publishing in the 1960s, to younger writers like Vonani Bila (b.1972), whose first book of poems appeared in the 1990s. Eighteen of the interviewees are male and twelve of them are white. At least four–Afrika, Zhuwao, Holub, and Isabella Motadinye of the Jesters–have passed away since the original publication of their interviews.

Each interview is preceded by the date of the interview and the name of the interviewer, as well as by a brief biographical note on the poet and an updated bibliography of his or her work. Aside from providing this information and from penning a terse one-page preface, Berold has kept his editorial intervention to a minimum. On the one hand, this is a welcome move, since the reader

can then focus resolutely on the interviews themselves. On the other hand, it would have been helpful–especially for newcomers to the study of South African literature–if the interviews had been supplemented with the customary apparatus of scholarly endeavor, such as an introduction, a discussion as to why these particular poets were interviewed and not others, information about the interviewers, notes on the contents of the interviews, and a bibliography or guide to further reading.

The interviews are arranged in accordance with the year in which they were first published. Each year between 1992 and 2001 gets two interviews, except for 1996 and 2000, for which four interviews and one interview are listed, respectively. Two of the poets, Rampolokeng and Muila, appear twice, in different years. Berold is responsible for conducting fourteen of the interviews, fellow poets Alan Finlay and Joan Meterlekamp (current editor of *New Coin*) are responsibile for two interviews each, and Colleen Crawford Cousins, Sam Radithlalo, and Susan Rich for one apiece.

In his "Editor's Note," Berold explains that the printed interviews are edited versions of taped conversations that lasted between one and a half to two hours and that were transcribed verbatim, after which the transcripts were edited to about half their original length. Poets and editor then apparently agreed upon what should be left out.

Judging from the portions of the interviews that were retained, it seems a pity that any of the original taped material had to be omitted, for as Berold accurately claims in his note, "the poets spoke openly, articulately and often, as it turned out, prophetically." Each interview is valuable in its own terms for what it reveals about the personal circumstances, reading predilections, political views, aspirations, frustrations, preoccupations, working methods, and accomplishments of each individual poet. Topics include the poets' thoughts about audiences and reviewers, the politics of identity and location, and the limited opportunities for publication available to them, among many other issues. Collectively, the interviews provide readers with an ample window onto the vibrant practice of poetry in South Africa today. Rather than describe the heterogeneous contents of twenty-one separate interviews, in the remainder of this review I will sketch some of the themes that recur across many of them.

One abiding motif is the engagement with the specific rigors and demands of poetry as a calling. In several cases that engagement has entailed a rejection of the constraints imposed by what Karen Press calls "struggle culture" (p. 17). While many of the poets interviewed here profess broadly left-wing perspectives, most chafe at the notion that poetry must conform to a correct set of prescriptions regarding form, subject, and style. As Joan Meterlekamp comments, "if you listen to your inner voices and write about what you care about, the politics is there. You don't have to strive after it; you don't have to write a poem about Boipatong to express the agony of this country" (p. 9). A year later, Tathamkulu Afrika notes, "we must write poetry which is poetry. It musn't be sloganising anymore. In fact, it should never have been sloganising in the first place" (p. 7). Accordingly, Afrika and others express a palpable sense of relief that, with apartheid's demise, they need not limit their poetry to a purely defensive posture of denunciation.

Instead, they insist that while the practice of poetic denunciation remains necessary and urgent, especially given the chasms of wealth and privilege that continue to divide the country, new spaces have opened up for a poetics of affirmation.

What are the poets affirming? Some of them affirm the need to reclaim their personal lives and priorities after long periods of orienting themselves towards collective aspirations and pursuits. Others insist that both politics and aesthetics must be rethought, redefined, and made more inclusive than hitherto. It is notable in this regard that several of the interviewees draw attention to the significance of everyday life, the quotidian arena of social reproduction, as when Lesego Rampolokeng observes:

"I at some point in my life said I wasn't going to write about flowers. ... [A]nd I said I wasn't going to write love songs or love poems. But there are people in my life who I love–I love my son, I love other people as well, I can't put that aside as being secondary now, and seek to define this great and glorified concept that we call *the struggle*. Because it's a struggle for myself to grow up in this world. I walk down the street and see beauty: people in love, people kissing–I can't wish that away" (p. 31).

Many of the poets also seem to believe that as marginalized, misunderstood, maligned, or trivialized as it may be, poetry can play a modest but essential role in creating a democratic public sphere. Jeremy Cronin, interviewed in December 1998, goes farthest in his hopes for poetry's civic role:

"Poetry should ... become a full citizen of the new South Africa; it should not have to choose always be-

tween either the street or the study (both forms of exclusion and marginalisation in their different ways). Poetry should also occupy the town hall" (p. 130).

Echoing Cronin's optimistic opinion, in a 2001 interview Angifi Dladla asserts "the people regard poets in high esteem" (p.182). He continues, "at the lobola ceremonies, at the weddings, at parties for the initiates from the mountain school, at the school concerts and debates-poetry is there. Even at political rallies, poetry is there. This is our strength" (p. 182)!

However, not all the poets interviewed here share Cronin and Dladla's faith in the social power or mass appeal of poetry. Nor do they necessarily regard it as their task to gain a large audience for their chosen form of self-expression. Ingrid de Kok, for instance, emphasizes that she has "no mission to make South Africans read lyric poetry! Writing and reading this sort of poetry is solitary and demanding. So be it" (p. 117)! For her part, while she believes that her poetry is " 'political' in the sense that it accepts politics, power struggles, social oppression, as part of the reality that decides pleasure and pain" (p. 19), Karen Press insists on the deeply subjective and even starkly existential nature of her poetic vision:

"I'm more involved in the notion of being on the edge of the void; that you're always looking into darkness and you've got your back to the safety of any notion of home, or land.... It's very much that sense of being away from safe ground. That's what the writing is about, that being on the edge and writing out of the space that you could fall into" (p. 19).

As this brief review of attitudes towards poetry's purview suggests, the interviewees often express contrasting viewpoints on a variety of subjects, although on some key questions they are relatively unanimous. Given how varied the work of these poets is in idiom, aim, tone, and style, and given the different striations of gender, class, confession, education, ethnicity, age, sexuality, race, and region that mark them, it is hardly surprising that they should subscribe to a wide spectrum of opinion. Such diversity of thoughtful, sincere, and dissenting views is refreshing in a political climate of a frequently stifling and univocal officialese. Moreover, it lends weight to the claims that several of the poets make for the civic significance of their poetic endeavor.

Nonetheless, the differences among these poets also point up the rather arbitrary nature of the national rubric under which they are presented to readers. While in a sense it seems logical to define the poets according to the criterion of national belonging (they are, after all, South African citizens), and while the impulse to convene them under this label chimes with the official prerogative of nation building, doing so calls attention to what the category omits as much as to what it includes. Poets that write primarily in Afrikaans or in Zulu, say, do not appear between the book's covers, and although this is to be expected in a book published under the auspices of the Institute for the Study of English in Africa, the fact remains that the title makes the collection sound more nationally inclusive or representative than it is. Although the poets themselves often take up the question of their relationship to the country's linguistic and ethnic diversity, some editorial discussion of the phrasing of the book's title would have been useful. By the same token, it would also have been helpful for the editor to, at least, gesture towards recent developments in poetry written or performed in South Africa's other languages.

At any rate, a shared and perhaps distinctly South African dimension of the poets' outlook is, in fact, their awareness of other languages, and of the potentially energizing consequences of cultural borrowing. Dennis Hirson, for instance, argues that "moving across language walls" is "essential to the creation of a new poetic territory in South Africa" (p.78). In their own multilingual and multi-media publications and performances, and in their promotion of poetry and fiction in South Africa's many languages, the Botsotso Jesters are enacting the kind of linguistic border crossing and poetic experimentation that Hirson valorizes. In a 1998 interview, Siphiwe ka Ngwenya et al. insist on their right to hybrid forms of expression, such as creating poetry for either the page or for the stage in both English and tsotsitaal/isicamtho.

Isicamtho's linguistic versatility mirrors the heightened sense of creative restlessness that permeates these remarks made by over twenty poets across the span of a decade. One of the overall impressions the book creates is that many of the poets are trying to cast off received poetic paradigms and political outlooks. Out of the quarrel with themselves and with the enormously complicated country they inhabit, they seem to be forging a new poetry or, more accurately, new poetries, each possessed of a distinctive cluster of registers, preoccupations, and purposes. Moreover, many of the poets appear to share the belief that poetry can provide human beings with emotional and intellectual sustenance and succor while living through a shifting interregnum. Jeremy Cronin speaks of the "anchorage, moorage, integrity" that poetry can provide (p.127), while Kelwyn Sole suggests that poets

should "aim their expression at people without a political home, maybe even without a home, restless people" (p. 41). For her part, Karen Press avails herself of poetry to explore the need for love, for a "kind of home that the universe doesn't offer you" (p. 20).

Literal homelessness is one of the problems that belie the sunny portrait of the New South Africa that often shines forth from official pronouncements and from the pages of tourist brochures. As Sole has argued elsewhere, and as this collection of interviews amply demonstrates, South African poets have assumed the burden of bearing witness to their country's most intractable social dilemmas.[1] Another way of saying this is that the poets often position themselves at an angle to hegemonic images of the state of the nation. In a 1994 interview, Kelwyn Sole enjoins fellow poets to "endure with your vision; become a lasting embarrassment to the landscape" (p. 42). Six years later, Vonani Bila echoes Sole in remarking, "perhaps the duty of the poet is to ask embarrassing questions, to express deepest analysis and feelings regarding the extent of development in our country" (p. 156).

Whether the poets are discussing their personal development as writers or their country's progress since the fall of apartheid, their observations are unfailingly engaging and insightful. Students of poetry wanting to learn more about the work of individual writers, as well as readers who want to get a feel for the temper of the times (as experienced by some of its most articulate witnesses), will find *South African Poets on Poetry* a valuable resource, despite the limitations of its scholarly scaffolding.

In recording, collecting, and publishing the reflections of these poets at a turning point in their nation's history, and in creating a wider space for poetry, the editor and Gecko Press have performed a signal service.

Note

[1]. Kelwyn Sole, "The Witness of Poetry: Economic Calculation, Civil Society and the Limits of Everyday Experience in a Liberated South Africa" *New Formations* 45 (2001-2002): pp. 24-53.

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