

# Beyond the Mono-Cultural Mind

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**ID:** *You have published poetry regularly since 1979 when your volume, First Poems, appeared. Thirty years, fourteen books and numerous plays-in-verse and graphic-poetry productions later, you find yourself based at the Institute for the Study of English in Africa and the first Professor of Poetry at Rhodes University (Grahamstown), a university which, while it bears its colonial legacy in its name, is acutely aware that the past has to be re-imagined in contemporary times.*

*What does it mean to be recognised, almost ‘embodied’ as a poet? I pose the question with a particular purpose: how to be a poet in the larger world; simultaneously, how to be a poet in this society, in which English – although it has global reach – cannot easily encompass the complex reality, indeed, the imagination, of a multilingual, multicultural South Africa, in both its traditions and modernities. Let me qualify my question further: how to go – as poet and citizen – beyond monoculturalism ?*

**CM:** You ask a profound question. My answer comes out of the framework of understanding within which I work at present. This is, as it were, a rough shed open to the sky which is always in a state of disrepair and construction. The building materials are metaphors, a number of which are generated by recent discoveries of science.

I have, for example, taken to heart the metaphor of cosmogenesis, which states that the universe began in a single founding event some fourteen billion years ago. The evidence appears to be conclusive, but the image of billions and billions of galaxies exploding out of a pinhead still appals my terrestrial commonsense and leaves my imagination trembling and aghast.

I also accept that, broadly speaking, there is an arrow to time, to complexity and to consciousness. I believe furthermore that it takes a universe as ancient, as vast and finely

calibrated as this one to create the possibility that somewhere among the clouds of gas and dust, the light-years of loneliness of space, something as complex as life will emerge.

Life is of course far and away the most complex of phenomena. Think only of an ant, whose chemistry is much more complex than that of the largest star in the universe. Life's earthly habitat is the water, soil and air that clads our speck of rock. I believe that the plants and animals that inhabit this biosphere are the visible tips, as it were, of lines of life that unfolded from one or more originating cells somewhere on earth, in a puddle of brine or at the bottom of the sea next to a hydrothermal vent, some four billion years ago.

These organisms are all in their own way literate. They read their niche with the skill of the cell which interprets its position in a redwood tree or a pot-plant, a mouse or a lion. They communicate with each other in a plenitude of different languages, sign-systems as strident as the song of a cicada on a branch, as silent as the fluctuations of current of electric-rays hunting and courting.

The language of each living creature is part of what I would call the organic semiotics of the earth. These languages range from the cross-species discourse between flower and bee to the megabytes of data memorized by a cell as it extracts information from a viral invader cruising the blood.

Sign and recipient are observable in the star-maps and magnetic contours that guide a migrating humming bird, in the change from winter to spring which induces green buds to appear in a dormant tree. Sign, signifier as well as recipient are made manifest when whales call to each other across vast tracks of the ocean, when a butterfly hurries upwind to mate, guided by microscopic puffs of a pheromone more potent an aphrodisiac than the fanciest human perfume.

The rapid spread of our species around the earth, together with our domineering modes of production and consumption also produce a semiotics of imbalance and distress. The signs, the visual texts are there for us to register and to interpret. Who can evade such admonishing texts as the satiny sheen of pampered cattle, the orange-tinted hair of a kwashiorkor child, the furrowed sub-soils of an eroded hillside, and the hole in the protective canopy of ozone around the earth?

Within this live and changing assemblage of interactions, within what I would call the planet's linguisphere, human consciousness, language and writing originated and persist.

Translation, to home in on your question, thus implies both the interpretation of the languages of the different cultures of the biosphere as well as the carrying over of words of one human language and their transformation into another.

If language is rooted in the biosphere, then so is poetry. The evidence seethes in the genes. In addition to the metaphors of the astronomers and biologists, I accept with the baffled compliance of the laity the metaphors of the geneticists who state that natural selection evolved within the genome of our species a specific twist of amino acids which prompts a yearning for meaning and significance.

This yearning, together with the cultural practices that have proliferated over the years from its drive, generates our thirst for knowledge, our need to seek explanations, our response to inequity and suffering, our hunger for love and transforming relationships, our urge to make art, music and literature and to seek a significant other, a transcendent being.

Is this a universal characteristic of the species? There are of course exceptions, people who doggedly restrict the search for meaning to the material world or evade meaning all together in order to proclaim the gospel of the absurd. Think though of pyramids and obelisks, the ziggurats and menhirs, the cathedrals and mosques, the ashrams in the hills of India and the monasteries in the mountains of Tibet as well as the fragile joss stick lit in the kitchen of a tiny apartment in Sao Paolo, Karachi or Manila.

This search for significance evolved with the development of our species. It is observable in the cultural practices of bands of hunter-gatherer, the inhabitants of early villages and towns as well as among people who live in cosmopolitan cities silently reverberating with the stupendous output of electromagnetic waves from millions of phones and screens. A statement by E.O. Wilson the socio-biologist about the genetic basis of religious belief in his book *On Human Nature* is probably prophetic in this regard: “The predisposition to religious belief is the most complex and powerful force in the human mind and in all probability an eradicable part of human nature”. Could this be predisposition be extended to the arts, to poetry as well?

I think so. While there are and always will be exceptions, I take poetry to be a crafted expression of that ache for meaning, a meaning achieved by linking the words of the poem to other words, to a more holistic understanding of the self and other people in the wider environment of the earth and the universe. This happens more easily for some than for other

poets. For me poetry is language sweated into shape by an imagination that has to sift through different emotions, vocabularies and prosodies to find a form that best expresses what I feel.

The prosody requires

an aesthetic as rigorous as a scientist's model of understanding. The imagery needs to be as concise as the constellations of the Hunter, the Dog and the Southern Cross projected in miniature onto the dome of a planetarium. The language should aspire to be as regularly irregular and functional and beautiful as the muscles and ligaments and wing-joints of a thumb-sized sun-bird hovering in the air.

To glimpse how such a poetry is as much an expression of cosmogenesis as the earth and the moon, we need to look backwards in time, to our origins in fire and dust. "Only connect", wrote E.M. Forster, of human relationships, and at the risk of restating the known, let me connect cosmic fire with human language, to assert an ancient intimacy our fragmenting thought patterns can often conceal.

Our genes are made of molecules generated in the roaring nuclear reactor of a star. The delicate filigree of the carbon in our chromosomes, as well as the molecules of the other elements of the spiral architecture of each gene, emerged from hydrogen, the simplest of elements. These complex elements take millions of years to forge, millions of years of white-hot heat and bond-breaking gravitational pressure in the nuclear reactor of the star. When the star exploded, these elements spewed out into space, cooled into ragged clouds of dust which swirled into a planetesimal.

That star has gone. But out of its dust, gravity moulded an orb of rock, whose atmosphere, chemical composition, proximity to the sun and temperature range provided exactly the right conditions for life to emerge. Dust became animate on this planet. Whether or not this is a unique, miraculous event or has happened elsewhere in the cold expanding gallery of the universe, does not diminish the implication of what occurred. Within our canopied biosphere, the dust of a vanished supernova transubstantiated into plants and animals, into human beings who feel and speak and evolved a yearning to seek significance in their lives.

One such a human being is the poet. Equipped perhaps with more acute and holistic language lobes than others of his species, driven by an imagination that feels its way into the visible and invisible worlds and struggling at times to humble the egotistical vanity of art,

such an earthling is blessed and cursed with a yearning that frets away in the consciousness hour after hour. Like grit that cannot be shaken out of a shoe. Like a thirst that is never quenched.

Can there be a more illuminating, more burdensome a vocation? For in such a poet, dust becomes conscious and the cosmos groans to become more aware.

**ID:** *You offer here an elegant defence of poetry, a kind of prose-poem in its own right. You suggest an interconnected universe, a universe of nature within nurture, and vice versa. It's a model that parallels the world of your poems, in which transference and translation continually push experience and language beyond any mono-cultural mindset: a mindset quite prevalent among English-speaking South Africans. Not only do you speak several other languages, you also translate into and out of them ... "wording the gap in the hinterlands," as you put it in the title of a poem. What lies at the root of your interest in Zulu and Xhosa, on the one hand, Latin and Italian, on the other?*

**CM:** I'd like to emphasize upfront that my formal knowledge of these languages is limited. Schoolboy Latin and Afrikaans, a couple of years of Zulu and Italian at university, Xhosa absorbed and spoken ineptly... As in science, I find that the more one learns, the wider the horizon of the unknown opens out ahead of the yawing prow of the boat, waiting to be explored.

In the case of languages, that means I become aware of the months of work needed to improve syntax here and idioms there, quite apart from the neologisms, the tonal grammars and pages of irregular verbs of incomplete predication that will always slip like wraiths of complexity through my language lobes.

The root of my interest in African languages, in addition to what I have outlined above, is a political commitment to undo where I can the separations imposed by apartheid, and a faith life which requires me to love my neighbour. Trying to learn the languages of my neighbours is part of a practical response to both these commitments as well as the poverty alleviation, education and development work in which I've been involved most of my working life, in particular the fifteen years or so of full-time work in these fields after leaving university. My interest in Zulu and Italian is also linked to my father.

My father, ‘Tufty’ Mann, was touring Britain with the Springbok cricket team when he was suddenly taken ill with cancer and flown home. He died soon after, when I was four. My family lived in Port Elizabeth at the time. I was sent to live with my grandparents in Durban, both of whom were away at work during the day. I can remember being looked after by a kindly man who worked in the garden. I remember him only vaguely but with an enduring emotion of affection. His name I think was Muntu. Years later I began to see him as one of my shades.

This active memory of a nurturing relationship with a person of colour was one of the factors that led to my involvement in politics as a student at Wits, and a decision to take a course in African languages.

At Wits I also decided to read Italian, building on my patchy Latin, again because of the residual influence of my father. He’d been a soldier in North Africa during the war, was captured at Tobruk, had escaped from a prison of war camp in northern Italy and been hidden for two years by Italian *contadini*, at the risk of their lives, in the countryside near Venice. Our family has felt indebted to theirs and remained in touch with them ever since.

**ID:** *There is a great deal of confusion, even in literary circles, about what ‘translation’ really is: a high status activity (when dealing with literature), a grammatical tool (when teaching foreign languages), or simply hack work for the mass market. As Susan Bassnett puts it, “What we have is a legacy of confused histories, so that the very term ‘translation’ triggers off differing sets of responses, related to differing sets of assumptions and expectations about the role of translating” (1995:150). Attitudes towards translation are based on particular assumptions about language use. For centuries the assumptions seem to have fallen into two large camps: instrumental (when privileging the communication of meaning) and hermeneutic (regarding language as constitutive of meaning).*

*In your poem, “A Note on the Limits of Translation”, you say that translation is “a tricky choice among illusions, none of them complete, none of them able to pin down a full logos”.*

**CM:** The poem is about the difficulties I experienced in translating a single sentence of Zulu spoken by Bheki Dladla, the front-man of a cross-over band called Zabalaza that the

musician Abel Ndlovu and I had started. The sentence ends with the word *isikorokoro*, which is slang for a jalopy and referred to the rusted shack of a car that Bheki had bought. My wife and I were living at the time outside Durban, on the edge of the Valley of a Thousand Hills, where I was working for a community-based development NGO, The Valley Trust.

The health-centred, holistic philosophy of The Valley Trust, which brought together around one table agriculturalist, ecologist, nurse, doctor, accountant, teacher and engineer, had a profound impact on my outlook.

Translation and writing were important parts of my job: the translation of the energy of the felt needs of impoverished people for food, water, education, health care and employment into long-term practicable projects that could be innovated elsewhere by means of trainee programmes; the writing of project proposals, budgets, job descriptions, plans, evaluations, reports, training manuals, technical booklets and constitutions for newly-formed civil society organisations that are intrinsic to such work.

I saw the latter literature as part of a continuum, with poetry and poetic drama at another end of the scale. Such literature was also a way of avoiding the trap that I fell into from time to time, particularly during the sternest days of the struggle against apartheid, the trap of using literature as a soft option, as a moralizing surrogate for direct socio-political action.

The timing of Bheki's battered car was way out of sync and the rings and gaskets were worn. On Sunday afternoons we'd hear a series of enormous bangs as the car jerked up the road for a practice, spewing oily smoke through the exhaust. Bheki was enormously proud of his acquisition. Quite apart from the linguistic difficulty of translating the verve of the sentence with its multi-language imports in the poem, I knew I could never feel or convey what the car meant to him, a second-generation inhabitant of shacklands.

That gap between my image of the car and its apprehension by another person from a different, though interlinked, linguistic and socio-economic world is also the subject of the poem. The fact that I spelt the slang-word incorrectly in the original text of the poem demonstrates how much I was seeing and how much I was missing, all in one take.

So, the view of translation I expressed in the poem suggests that both an instrumental and a hermeneutic understanding of language are necessary, but not sufficient, criteria to comprehend the complexity of what takes place during translation, particularly when the two

languages are not as cognate in culture, vocabulary and grammatical structure as say Spanish and Italian. The static quality of texts, particularly those written in languages with a relatively long history of being reduced to writing might beguile us into thinking otherwise, but what is missing from both emphases is a frank acceptance of the figurative nature, and hence the epistemological incompleteness of both the originating and the translated text. This can of course be remedied to some extent by a translator who sets out the guiding principles of a translation in an introduction to the translated text.

**ID:** *It is important to write such forewords, especially in our times. These are times when the notion of an ‘ultimate text/ original’ might belong to either religion or fatigue – as Borges has ironically and repeatedly pointed out – and when discussions on translation continue, in some circles, to treat original texts as ‘ultimate texts/ entities’ and their translations as ‘(un)faithful copies/ servants’.*

**CM:** Borges should have extended his quip to include the ‘ultimate texts’ of Marx, Lenin and Mao, whose application led to enormous human suffering, a suffering as ghastly as that caused by the sudden encroachment of monetarist economies on the peasant cultures of the so-called undeveloped world.

This is not said lightly and it is directly linked to our view of texts. It seems inequitable that someone like Pol Pot, for example, should be demonized for crimes against humanity while the lecturers in Paris who inculcated in him and others from Cambodia the textbook definitions of classist thinking and proletarian revolution have yet to account for the consequences of what they taught. Not all the horrors of that conflict can be ascribed to Washington.

Treating texts as ultimate entities can be that dangerous. The danger rears up off the page, I think, when those who define language as a literal and complete description of reality, and not a figurative and illusion-making activity of the imagination, attempt to control the minds of the public and empower themselves and their cause. This is not particularly new. The Pharisees were enraged when Jesus challenged their literal interpretation of the law. St Augustine of Hippo, three centuries later, fumed against the fundamentalist believers of his day, calling them the worst enemies of Christianity.

**ID:** *I agree. Essentialist models of purist, linguistics-based and culturally de-contextualised translation theories are age-old and still with us today. These models suggest that the source-language is made up of ‘universal’ components that have to be translated ‘faithfully’ into the signifying system of the target-language. This process, the argument continues, always implies a degree of ‘betrayal’ (the famous traduttore traditore) as one cannot possibly fully capture the ‘elusive essence’ of the unquestionably solid original unit of meaning. Many still believe with Florio who, in 1603, said that “all translations are reputed females, delivered at second hand” (2002:131). Others keep citing Dryden, who believed that the “wretched translator” – being tied to the original writer’s thoughts – “must make what music he can in the expression; and for this reason, it cannot always be so sweet as that of the original” (2002:175; 1697).*

*Does such source-text veneration suggest the marginalisation of the translator’s art?*

**CM:** I’m glad that you also consider translation as an art. The philosophers have shown us for years that nominalist theories of language which purport to show an impenetrable cohesion between word and object are fallacious. Even numbers, if we follow Pythagoras and contemporary mathematicians such as Roger Penrose, are figurative. If this is so of the relationship of word to object within a language, what unforeseen meanings occur when a word is translated into what appears to be its equivalent in another?

The translator, like the poet and the scientist, makes decisions that are informed by factual enquiry and the aesthetics of form but precipitated by an emotional decision, a belief: this model of understanding, this phrase or tense or adverb, works better than that one. This is true, I submit, even when legal, commercial and scientific language is translated. What results is an intimately linked but always slightly differing pattern of meaning, whose salient differences from the original can be indicated by the translator in an explanatory introduction and a series of footnotes. In that way something of the achievement of the translator’s art can be conveyed to the reader.

My feelings towards source-text veneration are mixed. On the one hand, I reject the notion that the source-text is in itself superior in value to the version produced by an artistic

translation. This omits a consideration of the value of the art of the translated text and its value to a different and perhaps much wider readership.

On the other hand, I can remember grinding away at my UNISA text-books on Saturdays and Sundays in the back room of a yard in a township believing then, as I do now, that to *hlonipha* (respect) another language one has to submit to the discipline of learning the grammar and vocabulary as thoroughly as possible and to live with the people who speak that language and read the texts of their literature in the original.

As a writer, I also respect the source-texts of writers who exhibit a profound understanding of human existence, repudiating the tendency to evaluate such texts in terms of contemporary socio-historical and economic criteria such as race, gender and class. Learning a different language and reading a text in its original context both require journeys of the intellect, towards the other and away from the parochial, ridding oneself if possible of the consumerist hauteur that seeks to satisfy the *me me me* of the here and now.

Source and translated text are different artefacts, each with its own strengths and limitations. Take the New Testament as an example. The source-texts are written in Greek and valued as such, though the Greek is itself a translation of the originating oral testimonies provided by predominantly Aramaic and Hebrew speakers. Even individual gospels show different principles of selection and translation at work, from the factual narrative of Luke to the mythopoetic style of John.

These texts are the source of hundreds of translations into different languages, in Africa as elsewhere, which in English vary in style from the Tyndale to the King James' and the New English Bible. In this tradition, the source-text is venerated not as an ultimate source of truth but as the *fons et origo* of a wider diffusion of the gospel around the world.

Other traditions privilege the language of the original, for example Hindu, Arabic and Hebrew sacred texts, but the increasing number of people who read or listen to the sacred texts of the main-line religions around the world reminds us that, as far as numbers go, such texts still attract the greatest following in world literature.

I'm reading St Matthew's gospel in Zulu at present; the Zulu version has a down-to-earth diction, a rural vocabulary, and is perhaps closer to the language spoken by the people in the gospel than that found in the English versions with which I am acquainted. A 'physician', for example, is translated as an *inyanga* and the 'scribes', whose role is so often

questioned with animosity in the New Testament, are translated as *ababhali* (writers). How would that sound to a congregation of impoverished, barely literate people attending a Saturday night *vuselela* (revival) service in one of the many independent African churches that have sprung up over the last hundred years?

**ID:** *One can, roughly speaking, detect two directions in your translation activity: one direction is into English, the other, from English into other languages. Your poem, “A Field in Italy”, is sourced in Italian; the play, Walking on Gravity, in Latin and Italian; the play Thuthula in Xhosa, while the poem, “Is this the Freedom for which We Died?” is sourced in Zulu.*

*You have also translated from English into other languages: for example, your own current process of re-translating Thuthula into Xhosa. Inspired by Benjamin’s poetic definition of the translator’s task – as “finding an echo of the original [intended effect, and] releasing in his own language that pure language which is under the spell of another” (Schulte 1992:77,80) – I would ask you to please describe how you went about ‘releasing’ the young woman Thuthula from the spell of J.J.R. Jolobe, who preceded you. Jolobe initially produced a short epic romance, U-Thuthula (1936), recounting the internecine clan rivalries that led to the undoing of the Xhosa in the early nineteenth century, and then an English version, Thuthula (1938), which seemed to be modelled on the blank verse of Tennyson. How does your own version of the legend of Thuthula relate to Jolobe’s?*

**CM:** I drew on a number of sources and these are acknowledged in the book. Jolobe’s poem is one of these. What is remarkable about his treatment is the epic quality of his narrative voice. He is the first writer, as far as I am aware, to imbue the events with a larger mythopoetic resonance than the prose accounts in the history books. This epic tone is of course consonant with that found in *izibongo* and the tradition of bardic speech-making found in rural Nguni society. His own welcome translation into English verse, while valiantly versified, sounds stiff and strained. I could not furthermore be sympathetic to his conclusion, that the woman, Thuthula, was to blame for the disastrous conflict between the two clans.

**ID:** *Your version of Thuthula combines a lyrical, poetic, occasionally archaic style with humorous, earthy interludes, as well as excerpts from traditional praise poems and numerous Xhosa exclamations and fixed expressions. The text shifts with ease between diverse registers, which is very different from Jolobe’s conservative style. Did you mean to emphasise “the glorious hybridisation of English” that mixes archaism, slang and borrowings – in an act of “happy and creative ‘infidelity’, that must matter to us” (Borges/Robinson 2000:41) ?*

**CM:** The different language registers audible in the play convey, I hope, more of the range of dictions that people actually use than a single register would have done. One person – many languages, whether speakers of Xhosa or English.

The text was primarily written to be performed rather than read. There have been two productions so far, both directed by Janet Buckland. The first at the national student drama festival in Grahamstown in 1981 featured actors whose mother-tongue was English. The second production took place on the main of the national arts festival in 2004 and the actors were predominantly Xhosa-speakers.

News of the latter production triggered a controversy in the national print and electronic media with some Xhosa writers and academics defending the play, and others voicing suspicion about my motives as the author. At one stage I was being interviewed for different TV news bulletins in Xhosa, Afrikaans and English.

The controversy was resolved when people ranging from the Premier of the Eastern Cape to the descendants of the leaders of the clans who had fought over Thuthula in 1806 attended the production. Janet Buckland and I were in due course summoned to meet the present *amakhosi* at a great place in the countryside near East London. They asked us to take the play to the “grass roots”.

What further surprised us was the enthusiastic response of Xhosa women to the treatment of Thuthula in the play. My view was that she was not a two-timing philanderer but a young woman from a commoner’s background caught up in patriarchal clan politics over which she had no real say.

When writing the play I was not aware of any ‘happy and creative infidelity’ at all. I was more aware of how the formal conventions of blank verse, plot and characterisation

typical of an Elizabethan play transformed the story I had read. As I wrote, these formal techniques impersonally moved the story out of my hands, as it were, producing a work of more mythopoetic significance than I had ever imagined possible.

The ‘infidelity’ was perceived instead by those who led the storm of protest on Xhosa radio and in the newspapers against the play and wanted it banned before they had even entered the theatre.

I received, for example, a phone call which began, “Hintsa speaking”. The caller was a direct descendant of Hintsa, the legendary Xhosa king. In a scandalous event which took place in 1835 during the frontier wars, British troops had shot him in the head and removed his ears. Mr Hintsa said that following a meeting with members of his council he wanted to meet and discuss the play with me.

I began the meeting by saying that the ancestors on my father’s side of the family were Irish, whose surname was McMahan (pronounced “Maan”). When the English forces led by Cromwell invaded Ireland in 1649, one such forebear with the name of Bishop Heber McMahan led a small group of rebels against the English troops in his area. The English captured him, cut off his head and displayed it on a spike on the battlements of Enniskillen castle. I also stated that this was not the full story as my mother’s forebears were English, then went on to explain the sources of the play and invited him and his councillors to attend one of the performances. He seemed mollified by this approach and I heard no more from him.

**ID:** *In Episode 7, the action is focalised through the figure of the interpreter, whom you present as a real linguistic trickster and adept diplomat in his intercultural acrobatics.*

**CM:** By the end of Episode 6, which is halfway through the play, the tragic consequences of the decisions made by the characters are beginning to suggest themselves to the audience. The first function of Episode 7 is a dramatic one: to provide comic relief. There is a switch from naturalism to mime. The British and Xhosa representatives stand on either side of the Interpreter. He is the only person on stage who knows both their languages. He speaks to the British, for example, as if he were simultaneously translating what the Xhosa characters are saying as they gesture with their hands and pretend to speak out loud. He uses an English that

foregrounds transliterated idioms and grammatical structures characteristic of Xhosa, such as those you mention below. The Interpreter then turns to the Xhosa and speaks a flowery imperial English to them in reply, while the British officers bow and smile and pretend to speak in turn.

The elaborate courtesies of these formal exchanges is accompanied by *sotto voce* asides where each group is overheard by the audience to express suspicion and disdain about the other. The audience laughs, and they really do, at the interchanges, at what you accurately describe as the ‘cultural acrobatics’ of the Interpreter.

**ID:** *Any implied comments here on the “splendour and misery of translation”, as Ortega y Gasset would say? According to him, a translator has to achieve two things that are difficult to reconcile: on the one hand, “simply to be intelligible and, at the same time, to modify the ordinary usage of language. This dual operation is more difficult to achieve than walking a tightrope” (Schulte 1992:96).*

**CM:** Gasset’s comment about the “splendour and misery” of translation also illuminates what happens in this episode and the response of the audience. Watching a superb actor such as Andrew Buckland playing the scene, one is aware that the ‘splendour’ of an interlude of inter-cultural translation such as this one lies in the way the humanity and the limitations of people from differing cultures is clarified when they interact. As I have suggested elsewhere, Africa and Europe bring out the best and worst of each other. The ‘misery’ lies in the sense that both the Interpreter and the audience know there is very little that can be done in the foreseeable future to rectify the iniquities, prejudices and suspicions that such an inter-cultural exchange brings out into the open.

The Interpreter has another function, of course: to provide an example on stage of the role of the author of such a play, the author-as-intercultural-translator.

**ID:** *Your play is sprinkled with Xhosa words and idiomatic expressions, for which you offer generous explanatory translations in the footnotes. This strategy would be commended by Nabokov, who, in translations, praised “copious footnotes reaching up like skyscrapers to the top of the page ... I want such footnotes and the absolutely literal sense, with no emasculation*

*and no padding” (Schulte 1992:143). At the same time, there are numerous English expressions within the text itself, expressions that appear to be literal translations from Xhosa. To give a few examples: “noisier than a goat’s stomach .. loud enough to waken the ancestors” (4), “ambitions rip the woven matting of our clan” (6), “my head is like a hill of sheep” (13), “heavy with the presence of shades” (13), “badly big men, I mean very big men” (72), “he has always wanted to put the English under his armpit” (75), “an elephant is not to be mistaken for his dung” (76), “your people will soon become saliva and tongue” (77).*

*These literal translations (or coined expressions in the spirit of Xhosa?) return me to Ortega y Gasset. He considered literal translation important as it emphasises the distinctly different and distant character of the Other, while nevertheless making it accessible. In his opinion, one should steer clear of naturalising/ colonising a foreign text and learn to appreciate the “annoying apparatus” of translation that will truly help the reader “transmigrate” within the Other; through literal translation, “the reader effectively makes mental turns that are [Xhosa]. He relaxes a bit and, for a while, is amused at being another” (Schulte 1992:111-112). Would this interpretation – his concept of ‘splendour’ – fit in with what you had in mind when producing echoes of Xhosa in English?*

**CM:** Xhosa-speaking people who attended the play were, unlike the mono-lingual people in the audience, aware of the transliterations. They responded – as far as I could tell when I sat in the audience among them – with an amused delight of recognition not dissimilar to that I’ve observed when Johnny Clegg sings and dances. Many of the apparently Xhosa figurative expressions, however, such as the first three you mention, were coined by the author and are based on personal observation and experience. I mean I’ve slept beside goats and the noise of their digestion is cavernously and magnificently huge.

Thank you for bringing the term ‘transmigrate’ to bear on the text. That is what I hope audiences and readers will do as their imaginations enter the cultural niche established by the metaphors of the poetry. This includes both urbanised Xhosa, some of whom look down on rural people, calling them for example *amaqaba* (primitives), and those English-speakers who look with prejudice at rural non-industrial culture. I am not exaggerating the former. I was once a member of a Grahamstown band which used cardboard boxes for drums and the

cheapest of acoustic guitars. Our gig in a hall in East London ended early when members of the band started threatening a couple of youngsters in the audience who called us *amaqaba*.

The term ‘transmigrate’ also helps explain why I welcomed the initial production where the actors were all English-speaking students. They worked hard to understand and enact the text, the music and dance and threw themselves into the production with an educated gusto reminiscent of a Sibongile Khumalo singing an operatic aria from the western canon.

**ID:** *It is generally recognised that it is more difficult to translate into a second language than the other way round. How do you handle the challenge of translating mother-tongue into other languages?*

**CM:** When I was a teacher and reading *Far from the Madding Crowd* with Zulu-speaking matriculants in a village school – no, I’m not making this up – I would translate phrase after phrase of Hardy’s novel into the mother-tongue of the pupils as we discussed the meaning of the text. That was a fairly straightforward, if not particularly accurate process of exploration and discovery. Much, much more difficult, as you imply, is translating a literary text in its entirety into a second language. Here my language skills are simply inadequate.

Those who manage to do this have exceptional linguistic gifts. BW Andrzejewski, who lectured me while I was at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, is one such example or role model in the linguisphere. A mother-tongue Polish speaker, who wrote scholarly articles in numerous other European languages as well as Arabic, he translates Somali poetry into English. Perhaps in the future we will welcome scholars of that stature who are also conversant with a wide range of South African languages to our different departments of literature.

The *Thuthula* text is in fact being translated by a mother-tongue speaker of Xhosa into that language. The translator has not as yet found a way of translating the iambic pentameters of the stress-based language of the source-text, in other words English, into a prosody suitable for the target-language.

The difficulties are immense. The Xhosa language is more tonal and quantity-based than English. The prosody of *izibongo*, for example, is characterized by a falling cadence

over a verse paragraph and by stretched-out penultimate syllables at the end of each line – neither of which structuring principle can transliterate the blank verse of the original text in English.

**ID:** *Shifting from linguistic to cultural difficulties, the concept of the ‘labyrinth’ (mentioned in the subtitle of Thuthula, and referred to throughout the play) is not only an African spiritual symbol, but has deep roots in ancient Greek, as well as in Far Eastern mythology. In general spiritual terms, the labyrinth signifies sacred structures guarding the Centre of knowledge and wisdom, which is only accessible through a complex ritual of initiation. Once having gained access to the Centre of the labyrinth, the ego is purified and transformed. However, for those not willing to seek spiritual guidance, the Centre will never reveal itself and the ego will remain trapped in apparently hostile and impenetrable mental structures.*

*When creating Thuthula, did you perhaps have in mind the labyrinth as a cultural universal, a connector between worlds?*

**CM:** Thank you for pointing out the presence of the labyrinth in other cultures and mythologies. I was not aware that it is something of a cultural universal and I am glad to hear you describe it as such. My source is a drawing in a book I read years ago, in the old Cory Library at Rhodes, a book that I have been unable to relocate despite numerous attempts. The book described various Xhosa cultural practices and the drawing depicted a labyrinth drawn in the sand under a tree and used for a game. I transferred the labyrinth to the play as a metaphor for a complex political problem, as insoluble, it seemed to me, as a Gordian knot.

As I edited and rewrote the play, I expanded the metaphor to include the labyrinth of footpaths that connect rural dwellings and the polities of their clans, as well as the labyrinth of pathways opened by language and culture in the sweet-and-sour veld landscapes within the conscious mind.

**ID:** *This interconnectedness – I connect your comments to the concept of the ‘shades’ – is a motif in much of your work. The shade is that which opposes the light, while at the same time being an embodiment of transient, unreal and ephemeral conditions. In many*

*cultures, the shades are symbols of death: shades help the living stay in contact with the dead. Again: can one detect an attempt, on your part, of writing across worlds and cultures? An attempt at cultural translation? The labyrinth and the shades as archetypal and unifying principles between North and South? In the poem, “New Lands” (from New Shades), you said: “I search for my European bones ... I listen to my African sinews”...*

**CM:** This is a question that focuses on a crucial area of human experience that I have laboured to highlight for many years. The initial source of my contact with the shades is a magnificently detailed book entitled *Zulu Thought Patterns and Symbolism* by Alex-Ivar Berglund. Virtually every page is dense with phrases translated directly from the Zulu-speaking informants and the whole work can be seen as the result of years and years of devoted transcultural migration by the author. Berglund’s text, as with similar remarkable books by Monica Wilson, Mamphela Ramphele and John Mbiti, evokes a comprehensive view of an African culture and spirituality from, as it were, the inside.

A belief in the shades, the *amadlozi* (Zulu) and *izinyanya* (Xhosa), to quote the only two African languages with which I am familiar, is a widespread, dynamic, modern and differentiated cultural belief in contemporary southern Africa. For these reasons I will not attempt to caricature its complexity with a definition here, but refer those interested to take the matter further with people for whom the shades are part of daily life.

To prevent the tendency of westerners to view the belief as primitive and exotic, I normally ask those of my boom-gated, computer-headed peers who are curious to close their eyes and to bring to mind a couple of people who are physically absent and yet influence them profoundly in one way or another. That, I say, is the start of the matter, deliberately extending the original Nguni concept where the shades are in general limited to the ancestors of a particular lineage. Such people, I say, your teachers, loved ones and lost ones, as well as your parents and siblings and grandparents, such absent presences are your shades.

I then ask whether saints are also shades, and what the different status is of people we frequently see on a screen or read about in a newspaper – the sports-stars and celebrities, the pop stars and political and religious leaders. The responses are varied but the questions help to establish that the inner life of such urbanised, post-industrial people is alive with the presences of other human beings.

Different cultures have conceptualised and ritualised the shades in different ways and literature is filled with their manifestations. Dante's poetry for, example, is suffused with the presence of the shades of historical and mythical figures, to such an extent that time present cannot easily be prised loose from time past in his mind. It seems remarkable that Dante's perceptions of the shades and time should resemble those prevalent in the culture of South Africa today.

Within an urban culture, we can interpret the shades as memories and images of other people who influence important aspects of the inner life of an individual. Such shades come and go. Such shades are spiritual companions in dialogue with whom individuals shape their values and identity. What South African has not experienced Mandela as a shade?

In the poem "Five Metaphors of the Soul" I took this further and suggested that one aspect of the soul could be likened to a community, a community of shades at the centre of which is the self. Such a gathering includes the presences of people with whom we argue as well as agree, people of different class, colour, culture and faith. How often do we not try to pretend that such people are not part of our own particular clan or community and do not participate in our inner life, thereby practising an inward and spiritual apartheid?

I extended this metaphor to the meta-political in a poem entitled "The Parliament of the Shades". Here I argue that we cannot as a species live in peace with one another if we do not make peace with our shades. As our inner life can include the presences of people who are antagonistic to our values, or who have hurt or betrayed us, such personal and private acts of reconciliation can never be part of a cheap and easy process. We can of course do our best to forget such presences but they remain to haunt us, renewing anger and bitter feelings as they resurface in our memory from time to time. We know but do not easily accept that such potential demons require confrontation and forgiveness at some stage in our meditative lives.

Dealing with this inner constituency of the shades in consultative and democratic processes of prayer and meditation that do not banish or repress their presence is democracy in action in the inner life of an individual. I go on to conclude that democracy will remain a dangerously superficial and externalised practice until we root its processes in our inner life, in the way we interact with our shades.

Such poems are meant to complement the literature of externality that tends to dominate curricula at present, together with what I call the literature of symptoms, discourses

that eschew research into the spiritual and cultural lives of the subjects and privilege for example gender, race and postcolonial phenomena.

**ID:** *The poem, “The Clan Bard of the Drakensberg” – in memory of Msebenzi Hlongwane – that has recently appeared in the show, Beautiful Lofty Things, is sourced in a Zulu narrative and is also based on your own field trip to the Drakensberg, where you stayed with members of the AmaNgwane clan and conducted research in Zulu. Your poem is a meditation on the ravages of western civilisation on traditional Zulu life, and, in fact, on any traditional way of life (you compare “the bardic shade” to “a Grecian statue’s look”). How did you select your glimpses of insight into a much admired, yet distant culture?*

**CM:** The AmaNgwane live on the slopes of the Okhahlamba mountains (Drakensberg), near Winterton. I visited them because I had come across an extraordinary book and wondered whether it should be retranslated and republished. The book is entitled *History of Matiwane and the AmaNgwane Tribe as told by Msebenzi to his kinsman Albert Hlongwane* and is a Union of South Africa Department of Native Affairs publication dated 1938. The text is immaculately edited and translated by N J Van Warmelo, who was the ‘Government Ethnologist’ at the time.

The text comprises an extended historical narrative by Msebenzi kaMacingwane interspersed by the *izibongo* (praise-poems) of a number of Ngwane leaders *amakhosi* (chiefs). The frontispiece of the book carries a photograph of the head of Msebenzi in old age. His eyes are shut as if he were blind and his strikingly handsome face has a memorable expression of poised serenity.

A couple of years ago, decades after my visit to the Drakensberg, I was fretting in a car, caught in the crawling traffic on the six-lane highway between Johannesburg and Pretoria. I suddenly saw that face again and wondered what Msebenzi would make of the cars and the flyovers and the factories. That was the origin of the poem. Its rural imagery is drawn not only from the mountain landscape of the AmaNgwane but from images of rural devastation and resilient resistance to the inward pull of urbanisation in other parts of the country.

Your question, however, highlights the fact that I work with a model of understanding

of social change in South Africa that is, I believe, more holistic and has a deeper perspective in time than that of conventional postcolonial theory. This model has its origins in Monica Wilson, an anthropologist who lived with the people she wrote about and tried to understand their language, their spiritual and cultural values as well as their political and material life.

Based on her fieldwork in different parts of Africa, Wilson argued that what is underway here and elsewhere round the world is the change from small-scale to large-scale societies. More recent research into the diaspora of small groups of early hominids who left Africa some 100 000 years ago link this model backwards to include the hunter-gatherers who are according to present theory the ancestors of all humans alive today.

Small-scale societies apart from nomadic cultures are typically made up of fairly sedentary clans who live in village-sized settlements, where relationships and modes of production are kin-based, where the bartering of goods and labour is prominent and orally transmitted cultural norms and social practices abound. Large-scale societies such as nation-states are, in contrast, characterised by urban settlements, high rates of literacy and population movement, a greater range of impersonal relationships, numerous impersonal institutions and a highly developed monetary economy.

This model of social change, together with my perception of the terrible effects of job reservation, the pass laws and the migrant labour system on individuals and family life in South Africa, helped deepen my understanding of what was taking place in the Valley of a Thousand Hills. This led to the writing of an extended multi-voice poem called “Shacklands”, published in my volume, *Kites* (1990). The poem attempts to symbolise some of the effects of urbanisation on people and the environment, both here and elsewhere in the world. Demographers estimate that within a few years, for the first time in human history, more people will live in cities than on the land.

**ID;** *The poem, “A Field in Italy”, from Heartlands, is mainly sourced in Italian, which then becomes a poem, a narrative ballad with a stressed metre, in English. The poem attempts to fill the gaps left by death and the passage of time, which are exacerbated by the language barrier between speakers of English and Italian.*

*The word “gap” appears about six times in this poem (and frequently in other poems as well, including the above-mentioned, “Wording the gap ..”). Is the image-cum-concept of*

*'gap' a metaphor for 'communication barrier', invoking the need for translation?*

**CM:** The poem describes how my family and I, together with an Italian family, visited the farm where the Italian family mentioned earlier had hidden my father during the war. My knowledge of what took place is based on a diary written in Italian and English by my father and a memoir he wrote after the war. Then there was what the Italian family had told me – in Italian. We were used to the inhumanities of South Africa, but new to first-hand accounts of war in Europe. The stories of cruelty and heroism shook us, and made me aware of how little I knew about the scale of warfare between nation states and the massive, murderous, tragic, homicidal barbarism of my species.

I also remembered Shelley's extraordinary poem "Julian and Maddalo", read years before, which describes how he gallops with Byron along the Adriatic shore not far from where we were staying. To me his perceptions became strangely diffuse as the poem progresses, as if depleted by the language differences between him and the man in the asylum they visit.

We were staying with the family in their home in a village near the farm on which my father was hidden when a strange thing happened. I was sitting on my bed writing in my diary. I was trying to put together the various war-time stories I had heard and not fully grasped in the course of the day, due to my limited Italian, when a sentence shoved out into my consciousness with a force that left me startled. "Go to the gaps," it said, "go to the gaps for the poem."

That sprung the narrative from its coop. I began to tell the story as best as I could but, instead of eliding moments of doubt and ignorance, I drew attention to a number of them in passing, as many as the dramatic torque of the narrative would allow. I also chose, after the normal exhausting struggle to find the form of a new poem, an unrhymed stress-based five-line ballad stanza, one that could carry the scrappy phrases of knowing and then the silence of not knowing that began to appear as I wrote. I also made a point of end-stopping each stanza, to keep the gaps as audible and visible as possible, except between the penultimate and ultimate stanzas when a brief moment of lyrical affirmation is intended to transcend the stop-start narrative of the poem.

**ID:** *Interestingly, “A Field in Italy” – like several other poems of yours – has been translated into both Italian and Arabic. The translation process may involve on your part a dramatic ‘letting go’ of your initial poetic intention. You may have to allow the poem to be interpreted, re-written, moulded and modified, and yes, sometimes ‘appropriated’ by another poetic impulse; you may have to let go and allow the poem to assume its own ‘after-life’, as Benjamin would say.*

**CM:** The person who translated the poem into Arabic is Nazih Abou Afash, the editor of *Al-Mada*, a literary magazine which is published in Damascus and has I’m told a fairly wide circulation in the Arab world. He speaks little English and worked from the Italian version, so the poem is at two removes from the original, part of which – as you have pointed out – is also sourced in Italian. This multi-lingual complexity is part of the reality of the planet’s linguisphere, and is notably present in numerous African countries.

I am unable, of course, to evaluate the final text and in general accept that such a poem will have its own dimensions of meaning. Misrepresentation, when deliberate, would be another issue.

**ID:** *In “The Roman Centurion’s Good Friday”, an extended poem for the Good Friday service, you have translated prosodic and literary forms (from Anglo Saxon and Middle English), as well as Nguni praise-poetry into contemporary English.*

*This reminds me of Ezra Pound’s use of translation: he sought to recover distant poetries (e.g. Latin, Chinese, medieval Italian) in order to enhance experimentalism and linguistic precision – by doing away with “the crust of dead English” (Venuti 2000:28) in contemporary language usage.*

*Are your reasons for importing alien poetic forms into English also experimental/modernist? Or do you rather aim to reach depths of the psyche that prose skims over? Or a combination of both?*

**CM:** Let me answer you this way. “The Roman Centurion’s Good Friday” is a dramatic monologue. The speaker of the narrative is the soldier who supervised and witnessed the crucifixion. He is now an old man, living in retirement on a farm in central Italy. He

meditates aloud on his career as a Roman soldier who sustained imperial power and tried to keep the peace and improve the infrastructure of a turbulent Judea. He also meditates on the relationship between imperial and provincial power, and on the significance of the life and teachings of Jesus.

The poem has been performed in churches and cathedrals in Johannesburg, Durban, Dublin, Oxford, Cape Town and Grahamstown. Its origin is a visit my wife and I made years ago to Jerusalem. We stayed in St John's Hospice and, walking the streets of the walled city, realised that contemporary Palestine and Judea replicated in more ways than expected the conflict and oppression experienced in that region two or so thousand years before.

The poem is meant to be recited during a service of meditation, when people have moved themselves with the help of hymn and prayer out of ordinary, urbanised time and into significant or mythopoetic time. The prosody is designed to have the impact of plain-chant, which slowly releases parts of the psyche repressed by the staccato exigencies of daily life, the demands of getting and spending, as Wordsworth put it.

The narrative is spread across thirteen stanzas, each thirteen lines long. The end of each stanza marks a definite pause in the narrative and helps to establish a pattern of sound. There are four stress-peaks to a line separated by an irregular mixture of iambs and anapaests. The stress dynamic pushes the narrative forward, together with the short sequences of lines in each stanza that end in unstressed syllables and are resolved with a line which ends in a syllable that ticks upward into a stress. These prosodic elements are intended as in plain-chant to suspend the listener in significant time while simultaneously floating the psyche forward as the narrative unfolds.

**ID:** Please could you quote a stanza.

**CM:** I'd be glad if you'd let me quote the stanzas that contrast a symbolical Jerusalem and Rome.

i

Jerusalem, Jerusalem the turbulent in the spring,  
The crack of dry thunder in the skies of its desert,

The smell of moist air in the courtyards at noon,  
The streets and alleyways crowded with pilgrims,  
The fields round its battlements a village of tents,  
The vineyard below the rock-face of the barracks  
Bursting new green from the skeletons of its twigs,  
Jerusalem, Jerusalem on a Friday in the spring  
Is where I first saw him, heard him, evaded him,  
An artisan in the robe and sandals of his people,  
A dreamer shoved into the court of the governor,  
A poet from the villages and the hills of beyond.

v

And Rome, Rome, the ordered streets of Rome,  
The sentried squares and the scoured colonnades,  
The smell of the stallions harnessed on parade,  
The marbled porticoes of the public companies,  
The roar from the stadium as the games began,  
Rome scaffolded the vision of the civil servants,  
The magistrate and bankers I called my friends,  
The vision of a republic where law's iron ghosts  
Patrolled the barbarous thoughts of each mind,  
Where petty sects were raised into legislatures  
And banditry crushed on the passes and seas,  
Where trade put bellies on merchant and farmer  
And Roman governance brought peace, peace.

There are, as you note, other features in the poem imported from a variety of oral traditions, such as repetition and kenning. Their function is to increase the strength of the narrative's evocation of place and meaning during the fifteen minutes or so that it takes to introduce and recite the poem - rather than to fulfil some sort of modernist aesthetic.

As can be expected from my response to the first section of this interview, modernity to me has an ecological rather than an anthropocentric time-depth, though it should be noted that Roman Jerusalem was more multi-lingual and multicultural than many contemporary towns of comparable size.

As suggested in a fairly recent poem entitled “Ideas of Modernity in Singapore”, modernity to me is more significantly defined by long-lasting biological changes on earth than recent changes in human institutions and improvements in technology. One example is the moment when a leaf first captured a photon of light from the sun. This marked the start of a huge increase in the amount of energy available to life on the planet. As a result of this astonishingly well calibrated mechanism, which led to the transubstantiation of light into food, new complexities began to emerge, quite late in cosmic time.

**ID:** *You link ecology to spirituality.*

**CM:** Yes, the link between the two, or perhaps better, the source of both, is that restless yearning for meaning described at the start of this interview. If this is an evolutionary development characteristic of the species, as some geneticists believe, and I say ‘if’ deliberately, as the history of science is a history of people who keep on changing their minds about the nature of reality, then there is some solace to know that the yearning I experience is not a personal malady.

St Augustine of Hippo describes this urge memorably when he says, if I may translate his famous sentence into a figurative English, “You made us restless so that our hearts can rest in you”. Which doesn’t of course evoke the more emphatic start of the original – “quia fecisti nos ad te inquietum est cor nostrum donec requiescat in te.”

**ID:** *Do you think there should be more social space offered to the religious intellectual – as public intellectual – in South Africa today? Translating religious aspirations into more broadly social discourses?*

**CM:** Marx duped many of his followers into thinking that religion would wither away. Nietzsche’s announcement that God was dead was parochial and naive. Numbers are at best

an ambivalent guide to religious practice, but research has shown that with the exception of parts of Europe and North America the number of religious adherents around the world has kept pace with and in fact notably exceeded the enormous growth in the population of the species over the last hundred years. There are, for example, more Muslims, Hindus and Christians alive today than all the adherents of such religions in the past put together and the Catholic church for all its weaknesses is still numerically the largest human organisation on the planet.

Intellectuals who wish to engage the world cannot avoid the reality of organised religion, a reality whose social and political importance much of the western academy has I believe largely underestimated during the last century. One can't wish away as false consciousness the million or so people who gather at Moria in South Africa for Easter each year, or the million or so born-again Christians singing together during a service in Korea, Brazil, Nigeria or the Philippines. Nor can one dismiss as tribal superstition the millions and millions of Hindus taking part in a ritual pilgrimage to the Ganges River or the millions and millions of Muslims facing Mecca in prayer each day.

The language of religion is woven into the linguisphere of the planet, and underestimating its ubiquity contributes to the terrible mistakes in foreign policy made, for example, in the Middle East.

What intellectual committed to promoting the importance of reason and tolerance in the public domain can remain passive in such a turbulent context? When such intellectuals repudiate the global reality of different faiths and turn their backs on the socio-political conflicts that these can spark, they risk handing the moral high ground in such debates to the fundamentalists found in every faith.

For intellectuals to remain secluded within their digital towers in such a world is, I would argue, an act of irresponsibility. Again, a type of translation is required, one between the different languages of faith. Such activities are not limited to religious-minded intellectuals. Both religious and secular intellectuals have much to offer. They can at least research and affirm the values of reason and tolerance that are discoverable, I believe, in the tradition of every faith.

**ID:** *Any affinities with East European writers and intellectuals who boldly declare themselves to be ‘religious intellectuals’? I asked this question of Romanian poet, Ana Blandiana, when she visited South Africa (Dimitriu 1998: 69-70).*

**CM:** Your interview with Ana Blandiana opened a different window on Europe and taught me much that was new, thank you. It made me aware of the importance of ‘religious intellectuals’ not only in the totalitarian regimes of the left but also in liberal democracies, where the dominance of monetarist values and commercial media diminishes interpersonal relationships and makes a commodity of culture and leaves the discontented searching for alternative sets of values.

‘Religious intellectuals’ in South Africa need, of course, to be extremely cautious since the history of organised religion in this country, and elsewhere, leaves a dispassionate observer full of ambivalence towards religious enthusiasts of whatever faith community, whether indigenous or multi-national, old or new.

The geneticist Dean Hamer in his book *The God Gene: how faith is hardwired into our genes* argues controversially that human spirituality has a biological foundation. Whatever the merits of his scientific argument, he makes a useful distinction between spirituality and religion. The first may or may not generate the second, and not the other way around. We could thus use the enlarged phrase ‘spiritual and religious intellectuals’ to describe a wider array of kindred thinkers and writers.

On the one hand, Christian Nationalism, the “loveless Calvinism” that Antjie Krog describes, which bristled with a pious, sectarian antagonism towards Catholics, Jews, communists and persons of colour, especially the last, endorsed the policies of apartheid, an endorsement which various churches eventually repudiated as heretical.

On the other hand, South Africa has been blessed with spiritual and religious intellectuals of the stature of S E K Mqhayi, Bishop Colenso, Sol Plaatje, Trevor Huddleston, Desmond Tutu, Dennis Hurley, Frank Chikane and, most recently, the Quaker mathematician and cosmologist George Ellis at UCT. There are many more, too numerous to mention here.

Nor should it be forgotten that numerous church congregations and church-based NGOs, together with the trade unions and other civic organisations, formed the United

Democratic Front in the 1980s and re-ignited popular resistance to the Nationalist government when the ANC was only able to work underground.

Spiritual and religious intellectuals based in universities can do the following: alert colleagues to the discoveries of contemporary science that make faith less a subjective decision than in the era of logical positivism; assert values drawn from their different faith traditions to counter the increasing dominance of consumerist culture and capitalist practices in the academy; complement the Cartesian epistemology and reductive models of understanding used within their discipline with holistic models of understanding that privilege reason and tolerance; be open about their faith to colleagues and students without evangelising or concealing doubts and uncertainties; challenge the secular correctness and pagan chauvinism of the literary academy where these occur; keep asking deep questions worthy of the great tradition of universities, questions such as “Did the universe happen by accident?” and “Why are we here, and able to ask such things?”

Such a recovery of holistic meanings, of holons of significance, to suggest a term, whether construed by audiences or readers as secular, spiritual or religious in form, will, I believe, albeit slowly and painfully, also help to restore the importance of poetry within the academy, not only within departments of literature, where prose fiction and a secular apprehension of the universe is dominant, but also among people in other departments to whom poetry is only a memory of something unpleasant at school. Having performed for the first time to audiences of scientists this year, I think that the warmth of their response suggests that this is more feasible than we expect.

**ID:** *In the play, Walking on Gravity, in CD format, you combine Latin and Italian excerpts (and their English translations) with digital images from the Hubble telescope. This juxtaposition – as well as substitution – of word and image points in the direction of what Jakobson has termed “semiotic translation”, a recoding process that involves equivalent messages in different codes: “interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems” (Venuti 2000:114).*

**CM:** *Waking on Gravity, which was first produced in Grahamstown Cathedral during the 2004 Arts Festival extends the medieval tradition of the mystery play. Everymind, like the*

Everyman of tradition, is an informed and questioning observer who tours the cosmos as revealed in images downloaded from the public domain of the Hubble telescope. These are linked to images of the brain's neural networks created by the graphic artist. Everymind's guides are the shades of Dante and St Augustine, both of whose visions are grounded in learning, cosmic in scale and poetic and mystical in form. It is often forgotten that the latter is African and deliberately contrasts his outlook with that of the great metropolitan centre, in other words Rome.

The images are projected onto a huge screen hung from the rafters of the cathedral. The dialogue is mathematical in structure – one hundred and twenty seven line stanzas of iambic tetrameters. This formal austerity is echoed by the extracts from Bach's string partitas played from a rostrum at the back of the church during the pauses in the dialogue, when the audience and characters meditate on a particular image. These range from stellar nurseries to Thackeray's globules and different galaxies.

I also downloaded sequences from a number of radio telescopes and the eerie whooshing and rumbling sounds were amplified until the whole building seemed to quiver. These techniques dramatised one of the themes – that our human senses experience only a small part of what is happening around and within us all the time.

The images were prepared by the artist Julia Skeen (my wife) and the production is one of nine such that we have done in the cathedral so far. Most of these implant poems I have written in large-scale images and, show by show, unfold a genre that we have tentatively called graphic poetry. This genre brings the tradition of the illuminated manuscript and Blake's Songs of Innocence and Experience into the digital domain.

A similar 'synergy between verbal and nonverbal signs' takes place in two books that we have done together, *The Horn of Plenty* (1995), a series of painting-poems that features fruits, vegetables and cereals, and more recently, *Lifelines* (2006), a series of poems about encounters with animals where Julia has positioned the text in an image on the right-hand page, while Adrian Craig, a zoologist, has provided notes about each animal that are printed on a ghost image of the animal on the facing page.

These innovations express what has become over the years a central activity – to restore poetry to the public domain. Other examples are WordBeacons, head-high, four-sided light-boxes in which poster-sized graphic poems in different languages are displayed in

foyers, libraries and halls, and Wordfest, a national festival of South African languages and literatures with a developmental emphasis, which opens a space for writers and readers during the national arts festival.

Julia and I also take our graphic poetry productions on the road, doing twenty or so gigs a year. *Lifelines*, the latest one, also features a number of songs. Music adds forcibly to the semiotics of each show. “Dragonfly”, for example, is a poem that evokes a moment when while white-water rafting on the Zambezi I was thrown into the enormously powerful river and came to my senses staring at a dragon-fly on a rock, intensely aware for a moment of the brevity and frailty of life. To convey this, the song changes to duple time and minor chords in the second half of the stanza. I mention these types of formal techniques because, if handled appropriately, they make poetry accessible to audiences in the public domain, audiences who have sometimes given up on contemporary poetry all together.

**ID:** *Some of your poems – although not translations per se – have strong references to multilingual realities, in all their “splendour and misery”, in South Africa. “Midlands Lexicon” is strewn with non-English words (ingongon’, steekgras, aristida; i-job, impilo, imvula) in an attempt to capture the complexity of different language communities “wording along” in solitude and “being worded upon” in perplexity. “Wording the Gap in the Hinterlands” is also a meditation on “the borders of wordscapes/ of unpainted lands within a land”. Do you see a way out of the miscommunication that inevitably takes place when “English collage” meets “minimalist Xhosa”?*

**CM:** Miscommunication between people speaking different languages is probably inevitable. A bilateral *intention* to communicate can of course reduce the gaps. Let me tell a story to convey what I mean.

One Friday evening in the eighties I was sitting with a group of about twelve people from the Valley of a Thousand Hills on the chairs that lined the wall of the hall at The Valley Trust. The people were members of a development and services board, a newly formed democratic structure which we’d help establish with the approval of the tribal authority, after much local diplomacy. Its first project had been the installation of a pipeline in partnership with our NGO and the funders, a Christian organisation from the USA.

The mood was jovial and after a period of informal banter the board members moved to the chairs around a table when the mode of expression changed. There was a moment of silence, the chairperson asked a colleague to open the meeting in prayer and the meeting began. Formal exchanges began.

I had learnt from many such previous meetings that the proceedings from now on were minuted and assigned to individual speakers in the memories of participants, more exactly than in a more literate culture where ideas and suggestions might flow back and forth across the table without being fully registered.

The manager of the pipe-line began his report. Mrs Ngcobo (say) at the stand-pipe near (say) Ndlovu's Store had run out of tokens on Tuesday and hadn't told him till Wednesday. Mrs Gasa (say) at the stand-pipe at the top of the following hill had opened the stand-pipe late on Thursday and people had complained. Stand-pipe by stand-pipe, anecdote by anecdote, the events of the week were recounted. The language was incarnated in individual people, places and times.

None of us had experience in managing a piped water-supply. That was one of the gaps. Another I suddenly realised was an absence in both indigenous English and Zulu, a gap that had been filled in the former with the importation of the Graeco-Latin language of administration by the English indigenes following their conquest by larger-scale societies such as the Romans and the French years before.

Equipped with such an abstract language, a manager could reflect on the events taking place along the pipeline and say the following paragraph whose vocabulary works more at an abstract level than the Zulu used at the time. I have underlined the words that were, as it were, imported or translated into English hundreds of years ago from Greek, Latin and French:

The committee agreed that the manager and attendants lacked experience in administering this project. Secondly, the terms and conditions of their employment and the regulations governing the distribution of water required revision. The edited document would be prepared by the development agency, approved and amended where necessary by the development and services board and communicated to the stand-pipe attendants in detail at an in-service training course which the manager

would also attend together with any volunteers or unemployed members of the community who wished to participate in this or other training programmes that would also involve visitors from other parts of the province or other countries in Africa in the future. The treasurer and financial manager then confirmed that they would prepare an income and expenditure account, a balance sheet as well as a summary of capital expenditure and would submit this to the office of the receiver of revenue.

In such a way the language of a small-scale society imports the relationships and institutions of large-scale societies. Such lingua francas give access to power and mobility and the individuals that learn to speak them break out, as it were, into the multi-dimensions of the linguisphere. They also tend to commute, to oscillate between the lingua franca and the mother-tongue if they find that the values inherent in the larger society are not as permanently desirable as the material gains.

In this particular example, because the will to communicate was so intense, the staff of the development agency and the members of the board solved these and other administrative problems with relative ease, although to urban dwellers the process took much longer than would normally be acceptable.

South African languages are rapidly importing significant numbers of new words from one another and from English. Mid-sentence code-switching for example, is common. The indigenous African languages that survive are likely to become ‘collages’ of vocabularies and usages, as found to some extent in standard or written international English. The strength of the *intention* to communicate across different languages will, of course, vary with changes in socio-political perceptions and cultural and spiritual values.

Which brings us back to where we began this interview, the restless urge of the poet to craft a holistic language of meaning that nurtures and extends the cultural and spiritual values of a troubled and dangerous species naively dubbed *homo sapiens sapiens*. Shakespeare’s description of such an urge is remarkable and leaves little to be desired:

The poet’s eye, in fine frenzy rolling  
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven  
And as imagination bodies forth

The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen  
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing  
A local habitation and a name.

(Act V, Scene 1, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*)

The standard model of cosmogenesis provides what I would call a meta-biological explanation of the origins of language and literature, of the genetic basis of the kind of frenzy that Shakespeare describes. Such a fine frenzy is I think our common urge to seek significance writ large and Elizabethan.

Such a frenzy is also a manifestation of the strange, bewildering conjunction of the languages of heaven and earth experienced in the imagination of Shakespeare's poet. How can we restore substance to such a holistic, visionary endeavour when the images from the Hubble telescope remind us so vividly of the dust from which we are made, of the cold dark silence of space through which our tiny planet sails like a solitary ark?

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