Angifi Dladla
(1950-2020)

A tribute by Kyle Allan

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KYLE ALLAN

Tribute

There are few writers who can make the unapparent visible through their writing, and even fewer who do so consistently throughout their career. Angifi Dladla was one of those.

Dladla had an ability to portray the violence and tension contained within everyday life; penetrating the superficial appearance, he could pierce to the essence. To read his work is to discover the world anew. Kelwyn Sole (2010, n.p) describes Dladla as "the master of the concise, surreally tinted but devastating image of the real". Dladla's sharp observations were balanced by his humanism; a humanism that was able to integrate the daytime world with the world of dreams, the world of the present with the world of the past, the body with the spirit, death with life, beauty with the abject; his poetry had no artificial binaries. One of his great gifts was to describe life with wonder and open mindedness, without denying any realities.

South African poems on social issues are frequently driven by slogans, hashtags and ideological statements, using physical images as illustrations of concepts rather than trusting their imagistic power to penetrate even deeper to the core of actuality. His transcending of superficial didactics and a mastery of depth using minimal words leads to social poems that contain unforgettable images, and are texts populated with the stories and impressions of people who are all-too-human; physical beings, fragile existences, imperfect minds, individuals cast in socio-political uncertainties and violence. Strikingly, even in poems of bare survival, his poems are touched with the presence of the spiritual. His dead are voices and presences offering profound spectral visions and warnings to those who would hear. These presences and signs continually testify, exhort or warn the poet.

In our late capitalist era, which worships the twin pillars of production and consumption, the dead are swiftly forgotten, and the precarious living (and the living dead) are exposed to high levels of violence, their lives marked as disposable and consumable. Dladla invokes both the discarded dead and the living dead in "the dead" (*the*

girl who then feared to sleep, 2001, p.68) by purposely confusing and obfuscating phrases; in this case, words which suggest death. Here is the whole poem:[1]

raggedly brown
and pitifully dry;
the dead, exhumed
for re-burial, are not
a curiosity.
i say this in passing:
our city has a daring collection.
ours hunt, eat, drink and
ask extempore – but the mayor
buries them from visitors.

These living dead go through the motions of life in capitalism: hunting (yes, hunting is an accurate description; job-hunting, husband/wife-hunting, happy hunting), eating, drinking and asking; but they are buried from sight. But in Dladla's penetrating optic, they are exhumed not for re-burial, but in recognition that they exist.

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"The building, the weapon, the way" (p.79), is in my view one of the crucial poems of South African literature; on the surface, a straightforward poem of social criticism:

the building you occupy, belonged to the enemy
that's where he wrote tragedies and farces for our people.
his thought forms have formed you into his twin.

the weapon you inherited, carries his impressions
like a dog used to sodomy, always it will
drive you to inhuman action

the way you are, is the way he was
growing blindly without shame;
ignoring the rumbling under his feet

This poem alerts those who would chronicle the contemporary to the reality that artistic activism is not rote repetition of issues or the dry realism of the obvious. It requires a careful scrutiny of aesthetic methods and poetic techniques, and even a rejection of many popular modes of truth telling, which may actually obscure further:

> Stories need to be told in a way that actually reveal the occluded sights and the roots of every injustice, and use the liberatory potentials of form and language usage. Previous aesthetic strategies are linked heavily to the capitalistic structures and strategies of categorisation, materialism, the one -sided focus on the individual, and are likened to sodomy, portrayed as exploitative as opposed to liberatory. The illusion of growth fostered by capitalism, where growth is equated with productivity, is revealed to be at the cost of the loss of awareness for the actuality of things on the ground, and of the environment. It involves the individual "ignoring the rumbling under his feet".
>
> (Allan, 2019, p.104)

This rumbling reaches a spectacular conclusion in "granny's last lectures; on hell" (p.73). As societal unrest and the psycho-social tremors lead to an implosion of heroes, the poet invokes the collapse of a "storied building", which swiftly moves metaphor to a concrete reality.

> hear! echoing a storied-
> building, heroes, child
> of my child, implode.
> but dust, oh child
> of my child, explodes
> for all the world to see…

What is important here is not so much the collapse of the building, but "the revelation of the previously unseen and the seemingly immaterial […]; that within the body of the building, within the quotidian grains of dust there lays a deeper truth" (Allan, 2019, p.118). Even the fall of the heroes does not reveal the vulnerability of individuals, but points to the frailty of all. In essence, the implosion is caused by a wilful denial of actuality which cannot be sustained. Dladla's "sense of depth" (Penfold, 2013, p.230) enables the reader to perceive the deeper truth(s).

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Considering that images and symbols are loaded with layered, sub-conscious or seemingly hidden messages, Dladla's forceful disorientation of readers is not just a device to grab the reader's attention with unexpected word and image juxtaposition. It serves to

undermine the accepted schematising of everyday spectacles of South African social reality, and foreground its dissonance.

In a time where so many poets meet social issues with wordiness and cliché, Dladla strips things to their devastating essence, such as in "so turned a taxi" (p.32):

> so turned a taxi
> into a lightning bird
> warming up
> but whirled in volume flames
> for failing to fly.
>
> we would later encounter
> an unidentified object;
> fused iron and bones.

Not only does this poem compactly describe the horror of an accident, but it also describes the violence of capitalism which produces "a society of 'fused iron and bones'" (Allan, 2019, p.113). When Dladla describes scenes of violence and unrest, he does not only do so physically; he also captures the psychic ruptures and underlying restless violence; a vivid example of this interplay being "impression" (p.22):

> off i flinched,
> drained
> dizzy and dazed.
> behind; outsize
> black wound
> in the earth
> where the tyre has nailed him.
> human gravy in the sun…

In "peace initiatives (midnight shift)" (p.45) he startlingly transforms an everyday (or rather every night) disco scene into a phantasmagoric nightmare scene, in which:

> swift.
> nightmare things
> pounce here
> and melt there
> as whirling rays
> and crystals.
> hi-tech hell of peace…

(p.45)

The artificial light is described in breathless line units, with the disco lights representing an indeterminate place between solidity and fluidity; they "pounce here/ and melt there" capturing the psychological unrest. This poem is complemented in "peace initiatives (day shift)" (p.45) by a rendition of a scene of parachutists descending from the sky:

> heavenly.
> nightmare things
> in white feathers
> of doves hover

White feathers and doves in the Western imaginary are symbols of peace, purity and often prosperity but here that symbolism is undermined with the "nightmare things/in white feathers" revealed to be connected by "the cords of spiders" and named "peace capsules of hell". The celebratory intent of the parachutists and their entertainment value is contradicted by these unexpected word usages and contrasts. The poet critiques the everyday ideological components of contemporary South Africa in several such poems.

By preferring a narrative voice that destabilises the first person voice of the lyric, Dladla effectively provides socio-political critique:

> [O]ne might read Dladla's reticence to inhabit a personal voice as a response to the tainted profile of black individuality in a post-apartheid era that has seen an elite profit at the expense of national good.
>
> (Meyer, 2017, p.158)

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Phaswane Mpe's 2004 review of *the girl who then feared to sleep* includes an interesting insight concerning the poem "exposure" (p.12). The poet describes a vision of his deceased stepfather, who enters his room one night. The poet vividly evokes the ghostlike form using descriptive language. However, this apparition has not come to haunt the poet, but to apologise. The stepfather ghost leaves once he understands the poet holds no grudge (it is revealed in the later poem "Sacrifice" that this man had attempted to kill the young Angifi when he was a schoolboy). When the poet tells his wife the following morning about his vision, "she gawked at me and chuckled: /poets are dreamers. Mpe explains:

> The poignancy of the wife's words issues from the fact that, indeed the speaker could be said to have been dreaming. However, the notion of dream could be extended to embrace the idea of imagination, that is, knowing her husband to be a poet, she assumes – that he is imagining – not merely dreaming – things into reality. Nevertheless, the dream helps the speaker to think through, once again and perhaps in a kinder light, his relationship with his stepfather.
>
> (2003, p.78)

Dladla has a great capacity to live with uncertainty and pain, and his poems reflect this. He is one of the few South African poets prepared to engage fully with the trauma of violence and apartheid in a direct descriptive way, while remaining open to the vulnerability as well as the possibility of the present. This openness allows him to redefine his relationship to both past and present. His awareness of the true violence and tension of post-apartheid society is liberating: in "dreaming" (p.17) he at first doubts his sanity, describing how "nothing i saw but the place i knew/ had turned into a red swamp": but subsequently he is reassured when hears the "voice of my sangoma/ 'you are growing, you are growing…'". For him, revolution begins with a turbulent but necessary journey of self-discovery, encompassing introspection, dreams and heightened consciousness. Politically, South African literary activism tends to turns its gaze outwards without pause for self-examination, self-critique or self-discovery. Dladla with his humane scepticism strikes a cautious note:

> i don't know what flies say to us.
> do they say something,
> to us?
>
> ("rotting", p.49)

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While many readers and critics will see for themselves the strength of Dladla's poems of socio-political critique, there are also poems like "balloons", a poem (quoted below in full) which startles the reader with its riddle-like message:

> balloons
> are toys to these cherubic children
> in the glittering morning
> on the pavement

mucous hands of pastime,
silvery faces of slime
curse my loving wife
roundly

little legs of children – needles
of sewing machines,
scuttled…

It is amazing how the viewpoint shifts in this poem, and how the poet succeeds in making us see the world in a fresh light; and how he strikes notes of beauty and ugliness simultaneously, describing a scene paradoxically both mundane and magical The word "scuttled" signals the defeat of the viewer and possibly signifies a sense of setback for the children; both in the awkward current present of their growing bodies and identities, and also in their attempts to find a world of easy meanings and significations also destined for defeat. Instead of finding easy meaning, the poem defeats any attempt to make a final observation. Instead, we are left in a world where even the slime glitters and the abject has a beauty of its own. Objects irradiate each other's external qualities and connect to each other in unexpected ways. The cursing of the children also rejects any effort of older people to define their lives. One can draw an arc from the poem of the narrator who was misunderstood by his wife, to the poet who acknowledges with lyrical glee even his own defeat in attempting to describe the world in which craft (perhaps signified by sewing machines, which the children's legs are likened to) is defeated, leaving an indeterminate beauty.

Dladla's poetry embraces open-mindedness and humanity, and displays a conscious understanding that artistic rebellion against contemporary capitalism and hegemony means:

> [A] shifting of values and rhetoric away from an emphasis on the exploitation of intellectual property (and thus labour power) and reinstating or inventing technics of value that address the uncertainties of economic and ontological life.
> (Neilson and Rossiter, 2005, n.p)

This shifting is necessarily driven by both the inward and outward, dependent on the poet's spiritual insights, visions, and critical self-examination, all meshed with a keen eye for the external world and its dynamic reality. While questioning and sceptically warning of many of the ills and agonies of life, it always keeps an eye on hope: as the

poet writes in "song of the aged" (p.80): "but a bright star i hear far, far… / within". Here the external star is also the internal guide and voice of truth and hope, and the small inner voice is described in terms of the brightest lights of the universe.

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In this short exploration of Angifi Dladla's poetry, I have only mentioned poems from *the girl who then feared to sleep*, and none from *Lament for Kofifi Macu* (2017) nor have I engaged with his fascinating (still to be published) long poem *Max the Gorilla and The Archbishop of Soshunguve*. The poetry of Angifi Dladla deserves a greater appreciation than it has received so far. It deserves an in-depth critical exploration. I hope at least one local academic journal will devote a special issue to his work. Examining how his poetry works and why it is so significant for us today will be a lasting and important memorial to this great poet.

Notes

1. The page number references for Dladla's poems quoted in this essay all refer to *the girl who then feared to sleep* (Deep South, 2001). Dladla's later book *Lament for Kofifi Macu* (Deep South, 2017) is not quoted.

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