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Seitlhamo Motsapi

earthstepper/the ocean is very shallow

Grahamstown, Deep South Publishers/ISEA, 1995

i write from beneath the foot
of time's perforated stagger
& as these scrawls or scrolls
hasten into their air or earth
slaves pile into the sky
up & beyond the sun
our spears call for surer rends
fire calls out for other roars
besides handshake
storms cry out for other songs
besides repose

Motsapi's declaration sounds a keynote for this, the first collection of a major poet. A very far cry from official New South African pietistic discourse of reconciliation, this collection brilliantly fuses pan-Africanist militancy, romantic spirituality, and scathing attack on neo-colonialism in its global and local forms. The political urgency is never, here, compromised by empty rhetorical posturing, aesthetic banality: this is a rich, experimental poetry, raining down fresh imagery, complex conceits, carefully patterned to produce a volume of striking originality and stylistic rigour. Motsapi's pan-Africanist militancy eschews the reductive version of manichean ideology found at times in 1970s black consciousness writings: as the above reference to "scrawls or scrolls" intimates, this is a poetry in which the polarity between dominator and the poor is consistently registered but the definitions, ideologies, cultural histories and resistance strategies of the subjected, are frequently pluralised, even as the urge for collectivity is affirmed.

The pan-Africanism of this collection is, then, one which embraces the struggle of self-creation: political solidarity and ethnic identity are conditions under construction rather than given essences, and the collection's form charts a spiritual pilgrimage, a process which develops through techniques of exhortation, commemoration and purification. Perhaps this sounds somewhat ethereal and didactic, but Motsapi's poetry is neither. On the contrary: this is an intensely physical writing, in which the human body works with and against the elements, a world in which oppressors feature as crocodiles, alligators and worms, working with fangs and razors, mauling, mangling, stabbing, bruising, lacerating, perforating their objects a world of injury to throats, lungs, bellies and intestines. What prevents the hyperbolic and apocalyptic lexicon from any self-defeating repetitiousness or overload

is the vigour of its unexpected verbs, animating a heavily metonymic universe, as in "morivah":

north of the bleeding
urgent hollers flood the equator wet ...

seven million legs
sing me across the river
six million fractures
vomit expiries & apostasy

or:

sweetnesses sired us from babylon
but the desert knitted her holy hollers
around my stragglng insistences
the entrails of the artificial forests
began to splutter outwards

("tariqa")

Celebrating the immensity of black inner resources, Motsapi plays creatively with tensions of physical scale; human sized organs house properties of cosmic or continental proportions:

inside my head
is shelved enough clay
to rend the sirens' belligerence
caked across the tarmac

("trudgel")

or:

tomorrow
they'll ask u
to renounce the skies
that throb in yr heart
like pregnant forests

("mushi")

This poetry constantly conflates visual, oral, olfactory, tactile and aural sensations in a frenzy of synaesthesia, and breaks down boundaries of liquid and solid:

& so the new blackses arrive
all scent and drape to their clamour
head & heart the liquid odour
of roads that defy oceans

("moni")

from the rock
our shoulders flow into
murmurs the sprout
of callings & onenesses . .

("sikis")

For me it is the complexity and range of Motsapi's political meditation that is the most compelling quality of his collection – a richness of vision that is clearly 'New South African', and all the more so for its antagonistic relationship with the new country, in particular the country's prevalent ethos of rainbow nationalism and its ongoing socio-economic inequalities.

That Motsapi perceives the New South Africa to be something of a war zone is clear from the first poem, which opens with the warning that

my love
there are no accidents
in war

("sol/o")

a poem which also registers a sense of the decline of liberation leaders:

i tell u this
as the sun recedes
into the quaking pinstripe
of my warriors
grinning & vulgar in their muddied dreams
of power

The causes and dynamics of this degeneration, and their relationship with a truly emancipatory, regenerative impulse, are thoughtfully explored throughout the collection. A similar imaginative thoughtfulness characterises Motsapi's treatment of the politics of religion and aesthetic culture. Differentiating between the gifts and the dangers of dreams and dreaming prompts a series of reflective poems in which the false redemptionism of messianism and quietism contrasts with a mysterious spirituality drawn in traditional and pantheistic colours. Motsapi not infrequently casts lone males as emblematic vehicles of spiritual and humanistic values, whose fate is to survive attempts at extermination; their irrepressibility is imaged in strikingly elemental terms:

so while the forests refuse to speak
& his name cannot be found
in the mouths of drums
he remains a naked knot, a kneeling bleed
in the dust

("duija")

so they bled him
to a smudge on the skyline

& as the last stab scuttles out
his mangled roar hollers

to its root in the foaming shore
profe/sea comes to pass
& the reckless waves return inward
("bo jili")

The affirmation of these cosmic-scale spiritual leaders goes along with a celebration of the modest individuals whose exemplary values are revealed through their prayers to the Creator ("humble, makeketa prays") and their dreams that

... the heavens to grant him
the imposing peace of the blue-gum in his backyard
& that all the poor send him their tears
so he could be humble like the sun
so the red wax of the stars would not drip onto him
("the man")

Their reward for such modest dreams is a beatific cosmic invasion ("the man", "the house").

Dubious religious leaders emerge in contrast as hubristic manipulators of the poor in "dreaming of the master" and "dreams of sun and wood", peddling reactionary "mantras". Neither the hierarchies of messianism nor the alleged anaesthetic mysticism of Eastern religions is found capable of emancipatory energy, while historical islam is represented as a murderous invasion by "arab hordes".

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One of the most interesting aspects of the book is the section exploring black musics. Motsapi is particularly concerned with the degeneration of black performance cultures through consumer capitalism, and reserves some of his niftiest word-play for this concern:

... ancestor maasai
melting into the purple nikon pose
of tourist disca/dence
("the sun used to be white")

... my son's synthesiser
spat blue red venomous disco/dant
skewed maasai jump dancity
("solo/together")

i am the nu man, mad i chant
loves song - gobbledigoon i mumble
chant me michael jerksin in the spepsi s/perm
while they kwashiorkor me
("djeni")

Synthesisers epitomise the destructive potential of capitalist culture, a seductive and corruptive force characterised as "sugary". Marvin Gaye receives an ambivalent elegy, his death at his own father's hands construed as parable of the ongoing antagonism between the earthy root and roar of African tradition (the "Iyaan") with the "lamb/of . . . sweetie melodies". Reggae seems to hold more potential as ally of liberation than Motown, though Motsapi warns against the isolation of its lofty and ganja-assisted idealism from the fatal realities of South African brothers:

lissen ras lissen here
jus don let de green of de spliff
curtain u from the red of mah blood
as piggin babylon runs with de gold

("brotha saul")

As this suggests, Motsapi's dialogue with reggae, soul, dub and rap generates much of his style too: reggae lexicon is freely drawn on, eclectic rhythms of orality brought together, phonetic spellings jostle with conventional orthography. (Motsapi refuses America its standard orthography, referring instead to "amerikkka" in rappish fashion). Somewhat differently from the poetry of Lesego Rampolokeng, this poetry establishes itself as a fluid hybrid of scribal and oral traditions.

The representations of musical power, however, are complex here. At times Motsapi presents a simple opposition between African "drum intervention" and contemporary culture:

the speak/speed of yr drums
now drowned to a croak
by the convenient noises
of popular music

("drum intervention")

But more often, I think, ambiguities emerge; even the Marvin Gaye elegy/critique suggests in part that the problem lies less in the music itself than in its appropriation:

& as i stammer so
the eternal embrace of clod & dust
perfumes the dittieses
that are buried to their crooning necks
in the shallow airth
of the amerigan top folly

("mah boy stah")

"Solo/together" presents Coltrane's jazzmaking as simultaneously dangerous and enabling in its narcotic effects

trane rolls off my walls at night
& dreamily nirvanas the ancient wells

of my heart that dreams of hills
into whirls of hypertenors

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The collection follows a careful, subtle sequence. Opening poems set up the fundamentals of Motsapi's aesthetic-political concerns (social conflict, black poverty, the values of humbleness, love, hope). Then the journey begins, starting with an exploration of black music as a privileged metaphor of contemporary black identity, assessing concomitantly the forces of cultural amnesia and residual heritage at work in musical production. The collection then moves on to a consideration of political and spiritual expressions of power, in both local and global dimensions, juxtaposing exploitative and regenerative versions of this power. The book ends by detailing the project of emancipation's journey, the formation of a collective black liberatory subject, an affirmation of hope and the inevitability of triumph; a journey which holistically integrates the political, physical, cultural and spiritual themes of earlier sections into the vision of an organic consciousness-in-process.

The end point of the triumphant journey is itself fascinatingly inconclusive. Although the tenor of "rasula" is one of certitude:

we have arrived
& the spirits of the land
hymn us inwards over our fragmentations

the concluding poem "river robert" emphasises the unfinished and divided nature of a regenerative condition:

i have one eye full of rivers & welcomes
the other is full of flickers & fades

we bless the inscrutable darkness
where our names are rent into spirit
we bless the splinters & the air
full of asphyxiations & amnesia
we bless our lacerations & our deformities

we bless the belligerent strangers
who stay on in our throats
long after forgotten festivities

as we learn the painful lessons of love
as we learn to respect the night's sovereignty
& the slow stern wisdom of the desert
we bless the mysteries & the silence

All in all, an extremely exciting, multiply resonant and freshly original collection; a highly valuable contribution to new imaginings for a new country.