Interviewed by Robert Berold

Your writing has come a particular route — starting with workshop-written theatre in Johannesburg, then, as a trade union activist in Durban in the 1980s becoming a poet within the labour movement. What was it about moving to Durban which drove you towards poetry?

I was privileged to be made aware of Durban through the labour movement in the early 80s. Downtown in Gale Street, where the offices were — they were dingy little offices — that's where a lot of the life of the labour movement was, that's where I would hear stories, make plays and be involved in running workshops afterwards. And being new in town I wanted to know much more, search for more, find out about this place. From that office I, we, went out and 'discovered' the Dalton hostel, the Dunlop factory, the black side of the inner city towards the harbour, the industrial areas and from there all of a sudden Umlazi opened out; and from that activity at the heart of town you were called out to Pinetown, not the white side of Pinetown. So a whole world opened up. I got very familiar with all that side of town, and also I became familiar with the underside of this harbour town, this beach town. There were all these forms of life, moving, shaking, dealing, wheeling.

It was very difficult to make all this correspond to my other life, as a lecturer at the University, teaching a broadly white student body with a sprinkling of 'Indians'. All this made me divide my life in two neat slices. During the day, of course, I would be doing all the affirmative things: organising projects, organising people, making plays, looking after some of the needs of the cultural movement that was beginning to grow, hanging around with very creative people on that side of town.

When I really started writing it was during very private moments, about issues that upset me during the day, arguments going through my head, debates I was having with all kinds of imaginary and real people, stuff that I needed to pour out like a private therapy session. So the poetry was never affirmative, but very reflexive, reflective, surrealist — surreal I suppose because I had to move through so many emotions in a week, in a day, rather than a learned surrealism steeped in Breton, Césaire and others . . . Once the first lot was written I realised that I was talking to people, seeking their attention, so that however private it was, it had public pretensions. So my poetry started having that other voice, started introducing the doubts, asking the questions — myself, where I was going, what people were saying that was really upsetting me.

Your poetry engages passionately with physicality, texture, a sense of place.

The sense of place was unavoidable, because I did not seek to play with ideas, or metaphors or concepts. I was encountering something, I was learning from something very literal, something very tactile, very 'scratchy-scrapy.'

Being in the labour movement created the urge in me to discover, to be able to name objects, and to learn how to talk about them, and that's how I started learning more and more through the description of objects and just accumulating nouns, I suppose, as opposed to verbs, and increasingly beginning to utilise these into the communication, English, Zulu, it didn't matter, that was happening between myself and a primarily black working class audience.

Also, I came from a socialisation that I suppose was more musical, bodily, gestural, touching . . . If I have ever felt repression as opposed to 'oppression,' it's the repression that tried to limit me socially in terms of these non-Anglo things. Growing up first in Cyprus, then in Johannesburg, (in fact, Hillbrow) I had my fill of physicality.

From which you escaped into books, through the 'book ladder to the top', as you put it in "Our Little Tropical Scars":

> *'eager to make a book ladder to the top and*
> *page by page to climb there'*

You climb the book ladder to the top and then you realise from that hill, hey dammit, what is this? — total alienation. The moment of arrival is also one of total alienation. There is a new kind of violence up there. And there you are: you have violated what you had in order to arrive somewhere else, where you do not belong.

Nevertheless, your reading confirmed your sense of self, so it was not entirely alienating.

The poetry which moved me and influenced me had always been textured by landscape, feelings, sea, movement, music. A lot of the Greek poetry I had been schooled in was about settings, landscapes, rocks, people dancing, culture — Elytis, Gatsos, Ritsos, Sikelianos and to a lesser extent Seferis. French poetry too, so violent and maudlin since Baudelaire, has been very much about that — down there away from 'exalted' 'bourgeois' feelings. The American poetry I grew towards in the 1960s was also a rhythmical celebration of the body as opposed to the mind. And in South Africa a lot of the African poets I listened to had the kind of influence that just boiled and boiled away. The poems in *Tropical Scars* were like little explosions — bang! — in those margins of time; and then came the hard work of trying to discipline them, give them the musical form they were demanding . . . I never start with a clear vision of a total structure and work towards its completion, I start with inarticulate sounds, snatches, and then I just start organising its timbre.

Finding yourself a poet within an active labour movement must have given you an immediate sense of audience.

I knew that I had an audience, so I tried to communicate in different ways with them. At the same time there was always this doubt that I was a fraud, that I had said everything I ever had to say, and now I was just embellishing things here and there, finding new ways to tell the same old boring shit. I think the publication of *Tropical Scars* was a great boost. Ironically also it was crippling,

because it sold well, it sold fast, it was riding on a wave, it was launched at the right time at the right venues, a lot of people bought it as a memento, not to read it. It got a positive glib type of response that was good for the ego but then I started saying “where am I at? where am I at? now I am doing this second rate stuff.”

I started working on song-like structures, said OK, damn that, there is an audience out there, let me try all sorts of musical forms then which are already there in the first cycle. So I spent a lot of time writing poem-songs . . . Initially it was jazzy things, poking in a light way, but as the violence increased around here so it became more and more difficult to do that sort of stuff. There was all this counting of bodies, the dehumanisation . . . I think that I was very lost during that time.

You lost your mass audience too?

It was great having a mass audience but that audience was not interested in what I was saying, they were not listening carefully anymore, or how I was saying it, and in which context I was saying it. The mass rallies were getting bigger and bigger and I said, uh-uh, I’m not doing it any more. Then it was the smaller venues like the restaurant pub type of thing, someone would be putting on a fundraising thing and say — won’t you come and do something? That was killing as well, it was a more intimate audience but they were too poep-dronk to really care. So I said, next time we’ll play rock’n’roll, that’s fun, appropriate things for appropriate times: 1-2-3, jive baby, jive, mangos and spikes. Then there were the poetry circles that were as stifling as anything else with their weird patronage systems, people becoming dependent on the patriarchy and matriarchy existing around them and rather unprepared about the frightening changes all around them. If there is one thing that I have never learnt it is to find meaning through patronage-systems.

What have you written since Tropical Scars*?*

William Zungu --- A Christmas Story was published by Buchu Books, then COSAW thought that there weren’t enough poems in *Songs, Shoeshine & Piano* to warrant a book-length book, so COSAW included it in *Essential Things*. Then the other book, a novella, *Etopia*, is instructional, it was written for labour and community education programmes, a kind of futuristic novel describing the processes and structures of the ‘good life’ in the year 2020. New poems have appeared here and there. There is one that *Botsotso* has published recently, a cluster of lyrics for maskanda guitar. I collaborated with Mi Hlatswayo on this and had him pen the maskanda chorales in Zulu. There are a few plays here and there and a libretto for an opera, *Dead Fish and Dreams of Love Again*.

How does one find a workable aesthetics or poetics when you are so surrounded by violence?

As I was saying, my ‘alienation’ from many people increased once the violence escalated. I knew many of the people who were being killed. I would be involved in all that side of the world and come out of it, go to work. It didn’t make any sense. Cultural workers were being killed, I had to meet with their bereaved children. I had to convince them that those lives were not cheap, those feelings were very real, what people believed in was very serious. And

the more that was happening the more tense the poetry got, in trying to shock people into the realisation that there was a civil war happening here.

I learnt a hell of a lot too from some of the social photographers here, Badsha, Raijgapaul, Nunn, Peter, Mayet, who were documenting people's lives, who were saying "Come and look at this", "Come and look at that." They too were undergoing major artistic and existential crises around the violence. They could not make aesthetic statements out of the ugliness and grief any more. A phrase like 'working class struggle' was never an abstraction, there were hundreds of faces, contexts, experiences. And I could never just believe in abstract ideas, you know. I found myself linked to a combination between ideas and real constituencies, real people, real reciprocities, and that I think made me painfully richer at that time but made my integration into my professional class very difficult and very, very unsettling.

How did you get onto the track of Slave Trades*?*

I was getting caught up in the kind of 'revenge against my world' type of mood. One of the plays that I wrote about the violence, *Charred Loving*, has been hated by everyone who read it, not because it wasn't good, but because it did things the way it did, it was too close to the actual violence and the blood to really allow people to absorb it. As I said in one of my poems, "The Monkee Tree," in Natal, the healing of wounds had been proclaimed, there's peace, there has to be peace, it's been proclaimed — and one forgot the nightmares or tried to forget, and sweep them under the carpet. But the ghosts of the past were are still howling at us.

I needed a new space which would not be bound by any people, any particular people I knew in order to explore some of the more problematic phantoms that whizzed about in my brain; and that's where Ethiopia became both a metaphor and a reality. It allowed me to write about very painful issues, about liberation that's not a liberation, a golden past that's not a golden past. I felt that it allowed me to go wild in all kinds of ways, and in ways I could not explore before.

It opens out to something much bigger than anything you've done before . . .

I'm trying to deal with all kinds of discomfort in myself, all kinds of roots, traditions, history, destiny, religion, atheism, men, women, many voices speaking, to see whether it would be possible to really create multiple voices that create tensions and say something that is about all the times we've lost, also the times that we might get, the real rootlessness that exists now, the horizon shrinking. *Slave Trades* was born through all kinds of real and metaphorical slaveries, of ownership, of possession, of mastery, of servitude, mental, manual, patriarchal, historical. I'm still drowning in that project so there's lots of flashes of it coming here and there.

Why did you set it in Ethiopia?

When I was doing the futuristic novella, I used a liberation song which goes, "S'pume Etopiya/ sihamba ngomoya/thina solala/emakhaya" — "We are flying through Ethiopia/ We are flying faster than the wind/ We are sleeping home tonight". It started reminding me how Ethiopia was one of the images of redemption in the resistance to colonisation. It was a similar kind of impulse

that started the Shembe church here. In African Christianity, Ethiopia was Jerusalem on earth, and Nazareth was going to be built here by Shembe, it became part of the so-called Ethiopian resistance to Christianity. It fed into all kinds of things all over the world, but specifically here Ethiopia had a very particular ring to it, both as past and Utopia. In South African languages, certainly in Zulu for the last century, Ethiopianism was equated with sedition. But if you look at it, if you go to the US, you go to Jamaica you go everywhere, it was that defeat of Italians in 1896 by a Black Christian nation. That started me thinking.

How is it that Arthur Rimbaud is one of the main characters in the poem?

Rimbaud was a big influence on me and a friend when we were very much younger, in our Bohemian days in Joburg. Poems like “The Drunken Boat” and “Season in Hell” were defining influences. But then I kept on coming across appalling, disgusting erudite books that have been written about Rimbaud’s life in Africa; disgusting in the portrayal of Africa, the portrayal of the other through this genius who runs aground, who bought himself guns there, who might or might not have been involved with the slave trade, who — and this is irritating for someone who was born in Cyprus — he went to Cyprus, and wrote those appalling letters about the people and what was happening there. It’s rumoured that he killed a workman there. He helped build the Colonial Governor’s house there, remember we are talking of the *colonial* governor’s house, and moves on in the literature, goes and buys a wife in Abyssinia and then decides he’s not into it and just chucks her out, and so on; and one is reading all that, that stuff that makes your hair stand on end, written as though Africa was just part of nature through which this genius crashes. Nothing is said about the total insensitivity betrayed in his actions. What we need is the other story from the other side, so I started an excavation the other way around.

Then also, his ambiguous sexuality — they are not tackling this when they are writing about him either. And this woman who was just taken, paid for, taken out of context, family, clan, taken across to Aden. He tried to make her a French woman, she was beautiful, she was a good mate, then because she didn’t fit his narrative, putting money around her neck and sending her across the water back home. The catastrophe of that woman, what happens to her afterwards, what made her to go over in the first place, her resistance to becoming Frenchified, none of that’s there in the literature, she doesn’t matter.

Then there is the whole Greek connection, my discovery of it in Cyprus, the connections that existed between Cyprus, Ethiopia, Sudan and other places in pre-colonial times, as part of the Ottoman Empire, as part of trading, as part of being the innkeepers there; which might in a sense give me the textual freedom to go and search for roots as well. So the poem metaphorically looks at my predicament, the exploration of my roots, where are my roots? where are everybody’s roots? But the thing is, the more you go back into history to find roots and ground, what you find is violence, slavery, killing. We cannot find the Patriarch’s estate, the garden, described by Mahfouz in *Children of Gebelawi*.

At the same time I’m challenging the easy certainty of the past tradition, ethnicity, what happens is all of a sudden — when you think you’ve found

comfort and belonging, it turns to its opposite — that creates the turbulence in the text.

What gives it its power I think, is that you've thought it through, you've thought about how these things fit together, while at the same time you're letting go of your imagination as well, so both an unconscious and a conscious process come together.

Look, without sounding too arrogant I feel very happy about some of the pieces in *Slave Trades*. I look at them and I say, phew! you know, but that is based on hindsight. I was taking risks, and looking at it and even feeling I risk being misinterpreted here, and saying, well, damn that, it hangs together well, it captures something. The idea of slavery at all kinds of levels all of a sudden opens up — not the obvious ones but the kind of man/man, woman/woman, man/woman, woman/ man, priest/subject, dominant idea/subordinate idea, servants against other subordinates, you know that just released all kinds of shit.

I am also saying that we're not driftwood, you know, we come from a long way back. At the same time wherever you scratch you don't find paradise, you don't find that golden past from which the fall has happened, the more truthful you are you find, power, power, power, that's what I find very frustrating at the same time. That's the struggle that's happening: I want to be absolutely positive about something but then I can't. All the past is basically an act of rape and plunder.

In Enid Starkie's book about Rimbaud, there's a description of Rimbaud's last days when he went back to France and his sister was looking after him and his mind was rambling, he decorated his room with all this African stuff . . .

Look, he was possessed by the place, he was, despite the letters he was writing, slowly sinking into something there. They thought that he might have converted to Islam, the relationship with his manservant, all these 'facts' are opening up all sorts of possibilities. He wasn't just a colonist. But some of his attitudes, his stinginess and his whole bearing and the fact that he wasn't killed, basically because he was being protected by the various chiefs and notables there, because he was running guns. A small incident . . . he had these hides at his warehouse and the dogs fouled them up so he poisoned Harar's dogs, he killed a thousand dogs! Now the dogs were the ablution of the town in those days, nobody owned those dogs in a literal sense, they would go about and people would sweep their stuff out and the dogs would clear the streets . . . But you know the total arrogance of some shmuck like him, he just decides to poison them, you know you look at that attitude that comes from him and you say well he is just a shit. But he wasn't as racist as the French colonists, he intermingled, he had black lovers, he dealt guns against the interests of the Europeans.

Maybe he was a modern white African, a post-colonial prototype?

Yes, but he was a shit. Where's the genius? There's nothing profound about his existence in Ethiopia. And the fact that he is hardly recorded in a culture that has left lots of histories, he was no great shakes there. Even the house that is now paraded in Harar as his, is the wrong one, an invention for French tourists.

Coming back to what you've called his ambiguous sexuality, how do you explore issues of sexuality in historical and colonial contexts?

Ja, that's the hardest work. I find myself a lot of the time writing something and then inverting it, recorrecting it, in order to be able to estrange it from my immediate experience, in order to give a voice its own dignity there and try and dig and dig and dig and find what that sexuality would have meant from a different angle. The themes are very liberating but the danger is that there is just a monologue, an autobiographical monologue that comes out. And I think I'm discovering that in my subconscious, (not so much my unconscious), there are other voices, too, you know, in an interesting way I'm sort of undermining myself and letting those speak, and trying to see how the voices could take within a different kind of character. I find that very hard. That's why I get lost, it takes time for me now to say OK now, this is an authentic feeling, a feeling which is usefully different from this other authentic feeling.

Differentiation of these voices . . .

Everybody has different voices within themselves at various levels of dominance, at various levels of one's life. I've had to really really work hard to approximate the possible feelings and images that go with those feelings. It is very difficult, for example, to work from the bisexual feelings within an historical context, so that it fits in to the time, 1881. How did the sexes meet then? how did the men meet? how did the women meet? what were the possibilities of interaction? who were these women who were available? who were the men who made themselves available, given religion, given mysticism, given taboos, given prohibitions?

And realising what a hard time ideologues and the clergy and the political order had, and the family and the patriarchs and the matriarchs, what a difficult time they had to keep the balance — in every historical period — because anything that might be an aberration could really create all kinds of chaos. So, in exploring sexuality and transgression, at the same time you explore how things hold together, and you explore the repressions that hold things together now. How authentic historically they are, or not, I don't know, because no text has been written covering those issues, the most dangerous ones. Those are acts of imagination that you hang around real history.

It's quite a task to set yourself.

It is, but I never knew when I started. All of a sudden I realised how difficult the task was. Until then the work was easy. It was one energy that went through to many voices. How do you take another step that doesn't exactly repeat the cycle?

What do you imagine is the relevance of this kind of writing?

We are at a time when new kinds of tribalisms are being remembered and reinvented, that have to do with the past, the pre-colonial, the post-colonial, that's the new language of postmodernism. My struggle is against these new tribalisms — they're false.

If you look at pre-colonial African belief systems, they were incredibly universal and tolerant provided you entered their sphere. There was no inequality embedded in either discourse or transcendental deliverance. They all called to believers to pray for people who were an aberration. Sometimes they killed them, but if one looked at the aristocratic and repressive regimes that animated them, these systems of belief were very democratic, if not in this lifetime at least in the next one, and addressed everybody as an equal.

Women as well?

Yes. Differently. Women were controlled: sexuality, oppression, taboos, men controlling women, selling them, slaves, selling them, buying women, bride wealth, but at the same time women are the central 'cultural workers' that create society, the essential pillars. If you look at religion, they are assigned roles the wonderful roles to raise these boys to go out as fodder . . . All the contradictions that were then, are still with us now. If one looks at the ways of tradition and women that is being invoked now, they are being invoked for repressive reactionary reasons.

Then my own roots, Who am I? Where am I? Where am I going? And I feel very rooted, but ambiguously so, as somebody who was born into a Greek culture which has been elevated into a myth of origins for Europe. I feel quite uncomfortable with that. You know the whole Hellenistic period was quite barbarian, quite savage. It was not only Reason and Philosophy it was also about untrammelled sexuality, about taboos, transgression, violence, all kinds of other unhellenic shit, and all kinds of beliefs that link it to the Middle East to Egypt and beyond, so I don't feel European in any sense. Having grown up in Cyprus, under British colonialism then, it doesn't make sense. At the same time being in Africa, being in South Africa, what sense do I make of that?

It seems as if you use music to make sense of a lot of it.

Music's got a lot to do with it. I'm at a type of a crosspoint between three major influences: a very rhythmic type of influence; then a very byzantine, eastern, long, mournful, sorrowful voice, that bemoans a situation, an ancient blues that is quite different from the blues. And then what jazz has done to us — taught us how close language is, and poetry is, to music, how the interaction between instruments is the beginning of an articulation which gives shape to words, to poetry. These influences discipline all the material back into some structure. It's not very clear in the structure of the poem as such but I can feel it as an organising principle: theme, improvise, improvise, improvise, come back, theme, improvise, improvise, improvise — so that gives it shape.

A cyclical arrangement . . .

Yes. Each one of the cycles has got some dominant characterisations beyond its story-line dominant characterisations that come to that, so for instance in the second cycle there is an element of the wanderer who travels around a lot, and through that wanderer you see the land described before, in new ways, you come back to the theme, there are themes from the first cycle drawn into it.

Next year you're going to actually visit Ethiopia. What do you hope to find?

To be really imaginative you have to step out of your own imagination first and try and understand other contexts. Every culture has its Odysseus, and each Odysseus sees you as an 'other'. The Troglodytes have also got their Odysseus and also have the vote and their own lives and aspirations too . . . They are not those creatures that Odysseus tricks and uses as he goes on exploring. Once you are there, in that reality we need *be* like the Laistrygonians, what is demanded of us these days is to understand the Laistrygonians.

Ethiopia has these resonances, it's like Africa's utopia and it allows me to be fanciful within limits. I need to get there because I have to understand Ethiopia, I have to see how things are done as opposed to what is being done, I need to see gestures of people, I need to see whether they move their arms like I do, I need to see how they relate to authority or to eyes, movement, goods, landscapes, colour, sun, night, all these things . . . to make sure I am not constructing the other like in old ways, making the other strange and foreign. Then to let the imagination regroup itself and correct things if need be.

I don't know if *Slave Trades* will finally achieve what it sets out to do, communicate in a serious way. It's a battle, in the most difficult of battlefields, the one of language. I hope it completes itself, finds the words and the colours and imagery to create a world that is coherent and at the same time expresses its multiple feelings properly. And if you can dance to it, all the better.