

KELWYN SOLE

*Kelwyn Sole is the author of two collections of poetry, **The Blood of Our Silence (1988)** and **Projections in the Past Tense (1993)**. He has recently completed a study of *Black Consciousness* fiction.*

● One critic has suggested that you are “a political poet, but not in the way of so many other South African political poets”. Can you trace your political influences and development?

KS: I come from a lower-middle class white family in Jo’burg; a family of *Bloedsappe*. I certainly wasn’t brought up in a liberal or left-wing household, although I was instilled with a very strong sense of justice and the uniqueness—let’s call it the vulnerable uniqueness—of all living things . . . every single person killed in this country is a tragedy for all of us, and it’s time we started realising it. From that upbringing I also inherited a profound distrust, as an outsider, of the disparity between the liberal sentiments of wealthy whites and their comfortable existences. My distaste for liberalism is not Oedipal.

But I had to make my own way, politically. I was influenced by a whole lot of undergraduate enthusiasms—everything from anarchism to Zen Buddhism—as a university student. You’ll remember the types of books doing the rounds in circles of white youth in the late 1960s and early 1970s—everything from Marcuse to *Soul on Ice*. In this sort of scenario, where a lot of things were banned and one had to read what one could find, I first confronted Marxist thought *via* Cabral and Mao, if I remember. All of the post-structuralist and culturalist Marxisms that started doing the rounds on a systematic basis among left-wing people came later, in the mid- to late-1970s. It was only the privilege of intellectual space, and the amount of it, that gave me and others like me the time to do much reading. This changed, for many, during the 1980s.

I think, looking back on it, that I was lucky to grow up at this time, difficult as it was—systematic reading allowed me to see the way in which theory needs to be consistent, needs to be rigorous (these are scare-words among those who believe these days that they have done away with “master narratives” in their lives) and needs to relate to practice. I suppose the latter’s what fuelled my attempt to move away from the Jo’burg suburbs, and work in Botswana and Namibia, for example.

⊙ What was your perception of the political practice of socialist governments at the time?

KS: While I was spouting Gramsci with the best of them, it was shortly after I was thrown out of Namibia in 1980 that I started to feel something was wrong in the way in which Marxist theory was being practised, in those countries I had a modicum of knowledge about, as well as among some of the people I knew in the closed circle of the left locally. I began to get very suspicious of Leninism in particular, especially its separation of ends from means, its notions of command socialism, the role given to the vanguard party, the acceptance of the one-party State and other of its damaging platitudes—it was at the time regarded as the only acceptable theory of socialist transformation. Reading Philip Corrigan and Carmen Sirianni finally convinced me that the problems I was seeing weren't just aberrations of my own "false consciousness". I currently think that a lot of the problems that crystallised in the fall of Eastern Europe can be laid at the door of *Leninist practice—the hardening of arteries of a revolutionary party turned revolting bureaucracy*. Djilas was right, all those years ago.

We desperately needed the reassessment of socialism that was forced on us. There was, certainly, a huge failure of a number of the prevailing political practices of socialist countries; practices which, if you think about it, had come to stand in the way of the ideals for which socialism was supposed to stand. However, I'm still a Marxist: I have still found no better way of explaining the imbalances of the world in which we live.

⊙ Your poetry has a number of voices in it, there's a lyrical voice, a satirical voice, a polemical voice, a voice concerned with history, etc. How is this? Who is the "real" Kelwyn Sole?

KS: The thing is, growing up in South Africa has shifted, fractured my personality into a certain shape; and I can do no other than write from that personality. There have been a lot of factors that have helped shape my identity. And although this particular "shape" belongs to me, I would generalise to say that all of us in this country have been moulded and fractured, in our various ways and as a result of our various circumstances, by the experience of learning to live here. I've never believed that I'm someone with a simple, uniform, consistent "nature" or "personality": I am a person with a number of different attitudes, identities, emotional urges, enthusiasms, all intertwined. Often at the same time. These are at play in my poetry—at times in paradoxical and perhaps even contradictory ways. All I have done is try to use them, rather than resolve them before I use them.

This pushes me towards a certain type of stance in my poetry . . . to perceive this country—and then write about it—in a way which doesn't remain stuck in some of the dreadful stereotypes that exist in our literature.

This recognition of personal fracture is a useful place for me to begin exploring from: in that it allows me—potentially also, at least—to communicate with differing types of audience.

● How much is it possible to consciously find or meet an audience?

KS: I do try and “see inside” other people and situations, and what they are experiencing and suffering, when I work on a poem, even though I know complete identification or understanding is not finally possible. Yet while recognising these problems, what concerns me first and foremost is where *I* am, as I've said. It's possible to become too uptight about who *one's* audience is, and try to write to please them. That's death, as far as any poet I respect is concerned. Usually I get on with the process of writing, and let the audience take care of itself; although I'm surprised and pleased when someone tells me they like what I do.

● Does this issue of audience influence your stylistic choices in a way?

KS: Yes. I'm not suggesting I'm a sort of polyp with open feelers, indiscriminately tasting everything that floats by. The literary critic in me at times directs me to certain types of utterance, I guess . . . when I started to publish, for example, it was said to me a number of times that I had a “lyrical gift”—it was meant as a compliment, but I didn't take it as such. I'm dubious of the way the expressive lyric bloats out to include everything into the poetic ambience of a single consciousness. Ja, I know *one's* eventually stuck in *one's* own point of view, but for me some of the other forms I experiment with allow edges of the real world out there to jag against me; they teach me more because I have to struggle more to get them to talk. Even with my lyrical poetry, I sometimes try and decentre my first-person narrator: you know, undermine his authority with other viewpoints, criticise his point of view, and so on.

Any attempt to write poetry according to a certain style is, to my mind, simultaneously an attempt to define, and maybe transform, *human beings*. When I choose *one* style of poetry above another, I'm trying to form and transform people to sympathise with and respond to me in a certain way. So it's my social and psychological conceptions that make me want to speak in different voices and with different styles

in my work. I think that the commonly-held notion around when I first started writing—that the sign of a “mature” poet was someone who had found “his” voice and wrote in a consistently repeated style and with a constant angle of focalisation—was, when all is said and done, not so much a strategy to make writers work at their craft as a straitjacket: I’d be unhappy to be just a lyrical voice, or a satirical voice, or whatever. This way there are different options open to different types of situation and subject matter. At times, indeed, different subject matter calls for variations in form in my work. At times strict use of metre and rhyme makes sense, at times it doesn’t. This goes for other techniques of poetry as well.

☉ You have done a lot of experimentation in form and in language (I’m thinking of poems as different as “Akua’ba” “Promised Land” and “Blessing” for example). Do you think readers follow all this, or isn’t that the point?

KS: This is one of the ways I do feel lonely. If I’m lucky, a few of my readers might realise what I’m doing and what direction I might be moving in—I’m very restless, formally-speaking, in my poetry; but I don’t systematise what I’m doing. I follow my nose and explore. I might witness something that I feel cannot be expressed in ways I’m used to using, or read someone who strikes me as someone I could learn from. I remember, in the mid-1980s, as all the poems I’d written over a number of years started to finally coalesce into a book—what was to become *The Blood of Our Silence*—I was really taken, for a year or so, by Philip Levine’s poems. For several years I’d had a tape of him reading a tape Jeremy Cronin had given to me—and all of a sudden it started to make sense in terms of where I was, and what I was trying to express.

Sometimes a literary influence, or fresh perceptions of what I see around me, come together to make something new out of my poetry; at other times these influences and perceptions simply dissipate away. I’m curious at the moment about Charles Simic and the techniques of surrealism, for example . . . but there is no immediate goal attached. It all assists, I guess, in ways I’m not always aware of: it might or might not end in a poem or two, eventually. But the process of enquiry—I would call it the *discipline*—helps. Hopefully, literary influences are tamed by my own needs, have been metabolised thoroughly, by the time they reach the page.

☉ Don’t you get irritated when people who regard themselves as knowledgeable about literature are closed to—or ignorant of—the

variety of poetic forms available, past the few hidebound notions they're familiar with?

KS: One of the problems in South Africa is that some—although unfortunately too many—of our poetry reviewers, especially newspaper reviewers, are nitwits. What makes it worse is that it's precisely these people who tend to arrogate to themselves knowledge about "literature", in the grand sense of the word. Mind you, I can't feel too victimised in this respect, personally—reviewers have tended to be reasonable as regards my work, and the criticisms have occasionally made me think very hard. But I've been lucky!

Some recent poets—I think immediately of Donald Parenzee—have really suffered as a result of second-rate criticism. It's upsetting when you see something, a poem or a book, that's really interesting, and would attract attention in a more informed atmosphere—and it's totally ignored. Or taken up for the wrong reasons. Some of the most promising black poets in this country have been destroyed by patronising praise from critics; praise that doesn't engage seriously with their work. Just look at the current size of Mzwakhe's ego.

❶ Could you trace your literary influences?

KS: It's difficult to describe these influences accurately. Rimbaud and Blake have always been with me, not so much as influences but as models of what a poet should risk. I try to read very widely, particularly in poetry, try to read as many different kinds of poetry as possible, try to read and understand different poetic traditions from different countries. This isn't completely a wide-open stance: there are certain types of poet, maybe Nemerov and Snodgrass would be examples, whose work I actively avoid: it's so word-crammed, so mannered, it feels like it is activated by the sphincter rather than the imagination, or the heart, or the stomach. There's no room to breathe. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, I also actively avoided the white writers in vogue in journals like *Contrast* and *New Coin*, as they then were—it was an emotional reaction, I guess, and leaves me now with a gap in knowledge I rather regret. I felt that I wanted to avoid my literary "roots", racially speaking — for me at the time it was a maze with an entrance and no exit.

I've tried not to be too influenced by, and thus too imitative of, particular poets. This has happened from time to time, though, I suppose, especially with poets I really like. I remember being very taken with the *Black Mountain School* as an undergraduate, especially Olson, and I think traces of that influence will never go completely. Olson's writings about poetry are the only ones which have ever made

sense to me, along with Lorca's theory of *duende* . . . Okigbo I read obsessively at the same time. Enzensberger has been important to me subsequently, and Brecht (his techniques of estrangement rather than his verse), and MacDiarmid, and Levine. More recently, there are others, such as Atwood, Amichai and Holub, whom I enjoy thoroughly and who've probably influenced my stuff: I also go back to *Paterson* all the time. Mind you, there are other poets—Edwin Morgan and Tchicaya u Tam'si would be examples—whom I really like, even though I know any attempt to ingest their styles would be a disaster for me.

One learns not only from reading but from teaching as well. I've been amazed how much about the politics of form I've discovered, often without expecting to, from teaching Seventeenth-century English poetry.

I've also learnt some things about form from genres besides poetry. Obviously not directly, but some of the ways these artists have played around with, and manipulated, structure. Zappa and Godard, a long time ago. About ten years ago, jazzmen such as Roscoe Mitchell and Cecil Taylor. I actually believe music and dance are superior forms of expression to literature.

● You're one of the few poets in this country—and one of the only male poets—who has written erotic poetry. This has confused some critics, especially those who've expected to find a gulf between the political and the personal. How do you respond to this?

KS: In *Blood of Our Silence*, this problem of erotic expression was a big issue for me. I'd been reading some of the great erotic poets in English—such as Carew and Rochester—and thought about the yawning silence in South African poetry as far as explicit, erotic poetry was concerned. And thought, "Right, let's try that". So in one case in that volume I did what I occasionally do, let the critic in me decide on the type of poem I should write. More and more I think eroticism has to encompass other aspects of the social world outside of that private space of sex as well, even whilst describing it. My feeling these days is that you need to place sexuality in some kind of an historical, even a political, context. Moreover, one doesn't always need to show bodies explicitly to be erotic—the *Gita Govinda* is one of the most erotic poems I've ever read, and it works mainly by suggestion and repetition. I suppose this is an area I want to keep working on—there is something, a way of expressing such intimacy, and of exploring the power relationships in which it seems to become embedded, which I feel I haven't found yet.

● So it's a matter of allowing yourself to write poetry out of any and all experience?

KS: It has something to do with what sort of selective processes one is allowed to use. I'd argue that resistance to an openness about sex is typically South African, typically prudish, even perhaps typically macho. Disallowing me, or anyone else, this area limits our artistic choices. All artists select from their raw material: but some South African *literati* still want a particular kind of selection to take place. They want poetry to be "elevated", to turn life into some kind of rarefied, distanced world rendered aesthetically spic-and-span for the page. They want to simply expunge what *they* regard as inappropriate form, or what *they* deem subjects not fit for poetry. Some of these people tried to argue that politics was one such area, for a long time. And now sex. What next—poems which endanger their version of social harmony?

One of the reasons I think William Carlos Williams is such a joyous influence on twentieth century poetry in English is the fact that he is the most democratic, most generous, of writers. He doesn't have to make use of the smarmy "we's" of Whitman, however. Instead it's in the form of his writing. He mixes prosaic and poetic registers of language. And he selects, but his selections are unusual, at times appearing to be gleaned from trivial subjects or by chance. But it's much more clever than that . . . everything in our live is potential subject matter for him. There's none of this "elevated consciousness" bullshit.

● How do you explain the fact that poetry in South Africa in 1994 has fallen right off the "culture" agenda?

KS: I think poetry should count itself lucky. Movements and trends in art which are successful are driven, to misuse a quote from the science fiction writer Kim Stanley Robinson, "at a level below intention". They are fortuitous and often disorganised. You can influence the direction of a country's art with cultural organisations, to a certain extent, through controlling and directing funding opportunities, but you cannot legislate or plan what *forms* of art and culture will emerge. Creation is a spontaneous process, even if it is dependent on social and economic circumstances and individual preparation and hard work; a process of—combustion?—dependent on contingent factors. Attempts to promote "official" art tend to go awry, as far as I'm concerned. It's wryly funny that official sanction can end up making heroic symbols out of *very* inappropriate individuals. Look at poor old Mayakovsky! I hope those in this country who have chosen to make a business out of sitting at cultural desks and being full-time

organisers and planners don't get too great a rush of blood to the head about their own power or ability to differentiate or to be prophets. At best they can serve as clerks.

What is so debilitating about the way cultural organisation is conceived of in this country at present is that it is defined only in regional or national terms. It was presumed that a joint antipathy to apartheid was enough to bring artists together, because of geographical proximity, in a sort of "broad front" manner, or into little suburban and township committees: and it's still assumed that this will help us artistically. I wonder. Perhaps what we need, if we're going to talk about collectivity, is groups of writers cohering out of need and conviction around jointly-held interests in form, in the stance of the artist towards society, and so on. I sometimes wonder, especially in the times we're living in, if poetry is ignored because it's not visible enough. Visibility is a big thing in the arts these days.

As a sweeping statement, I wonder if the new South Africa hasn't become mesmerised by a sense of art as easily-consumed spectacle; if the spectacle's got a few leopard skins and tutus shoved in for good measure and we can call it "cross-cultural", even better. From the "traditional" music shows on television with smoke machines and sequins, to the drum majorettes at political rallies, to the versions of what's culturally or intellectually hip put forward by the Ronges, Mabuza-Suttles and Tambos, even to the cultural pages of the *Weekly Mail* . . . look at those pages sometime. The recipe is: blend together some notices about zingy new plays and music in Hillbrow, add some book reviews from the *Guardian*, pop in a bit of post-modernist discourse, gesture towards various minority and oppressed groups, stir and serve . . . it's all on the surface, it's half-baked. There's no debate, no meaningful engagement with culture and art, beyond what nasty things the DAC and the NAI are saying to annoy each other that week.

● Where do you think South African poetry could or should go from here?

KS: I am more convinced than ever that we'll need a political poetry in the future: but not of the kind that mouths platitudes of praise, or is satisfied supporting politicians or institutionalised positions. Political art shouldn't be functional to politicians. I can do no better than reiterate the hunch some Black Consciousness writers of the 1970s voiced that, even under an independent majority government in the future, the writer would have to act outside of the privilege and promises of politicians, as a critical voice. That's where I'd like to place myself, particularly as there are lots of ordinary people, both

black and white, who have realised that what went on at the World Trade Centre and on SATV has little to do with them—all of this seemingly reasonable and rational language by talking heads wearing suits, Dashikis, Miss Cassidy's, whatever. It's unfortunate that this gap in credibility is assisting the emergence of what I would call lowest common denominator politics, as well as various really reactionary forms of racial and ethnic identification. In this context, poets should aim their expression at people without a political home, maybe even without a home, restless people, those who wish to debate and understand in terms not allowed for in officialese.

When some of our older writers start getting comfy jobs as university professors, as members of parliament, at cultural desks, it's time for younger writers to get into the streets and hidden corners and find out how people are really living. In this regard, it's interesting to me how Zimbabwean literature is evolving, and the number of its young writers who are writing about broken promises, discontent, personal restlessness with what is happening there. I feel an identification with the stance of writers belonging to what Veit-Wild calls the "second generation" of Zimbabwean writers, even those who are still struggling stylistically, who are articulating this new kind of vision—a vision removed from the nationalistic and didactic concerns of the older generation. When I read Marechera saying, "If you are a writer for a specific nation or a specific race, then fuck you" I become intrigued . . . the middle finger is an underrated tool of poetry. Or Stanley Nyamfukudza noting that he's not interested in teaching people in the old way. Although I do worry about how some of these writers are starting to throw around words like "universality" and "truth" . . . it could simply retreat into modernist navel-gazing, if it takes a certain path.

● How will we get people to realise how vibrant poetry can be?

KS: One way is cheaper publishing methods, aimed at getting a poet's stuff out there, rather than turning him or her into a successful "author" with a "book". A greater emphasis on performance helps too, of course: although not all poets' work lends itself to that.

Another option is to find ways to widen that book-reading public. I suspect there are a lot more people out there than we realise who would enjoy reading the very exciting poets who are starting to emerge. But they either haven't heard of them or haven't the money to buy them. I don't think people in the main neglect poetry out of sheer disinterest—they just haven't come across what's of relevance to them, or haven't experienced and explored the genre enough to see how exciting it can be.

Literature doesn't lend itself overly much to glitz and glamour. It needs a thoughtful culture to grow; there should be some analysis, not just emotion and display. I once read something by Regis Debray about the Black Panthers which has always stayed with me. He said that their mistake was to merely invert the dominant images of the white world and present these back again as a kind of show. He warned that the world of display is the world of the momentary. To the media, permanence is boredom. To combat this, I'd say you must endure with your vision: become a lasting embarrassment on the landscape.

—interviewed by Robert Berold