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On Oswald Mbyiseni Mtshali's *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum*

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REVIEW ESSAY

by

JOHN POVEY

*I am the drum on your dormant soul cut  
from the black hide of a sacrificial cow.*

[*Sounds of a Cowhide Drum*. Poems by Oswald Mbuyiseni Mtshali. New York: The Third Press, 1972. pp. (xv) + 79. 'Foreward' by Nadine Gardiner.]

By the standards that I recognize, this first book of Oswald Mtshali's represents a major collection of poetry. The writing of poetry is difficult enough at best; in the context of South Africa, it is an incredible achievement. I mean this not only for the patently obvious social reason that the African's life is cruelly circumscribed by regulation, and intolerably restricted by customary prejudice; other poets have distilled poetry from similar inhuman oppression and there has been verse from the labor camps of Russia and from those incarcerated within the myriad political despotisms of our twentieth century. More significant and remarkable is the poetry that in its most profound and important sense has survived in a world of circumstances that might be imagined to induce only the rhetoric of vengeance and protest. Mtshali's verse taps the deepest well of poetry and sets it at the service of his historical and personal record.

I realize that it is not entirely fashionable to imply that there may be an apparent opposition between poetry and protest. For many sincere readers the fact of the protest, sometimes even the actual revolutionary activities of the writer are deemed to be at least part of the evidence of the consequence and validity of his art, for allegiance and dedication can in themselves be construed as one measure of value. In my own judgment, poetry and rhetoric do not invariably overlap - indeed one may be in counter opposition to the other. I can assert that Ezra Pound was a major poet, perhaps the major poet of our century, at the same time as I recognize that he was probably a nasty, anti-semitic fascist. But that subject would make the substance for an entire essay - probably for an unpopular cause too. Here it is only rendered as a preamble to the assertion that Mtshali is a poet and that, no matter a South African, and Black, no matter that he is bitterly and totally committed to the rejection of racism, the origin of his work denies from the art of poetry and the nature of his writing is primarily poetic at its heart and center. In this regard - to throw casual comparisons offhand - his work is closer to that of Dennis Brutus than Keorapetse Kgositsile.

His poetry has been previously published in South African journals (*The Classic New Coin* and *Purple Renoster*) and it is the distinguished editor of the latter (Lionel Abrahams) who managed the first publication of this altogether original and brilliant volume *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum*. It has subsequently been republished in this country through Joe Okpaku's important New York Third Press. Both editions include the sensitive and intelligent introduction by Nadine Gordimer.

The themes of Mtshali's poetry derive inevitably from the deepest and bitterest personal experience of his life as a messenger in Johannesburg. But the events provoke not the anticipated rage of immediate resentment, they are absorbed into poetry, distilled in his lines into moods of wry irony, and a curiously sustained tender awareness that persists through the anger. In the words of Nadine Gordimer, he achieves his quality as a poet "by forging from bitterness a steely compassion, by plunging into horror deep enough to bring forth tenderness." Perhaps, it would not be fanciful to note in passing a partially equivalent agony to be found in the work of Wilfred Owen during the 1914-19 war. He too had to find a mechanism in his writing to distill the brute blood experience of the gangrene of war into poetry suffused with the realization that pity and compassion are moods that allow the best response to such a confrontation with unimaginable horror.

Mtshali's voice can of course be strident and declamatory "for that is the sound of a cowhide drum/the Voice of Mother Africa." Yet, he accepts equally the implications of his role as a poet, his obligation to strike that cowhide drum so that its reverberations are true and valid and therefore as complex and varied in its tones as the human feelings it lauds. He recognizes that distaste does not preclude humor, that power may flicker in moments of delight, that a saint is a beast and the noble are also fools. Mtshali is a poet and sees himself specifically as an artist. In "The Poet," he describes himself at work:

*Through the night  
the typewriter sounded---  
clatter---clatter---clatter  
like the sonorous ring of an auctioneer's bell*

He continues seeing his isolated state as an artist.

*Through the whispering of dreamers  
the writer wrote and wrote*

*deaf to the nocturnal chorus  
of pompous praises and raucous curses.*

It is a complete isolation for

*Black is the hole of the poet  
a mole burrowing from no entrance to no exit.*

These lines indicate a significant degree of introspection, of a personal vision of poetry that is different from debate about the public efficacy and function of his verse. Quite openly he declares that neither 'curses' nor 'praises' can deflect him from his dedication to his art. Mtshali sees the poet as "a mole burrowing", drawing not only upon outward experience but also upon his deep private spirit. There is an acceptance of his role, of the function of words, rather than the anxious concern for their validity. Poetry in a sense is taken for granted as a pure discipline that allows the inspection of circumstance. It is for this reason that in Mtshali's work, the violence is controlled by a poetic sensibility that utilizes the devices of poetic expression for the recognition of experience. Both tone and technique are at the service of art; and just because his verse is, in the entirely non-derogatory sense, 'artistic' it is the more effective and passionate. For above all, Mtshali as a poet, is a worker in words that are rich, daring, suggestive, catching mood and scene into the concentrated explosion of work and experience that makes the imagery of poetry. The images flow, striking the eye with their vivid evocation of light and color, teasing the mind with the unexpected provocation of the analogy they make.

In the first poem in the collection, "The Shepherd and His Flock," image piles on image; similes striking in the confident authority of poetic skill.

*The rays of the sun  
are like a pair of scissors  
cutting the blanket  
of dawn from the sky.*

*And again later  
His bare feet  
kick the grass  
and spill the dew  
like diamonds  
on a cutter's table*

And immediately after these similes the more complex organization of metaphoric image is found in the vision of the rising sun, a metaphor both concentrated in impact and extended in its construction.

*The sun wings up  
on flaming petals  
of a sunflower*

The skill with imagery, the very essence of the nature of poetry, is evidenced throughout Mtshali's work. There is the picture of the snow-covered trees; simultaneously visually projected and yet initiated by the manual labor of the African.

*Trees sagged  
and grunted  
under the back-breaking  
flour bags of snow*

And in picturing snow-covered winter landscapes he creates the provocation of surprise by his unexpected analogy:

*Mud huts sprouted  
on the vastness;  
a rash of blackheads  
on the heavily powdered  
face of a woman*

Even the apparent commonplace of the bulldozers is brought by the image into a fresh observation that links the immediate visions with the deeper implications of the South African experience:

*Puffing machines swallow the red soil  
and spit it out like a tuberculotic's sputum.*

Above all, there is the immense accuracy of his observation at the birth of a calf. He exhibits that degree of intimate awareness of experience that equals intense compassion in its specific unsentimental vision.

*A newly born calf  
is like oven-baked bread  
steaming under a cellophane cover.  
The cow cuts  
the shiny coat  
as a child would  
lick a toffee  
with a tongue as pink as  
the sole of a foot.*

This kind of diction, the concentrated evocation through the poetic images, is the heart and root of all major poetry. Mtshali seems to carry them easily, making them not a series of separated gems amongst the structure of his poetry but

integral elements that substantiate the intensity of his vision that is nonetheless deep and sharp for being so apparently casual and ironic, without postures of either personality or language. But because he knows the South African world, what Brutus calls that 'world of knives,' for Mtshali even a train journey gives unavoidable evidence of the impress of the political context and shows his tenuous control over its social violence. The simile is like the earlier ones. It is easy, appropriate, familiar, but now the image extends into the specific pain of South Africa.

*I peered through the frosty window,  
and saw six men  
men shorn  
of all human honour  
like sheep after shearing  
bleating at the blistering wind.*

The political condemnation is definite enough. Yet the picture is created with the devices of the poet setting analogy at the service of truth so that emotion derives out of association as much as direct statement, adding perspective irony to direct criticism.

Mtshali has to recognize that all his life he too has been forced to confront those eternal rhetorical questions which he puts into the mouth of a young boy. They range from the obvious to the ultimate.

*Mother!  
Where did I come from?  
When will I wear long trousers?  
Why was my father jailed?*

The first question is the universal inquiry of all mankind asking for enlightenment on that cloudy region of the spirit that is only approached by poets. The last is a specifically South African question, though it could spread more widely. In a sense it is as equally unanswerable as the first, being just as unamenable to the process of human logic, for there is no "reason" appropriate to this society.

The hierarchy of human despair evoked by the questions enforces a climax that makes a terminal query ring out in all its awareness of injustice; for it is rhetorical in the exact sense that it can receive no answer. But the human consciousness is not amenable to impassable barriers such as this, it invariably seeks to comprehend the unknowable. The itch or awareness is not daunted by inescapable recognition of probable failure.

But where does one seek for some answer to the boy's recurrent question, that begs so many others? For this, neither of the usual channels of awareness -- education and religion, logic or faith seems adequate. For the South African, the usual modes of learning are too often blocked and, perhaps more importantly, are irrelevant. Mtshali realizes that for him and his people, there is only one place for education. For them learning can never simply be that conventional synonym that always matches it with attending school.

*He enrolled at Life University  
whose lecture rooms were shebeens,  
hospital wards and prison cells.  
He graduated cum laude  
with a thesis in philosophy:*

*"In this crooked white world, I can't be  
black and straight."*

It is also obvious that religion will not provide the relief for the division is as much in the soul as in the society. He finds himself "Perpetually at prayer while constantly cursing" and God and Heaven and hell must be redefined to match the circumstances

*God is no picture  
with a snow white beard. . .  
God is that crippled beggar  
sprawling at the street corner.*

If Hell is "the hate flickering in your eye," Heaven is conceived ironically in the South African mode as "a mansion/two cars or more/and smiling servants/ Isn't that heaven?" After such ironies, the poet is finally driven by the ultimate inadequacy of any theology to account for the distaste. There remains a core of anger with which "he hits God's heart with screams as hard as stones/flung from the slingshot of his soul."

With such an education and ironic motto with which it has equipped him, and such a theology, Mtshali cannot deal with theories and ideologies but with experience, with the painful and constant vision of oppression that surrounds his daily life. There is the constant "I" in his verse. It is simultaneously "I" and the "eye" of course, for Mtshali's observations become our prime awareness. "I counted ribs on his concertine chest." "I shuffle in the queue." "I" saw them clobber him with kieres." "I threw a brick." It is a person at once intimate and detached.

The series of experiences are similarly at the same time stimulating and daunting. In frustration he has to appeal:

"How can I. . . my mind is caged/my soul is shackled." Although one could aver that his poetry in itself is a concrete answer to this appeal in the face of limitation, the answer for him must also be found in human terms. In the final confrontation he realizes that for mankind the ultimate vision is invariably inwards, personal, making macrocosm out of microcosm. With painful accuracy he researches his own occasional despair.

*I looked at myself  
There I was. Shadowless there I was.  
Empty, like a hulk  
Waiting for a demolition squad.*

Yet the despair is always transient for there is his opposing understanding that rejects the self-deprecating and too easy negation imposed by the oppression under which he must live. For in a sense poetry, by definition, is the consistent assertion that oppression is not total but ultimately ineffective. This verse becomes simultaneously evidence of resilience and its initial cause. Mtshali has an almost visceral compulsion to maintain his own poetic confidence. "I will tell it all . . . I will give it to the world." This is precisely what Mtshali does give. But as a poet what he must give is not so much the political truth as the human one -- albeit compounded by social circumstance. For he contemplates another significant poetic conundrum, the sense that the poet is simultaneously the most individualistic of men and yet the most enigmatic, contriving both for the specificity of his individualism and the comprehensiveness embraced by the generalized personality through which the poet may address himself in a variety of tones and gestures. Yet again this eternal poetic dilemma is propounded in specifically South African terms:

*I am a faceless man  
who lives in the backyard  
of your house.*

This stanza particularly refers to those servants as unnoticed as vegetables who invariably have small huts in the remote corners of fancy Johannesburg homes; but it also includes the concept that the seer is depersonalized by his very involvement, making himself the channel through which wisdom flows. He is part of this society, "I am a cog in Mr. Jobstein's wheel." But at the same time he is about that most urgent of individual activities, poetry, and proudly he declares: "I lay bare facts for scrutiny." But this is too modest an assessment of his work, and although detachment can be a quality of poetry, dispassion has never been. Simply because his poetry is both human and universal no one has more precisely and surgically



penetrated the South African experience. Notice how even the casual commonplace metaphor is alchemized into the burning statement of his eternal nightmare, making banality into powerful art.

*Though the itch in my heart  
grows deeper  
I cannot scratch.*

In the final analysis such deep awareness records that the truth comes when man contemplates not society alone but himself, when the inner eye confronts not external events but its own essence:

*I am the victim  
I am the slaughter  
I am the prey  
I am the quarry.*

He asks finally and irrevocably, as both a poet and a man, for the freedom of the spirit, which is denied him.

*I spit my last defiant hiss  
and gasp the death breath  
for freedom to be free.*

The burning is there but it would be an unfortunate moment to conclude, for along with the anger there is a consistent compassion that sustains Mtshali even in his social nightmare. He is a poet and poets are generous men, committed to the spirit of human generosity. He asks in a series of charming simple tender images that we see him as a man and a poet:

*Look upon me as a pullet crawling  
from an eggshell  
laid by a Zulu hen,  
ready to fly in spirit,  
to all the lands on earth.*

It is this understanding of the international and universal nature of his private and unique experience that allows us to share Mtshali's concern and awareness, anger when it is called for, but above all loving benevolence towards the

needy and dispossessed. His African drum speaks with warmth and understanding to all men.

*Have hope, Brother,  
despair is for the defeated.*

\* \* \* \* \*

John Povey is the author of several scholarly studies on African literature. He is co-editor of *African Writing Today* (New York, 1969) and editor of an international journal, *African Arts*, published by the African Studies Center, UCLA. He is also an Assistant Director of the Center as well as Professor of English.

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