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## NOTES

- 1 This article is a slightly modified version of a paper delivered at the 1985 AUETSA Conference at the University of Cape Town.
- 2 P. Essex, *The Exile*, (London, Collins, 1984).
- 3 Al J. Venter, *Soldier of Fortune*, (London, W.H. Allen, 1980).
- 4 R. Ruark, *Something of Value*, (London, Hamish Hamilton, 1955).
- 5 F. Wilson, 'Southern Africa', in *The Cambridge History of Africa* Vol. 8, ed. M. Crowder, (Cambridge UP, 1984), pp.297-8.
- 6 Sergyei A. Nilus, *World Conquest through World Government*, tr. Victor E. Marsden, (Devon, Britons Publishing Co., 1969).
- 7 A Sparks, 'Hey, world! Don't you dare cross Supermouse!', *The Weekly Mail*, June 21 1985, p.13.

## Fictional Projects and the Irruptions of History: Mongane Serote's *To Every Birth Its Blood*

NICK VISSER

When *To Every Birth Its Blood* appeared in 1981 it seemed to resolve a long-standing dilemma in South African literary studies. For many years the conventional view was that the strengths in writing by black South Africans lay in journalism, autobiography, short fiction, poetry, and latterly drama. In every form, that is, except the novel. Here at last, so the feeling went, was a novel by a black South African which — approached within the norms of the reigning critical framework — could stand alongside the work of Nadine Gordimer or J.M. Coetzee. The novel quickly became a prescribed text in university courses; a second print run of 1500 copies was undertaken in late 1985, and by August 1986, according to Ravan Press, fewer than 100 copies remained in stock and a third print run was in the offing. No other works of fiction by black writers published by Ravan have had anything like that reception. What has made the reception possible (and at the same time has made the actual analytical grasp of the novel difficult) is its formal complexity, for just such stylistic and structural complexity has been a principal aesthetic criterion of twentieth-century poetics.

Early reviewers like Jane Glegg (writing in *Staffrider*)<sup>1</sup> and Marius Schoon (writing in *MEDU Art Ensemble Newsletter*)<sup>2</sup> were alert to the novel's formal complexity. Their work in turn was the starting point for the more detailed analysis of Dorian Barbour's 'Mongane Serote: Humanist and Revolutionary'.<sup>3</sup> Reviewers and critics have typically seen the structural complexities of the novel as the key to its interpretation. The commentaries they have produced on the two-part structure of *To Every Birth Its Blood* and on the complex temporal ordering of the first part are helpful. But they do not carry their analyses of the complexities far enough; much of what goes on structurally in Part 1 escapes them, and there are complications underlying the two-part structure which they fail to identify.

What has frustrated efforts to come to grips with the formal intricacies of Serote's novel can be glimpsed in Barboure's essay. Central to her account of *To Every Birth Its Blood* is an explicit assumption that would ordinarily not occasion comment since it is a fundamental tenet of orthodox criticism: an assumption of the work's unity. My reservation with regard to this assumption is not — or is not principally — that such a critical account depends on what Pierre Macherey has called the 'interpretive fallacy': the work as 'apparent expression of the unity of an intention or model which permeates and animates the work, giving it an organic life.'<sup>4</sup> What is more interesting, for present purposes, is that within the practices sanctioned by her own critical orientation, Barboure's assumption of unity is misleading. Overlooking the unusual circumstances of the actual composition of the novel, and unwilling to entertain the possibility of inconsistency or contradiction within the novel, she is able to come to terms with many of its difficulties only at the expense of falsifying some features and obscuring others.

The inability of any assumption of unity to stabilise the structure of *To Every Birth Its Blood* stems from two features of the text, the interrelations of which are difficult to pinpoint with any precision. The first pertains to the conditions of the text's production, the second to peculiarities in the handling of time in Part 1. In both cases, we are dealing with formal issues that are graspable only with recourse to extrinsic circumstances, formal issues, in other words, that cannot be understood purely formalistically.

Coming to terms with the structure of *To Every Birth Its Blood* requires a recognition that it is not one novel but two; or, in somewhat less mystifying terms, it is the product of two separate fictional projects. That this is the case is doubtless obvious to many who have registered the significance of a piece of evidence on the final page. Here again, we have to make an unusual distinction. If we were to ask what are the final words of the novel, the answer would almost certainly be that powerful exhortation: 'Push, push, push' (p.368).<sup>5</sup> But those are not the final words of the book. At the bottom of the same page Serote adds the note: 'New York — Gaborone — Kanye 1975 — 1980'.

It hardly needs reiterating that *To Every Birth Its Blood* is one of several novels of 'Soweto 1976', though it is important not to lose sight of the extent to which that expression is figurative. 'Soweto, June 16, 1976' is a synecdoche: the upheaval to which the figure gives a name spread well beyond Soweto and lasted well into 1977. All this is obvious enough; however, for this novel, the figure has to be hedged even further, since here the insurrection of June 1976 is in a literal sense an absent centre. Practically all narrative detail of the uprising itself is suppressed within the textual lacuna of the shift from Part 1 to Part 2. If *To Every Birth Its Blood* is about June 1976, it is so in an unusual way. Nevertheless, while little of the uprising is directly presented, June 1976 is clearly the fulcrum on which the novel rests; it marks the point of transition from Part 1 to Part 2, and everything in the novel is presented as leading up to and away from that seminal moment of the 'days of Power' (p.169).

Serote's concluding note establishes that the composition of *To Every Birth Its Blood* was begun between just under eighteen months at the maximum

and slightly over six months at the minimum, *before June 16 had happened*. (To put this more simply, if his dates are accepted, and there is no reason not to accept them, he started the novel some time between 1 January and 31 December, 1975). He began, then, an entirely different novel from the one published in 1981. This earlier undertaking we may think of as the first fictional project, and in considering it, we have to bear in mind that if *To Every Birth Its Blood* is 'about' June 1976 in an unusual way, this first fictional project was not about, could not have been about, June 1976 at all. When Serote was already some way into the process of writing a novel — and my guess is a fairly long way — the events of June 1976 erupted, and he expanded the novel to incorporate them. The novel, in the very process of its composition, was opened to the unfolding of history, to the unfolding of momentous events as they occurred. From June on, until the second fictional project was completed sometime in 1980, the processes of composition and of history were coextensive. As each new phase of struggle and repression got under way, Serote opened up his narrative further to incorporate it. As part of the same process, he also had to reshape the first fictional project in the effort to integrate it into the structure of the final text.

For a novel to incorporate in one way or another events that take place during the process of composition is unusual, but not unprecedented. Gissing, for instance, was well into the writing of *Demos* (1886) when the Trafalgar Square Riots of 1886 occurred; he simply seized on the riots as further confirmation of the anti-democratic position he had adopted, and included them in his closing chapters. It may say something about the circumstances of writing in South Africa during the Soweto period that we have at least two cases other than *To Every Birth Its Blood* in which external states of affairs intrude in different ways into fictional projects. For Gordimer, as for Serote, events impinged on a work already in progress. Speaking about *Burger's Daughter* in an interview, she remarked: 'Soweto overtook me while writing that book.'<sup>6</sup> She went on to indicate just how her project was overtaken: 'Rosa would have come back to South Africa; that was inevitable. There would have been a different ending, though, without the Soweto riots';<sup>7</sup> and she incorporates directly into her text a document issued by the Soweto Students Representative Council.<sup>8</sup> André Brink's *A Dry White Season* demonstrates another way in which events can irrupt into fictional projects.<sup>9</sup> Once again, dates appear at the end of the 'book': on the final page we read: '1976. 1978 — 1979'. The gap in the dates is revealing. Brink was writing a narrative of death in detention when Steve Biko died in 1977. Brink acknowledged at the time the novel was published that Biko's death had caused him to suspend writing precisely so that it would not appear that he was exploiting the death for fictional purposes.<sup>10</sup>

Where Serote's work is significantly different from such apparently related instances is that the intrusion of the actual does not merely get added on to or smoothly folded into the existing narrative, as it is in *Demos* and *Burger's Daughter*; nor is it suppressed as it is in *A Dry White Season*. The intrusion transforms the work: the initial fictional project is overtaken by a new project.

Part of the difficulty of *To Every Birth Its Blood* stems from the fact that the first fictional project, though overtaken, does not simply vanish. Although in the absence of a thorough examination of the manuscript one can only speculate about the presence of material from the first project in the published text, it seems clear that much of the first project's substance remains in Part 1 of the finished novel, and its traces continue to disturb the structure. And even though, in the absence of manuscript evidence, we cannot answer the question fully, it is still interesting to reflect on just what sort of novel the initial project would have yielded.

Serote apparently started out to write a novel in the vein of a Lukácsian 'adventure of interiority' (p.89) — a novel fully immersed in modernist and existentialist narrative practices.<sup>11</sup> Barbour has already written persuasively on the treatment of Tsi Malope as an anguished isolated individual,<sup>12</sup> and I do not see any need to extend her account. What I find difficult to accept in her commentary is her confidence in sorting out the complicated temporal ordering of Tsi's experiences in Part 1. At first glance, the time montage and chronological looping we find in Part 1 seem entirely in keeping with standard modernist techniques. Readers who have coped with the repeated references to the man on the donkey crossing the mountain in Conrad's *Nostramo* will imagine that *To Every Birth Its Blood* is unlikely to baffle them for long. Actually attempting to sort out the chronology of Part 1, however, turns out to be more difficult than one might anticipate. Serote substitutes dependence on personal knowledge and autobiographical detail for any entirely clear or consistent temporal framework, with the result that it is difficult to posit a *fabula* to ground the *sujet*, an *histoire* for the *discours*.<sup>13</sup> 'Memory', as Tsi notes, 'can be an unreliable mirror' (p.29). Moreover, the narrative of Part 1 is not presented from a fixed and identifiable temporal standpoint. Both of these features, the unanchored time montage and the uncertainty of temporal vantage point, may require some explication.

The main stages of Tsi's life and experiences seem clear enough, at least in broad outline: we learn that he was a member of a gang in his youth (p.115); then he goes to school in Lesotho; then a period as a journalist, followed by a period of unemployment, and then his time at McLean's College. The moment we try to gain greater clarity, this picture begins to blur. Assigning these phases or many of the depicted events to a particular date or period proves difficult, as does any effort to fix the length of time of the various stages (how long he is a journalist, during what part of his life he is involved with the theatre, etc.). There are external references that would seem to provide clear indications of time — the death of Timol (p.154), Lesotho independence (p.72), Kissinger's visit to South Africa (p.189), Dimbaza and Limehill (p.76), and so on — but these prove to increase rather than to allay confusion.

Let me try to identify the sources of confusion by citing just two comparatively straightforward examples of the uncertainties of temporal structuring. We are told at one point that Tsi spends one year in Lesotho (p.71). This is confirmed when he says a page later: 'I had been away from the Alexandra streets for a year.' He gives as the reason for leaving Lesotho the

need to have travel documents once Lesotho became independent (p.72), which occurred in 1966. That indication of one year in Lesotho in the mid-sixties is contradicted by his memory of praying at school in Lesotho for 'the American and Cuban crisis' (p.73), which presumably refers to the 'Cuban Missile Crisis' of 1962. And to confuse the issue further, we are told that such prayers went on daily during 'the year and a half I was there' (p.73). A similar inconsistency concerns the period at McLean's. On successive pages (pp.148-49) we read: 'A year at McLean's College . . . took me again . . . where I had been a reporter'; and, 'Over two years had passed since I became head of the unit.' These are minor instances of inconsistencies and contradictions of Part 1, chosen, from among many, because they are simpler to clarify than some of the larger difficulties. Further contributing to the perplexing temporal ordering of Part 1 is the unclear handling of temporal vantage point.

First-person narration typically falls into either of two principal patterns for handling temporal vantage point. Epistolary fiction and novels in the form of diaries shift temporal vantage point from one letter or entry to the next. A character lives through a sequence of action, and then stops to narrate it; then another sequence, another pause to narrate, and so on. The more familiar pattern is the one given classical expression by Dickens in *Great Expectations* and *David Copperfield*. Here, the temporal vantage point is fixed at a point posterior to all the depicted action. The experiencing self of the narrator lives through the experiences; the narrating self looks back and gives an account of them — in essence, a straightforward narrative realisation of Kierkegaard's assertion that life can only be lived forwards and understood backwards. Whereas Dickens distinguishes the realm of the narrating self clearly, so that the position from which the narration issues is fully established, other, particularly more modern, writers of first-person narration tend to obscure the realm of the narrating self, as for instance Hemingway does in *A Farewell to Arms*. In such novels, however, even if we cannot know from precisely what point in time the narrative is presented, cannot know even how long after the events it is presented, we do recognise unambiguously that the action is presented retrospectively from a fixed point posterior to the action.

In the first part of *To Every Birth Its Blood*, on the other hand, the temporal vantage point is uncertain, unfixed, free-floating. For part of the time it appears that Tsi is a journalist during the time he tells his story; at other points he seems to be presenting his story from the temporal standpoint of his period at McLean's. Neither, of course, is subsequent to all the actions presented in Part 1; moreover, Tsi reappears as first-person narrator towards the end of the depicted action of Part 2. Much of the fluidity of action and the general structural fluidity of Part 1 can be attributed to this absence of a clearly established temporal vantage point. Equally, any effort to impose a definite time-scheme on Part 1, or to unravel its complex structure, will be frustrated by the absence of a consistently retrospective temporal vantage point. The narrative of Part 1 is uncertain, inconsistent, even contradictory; and assumptions of unity not only cannot come to grips even with the purely formal characteristics of Part 1, such assumptions, by attempting to smooth over contradictory tendencies in the novel, can only obscure rather than

clarify the structural complexities of the work as a whole.

These formal considerations have detained me longer than I had intended. Far more significant than simply laying bare the novel's formal intricacies is recognising that while the unorthodox handling of temporal ordering and temporal vantage point plays a role in the structural complexity of the novel, such features of structuration are of considerably less import than what happens as a result of the clash of two different fictional projects, and the incomplete integration of one fictional project into another. What disturbs the structure of *To Every Birth Its Blood* is not, ultimately, any formal experiments Serote might have been undertaking, or, in a less generous account, any lack of control he might have had over his material. What disturbs the structure is what, according to people who were close to him at the time, profoundly disturbed Serote: the events and aftermath of June 1976, the events that compelled him to abandon not just one fictional project for another but one kind of novel for another, and one kind of politics for another.

Even that formulation misdescribes the situation, for nothing is really abandoned. The transition from existentialist novel to radical political novel is a transition always in process, never completed; just as the first fictional project remains incompletely integrated into the second. What distinguishes *To Every Birth Its Blood* most of all is the presence in it of a whole range of uncompleted processes. Here again, Barbour's assumption of unity, this time at a different level, misleads. We can read her description of Serote as a 'humanist' — leaving aside the question whether Serote would find the epithet a compliment or an insult — as a forlorn, and typically humanist, effort to recontain the radical implications of the novel. More than simply the accuracy or adequacy of the description is at issue here, however, since it is unlikely that any univocal description of Serote's ideological position in the novel would succeed. Just as there is no fixed temporal standpoint in the first part of the novel, so is there no fixed ideological standpoint in the novel as a whole.

Serote, like so many South Africans, was forced by the events of 1976 and 1977 to rethink the norms and categories by which he grasped South Africa, an undertaking that may have been all the more urgent owing to his living in exile at the time. *To Every Birth Its Blood* renders the process, not the result, of the undertaking: the structural fluidity of the novel is matched by its ideological fluidity, and both have as their source the irruption of history into the fictional project.

Mbulelo Mzamane accurately identifies Black Consciousness as 'the tradition . . . within which many of Serote's poems are written',<sup>14</sup> though in point of fact, Serote had begun to publish poetry before the term was widely in use, and the term had ceased to define his position by the time Mzamane's Introduction to his edition of Serote's *Selected Poems* was published. Black Consciousness continued, however, to be Serote's ideological basis right up to the moment of the first fictional project. Indeed, the Soweto uprising is presented in the novel as the highwater mark of Black Consciousness. I have no way of ascertaining the constellation of influences working on Serote at

the moment of Soweto. Perhaps he was in touch with external ANC people; perhaps the main impact on him was simply Soweto itself, or the crushing of Black Consciousness as a major political force in the massive state repression of October 1977, or the very failure of the insurrection to bring about political change:

Dikeledi in those days had believed that something was going to happen . . . Now, there was a sense of loss, a sense of defeat; there were no more fists and shouts of Power.(p.235)<sup>15</sup>

Whatever the case, we can see in *To Every Birth Its Blood* the movement through Black Consciousness towards a recognisably non-racial democratic position. Michael Romano, whose political martyrdom in the novel gives him considerable authority, makes the point explicitly when he says to Dikeledi:

'I want you to understand that colour here must not be the issue. Once we get to understand that, then we can talk on, but I am afraid that you have put too much emphasis on the colour question.' (p.250)

At the risk of unnecessary repetition, I want to stress that we would be misconstruing the novel if we were to impose some sort of simplistic political thematics on the change of ideological stance, on the model of such conventional thematic antinomies as 'being' versus 'becoming' or 'appearance' versus 'reality'. There is no shift from Black Consciousness to an ANC 'line', not even any simple thematised opposition between the two. Instead we get traces of Black Consciousness, and many other ideological strains, right up to the conclusion of the novel. What shifts is the emphasis, as, with the irruption of history into the project, a new ideological position begins to emerge from an earlier one.<sup>16</sup>

A thoroughgoing ideological inquiry into *To Every Birth Its Blood* would have to pursue a wide range of important issues, among them: the presumptive audience for the novel; the possible tendency towards a form of Leninist vanguardism; the representation of women as revolutionary subjects; the smoothing over of class antagonisms in black communities; the passing of political initiative to the youth; Serote's critique of mass political action in favour of small activist cells; the problem of narrative closure in radical fiction; the status of realism in radical fiction and the shift from modernist to realist modes of presentation from Part 1 to Part 2; and, with the figure of Tsi, the presentation of revolutionary commitment as a cure for the divided self.<sup>17</sup> Since, however, my interest is in attempting to think through the implications of the unusual conditions of the work's production rather than in undertaking anything like an exhaustive ideological reading of the novel, I shall confine my comments to a single issue.

Serote's presentation of the 'Movement' is his central effort to synthesize the separate ideological strains of the narrative and thereby arrest ideological fluidity. The Movement, as a point of convergence at which the various forms taken by collective desire for liberation will meet and coalesce, represents the highest outcome of his effort to think his way through the disruption of

Soweto 1976 and to harmonise the two fictional projects. As such, it is the central ideological operator in the novel. Yet the Movement is itself protean in its implications, and fundamentally ambivalent.

By the conclusion of Part 1, Tsi is already 'involved,' or at the very least, in a state of readiness; his abandoning isolation for group commitment is tantamount in the novel to an initiation, a coming of age. The first mention of the Movement comes near the end of Part 1, when Tsi is questioned by the Special Branch. Captain Botha asks him: 'About the Movement. Did you not talk about the Movement?' To which Tsi replies, 'No' (p.157). A link with the ANC is made at Romano's treason trial when he and his twenty-five co-accused are described as 'the people of the Movement' (p.228). In these references the Movement is presented as an organisation, and while a puzzling question put to Oupa by Dikeledi: 'Do you belong to any Movement?' (p.247, emphasis added), would appear to suggest that the term might refer to more than one organisation, other features of the Movement — the functioning of the Movement outside South Africa, the trips people make out of the country for training, the political position attributed to the Movement, and the like — all add together to suggest that the Movement is synonymous with, perhaps in the light of South African censorship a barely disguised code-word for, the ANC.

But there is another dimension to the Movement. We can gain a purchase on this other dimension by examining the operating metaphors through which the Movement is projected. We learn that the Movement is like 'water flowing from a dam, approaching every corner of the country'; like 'the wind' (p.272); and 'like the sea' it 'is deep, is vast' (p.359). Elsewhere we read:

Like an old tree, the Movement spreads and spreads its roots. It entrenches itself in the soil, issuing root after root, to spread and spread and spread. Some roots end up on rocks, baking in the sun. Some end up in sand. The roots spread and spread and spread. The tall tree, spreading its branches all around, gives shade to the weary. (p.326)

Repeatedly, the Movement is conveyed in organic metaphors: it is finally unstoppable because it is part of nature. It can be resisted, but as a natural force, it cannot ultimately be defeated.

Associated with such references is another facet of the Movement — its deep link with 'a people' and their history. So complete is that connection that the Movement virtually is their history since European incursion:

The Movement is old. It is as old as the grave of the first San or Khoikhoi who was killed by a bullet that came from a ship which had anchored at Cape Town to establish a stop station. The Movement is as young as the idea of throwing stones, of hurling one's life at the armed men who believe in God and shoot with guns. The Movement is the eyes which see how poverty is akin to a skeleton. So white. So dry. (p.318)

And again:

The Movement is an idea in the mind of a people; a resolve that it will never accept the process of defeat. Since the settlers first settled, all their laws and wars have succeeded in only postponing the real issue — that the people want and need their land. (p.327)

The Movement, then, performs a variety of powerful mediations, providing fictive and symbolic resolution to the disparate ideological strains generated in the novel. In projecting final victory beyond present defeat, it captures the unshaken optimism Rosa Luxemburg once expressed in her famous remark: 'All revolutions fail, except the last one.' It inserts and naturalises current struggles into a broader historical sweep, and conflates the organisation, with its small militant groups, and the social totality into a single identity. Equally important, it overlays individual choice and agency with historical inevitability, thereby resolving the paradox of praxis and determination. Tsi is, as he acknowledges, saved from his 'drunken escapism' by his commitment to the Movement (p.345), and only through such recruitment does it advance. But on the other hand, its victory is historically prefigured and determined: 'the struggle is forever assured of its victory' (p.284).

These various syntheses appear to provide analytical and political resolution to the immense pressures of the Soweto period. Instead, the analytical and political are shifted to the realm of the metaphoric; the syntheses operate purely tropologically, through the manifold figure of 'the Movement'. The irruption of Soweto 1976 into his fictional project confronted Serote with a crisis that was (in addition to being intensely personal) simultaneously compositional and ideological: the need to narrate, and the need to gain an understanding of, events which left him, like his characters, with the knowledge that 'South Africa will never be the same again' (p.193). The Movement represents the highest pitch of his effort to come to terms with the crisis; what it does instead is reproduce the very disruption it was designed to contain and resolve. Structural and ideological fluidity in *To Every Birth Its Blood* resist closure. History and fictional project, accordingly, remain in volatile solution.

#### NOTES

- 1 Jane Glegg: review of Mongane Serote, *To Every Birth Its Blood*. *Staffrider*. 5.1 (1972). 34-5.
- 2 Marius Schoon: review of Mongane Serote, *To Every Birth Its Blood*. *MEDV Art Ensemble Newsletter*, 4.1, (1982), pp. 35-8.
- 3 Doriane Barbour: 'Mongane Serote: Humanist and Revolutionary,' in *Momentum: On Recent South African Writing*, ed. M J Daymond, J U Jacobs and Margaret Lenta, (Pietermaritzburg, 1982). pp. 171-81.
- 4 Pierré Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, transl. Geoffery Wall (London, 1978), p. 40.
- 5 Mongane, Serote, *To Every Birth Its Blood* (Johannesburg, 1981).
- 6 Stephen Gray, 'An Interview with Nadine Gordimer,' in *Contemporary Literature*. 22:3 (1981): 261.71; p. 269.

- 7 Stephen Gray, 'An Interview with Nadine Gordimer,' p. 269.
- 8 Nadine Gordimer, *Burger's Daughter*, (Harmondsworth, 1979), pp. 346-47.
- 9 André Brink, *A Dry White Season*, (London, 1976).
- 10 In private discussions with the present writer, Sept. 1979.
- 11 Some may feel that the change in fictional projects involved losses as well as gains: the shift to radical political fiction in the second fictional project cost us one of our first modernist novels by a black South African writer.
- 12 Barbour, 'Mongane Serote: Humanist and Revolutionary,' pp. 172-74.
- 13 These terms, taken from Russian Formalism and structuralism respectively, posit a *fabula* or *histoire* as the events of a narrative taken in their causal-sequential order. *Sujet* and *discours*, on the other hand, refer to the artistic selection and arrangement of events.
- 14 Mbulelo Vizikhengo Mzamane: Introduction to Mongane Wally Serote's *Selected Poems*, (Johannesburg, 1982), p. 9
- 15 As this statement suggests, the shift from Black Consciousness gets linked to a critique of the strategy of the 'Power days' (see especially 181-83, 246).
- 16 There is at least one strong anticipation of this shift well before the beginning of Part 2. Early in the novel, during the narrative phase dealing with Tsi's torture, Boykie says, 'I am with the BSO right now, but I realise that it is only a stage, just a stage in our battle to reclaim a home for ourselves' (p.79). The torture sequence, however, is almost certainly in part, and possibly in its entirety, a product of the second fictional project.
- 17 Kelwyn Sole takes up several of these issues in his 'Authorship, Authenticity and the Black Community: The Novels of 1976'.

## Xhosa Ntsomi: The Language of Gesture

PETER THUYNSMA

Our familiarity with Africa's oral tradition may not be far enough advanced to dispense completely with an introduction, but we have, however, reached the point where we can ignore remarks concerning its legitimacy. Those early debates centering around the validity of *oral literature* as a viable term instead of *verbal art* are now well shelved and it seems we can also by-pass the fundamentals of orality and cultural indices. We are now fully equipped to begin building and shaping a critical analysis of such narratives from a literary critical perspective without side-lining an invaluable inter-disciplinary approach. Our critical attention can turn to specific aspects such as that organic bond<sup>1</sup> which exists between story-teller and audience, to explore the nature and devices of language within the full implication of folk context.

Before a discussion of oral narratives can get under way we must acknowledge the artificial nature of our literary examples. In print they have been stripped of their most essential dimension: performance. Deprived of their primary vehicle for communication, in transmutation the nuances and rhythms of the original language have been forfeited. Indeed, a strong case for fieldwork and the acquisition of proficiency in the original language emerges if one wishes to appreciate such tales, let alone comment on them. However, the range of themes and core stories are limited and anthropologists, plus a few literary collectors, have for a time now done exacting work which deserves further recognition. I do not mean to suggest that fieldwork is irrelevant, only that it has become impractical for the general critic to invest the time required to become intimate with a language and its culture so that he may work in its oral tradition (literature written in the original languages is generally so poor in thematic scope that it too would seem barely viable).<sup>2</sup> Yet knowledge of the oral tradition is as imperative as a basic knowledge of the Anglo-Saxon and Medieval periods would be to the student of the so-called 'Great Tradition' of literature. It is also not enough