

**BROKEN HOPES AND FRACTURED DREAMS:
THE POETRY OF ANTHONY NAZOMBE**

**SYNED DALE MAKANI MTHATIWA
BACHELOR OF ARTS (UNIVERSITY OF MALAWI)**

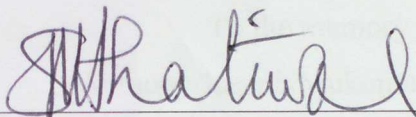
**A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF HUMANITIES,
UNIVERSITY OF MALAWI, IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS IN LITERATURE**



**CHANCELLOR COLLEGE
JULY 2005**

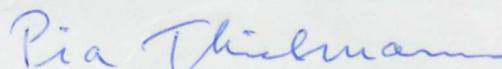
DECLARATIONS

I declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own and has never been presented for any award at this university or elsewhere. Other people's works that have been used in this thesis have been duly acknowledged.

Candidate: 
Syned Dale Makani Mthathiwa

Date: 19.07.05

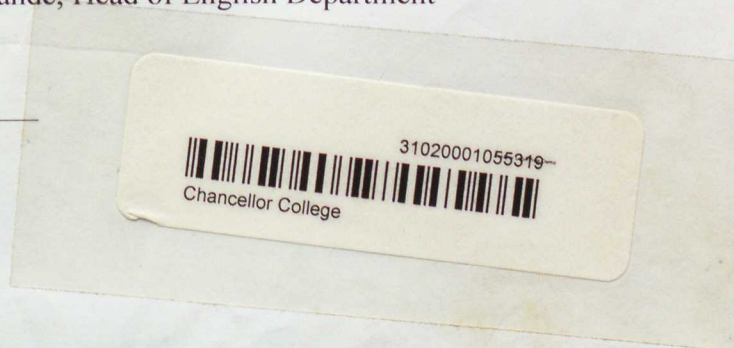
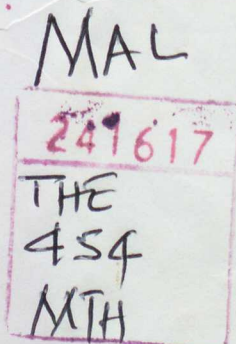
We certify that this thesis has been submitted to the University of Malawi with our approval, as a fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Literature.

Main Supervisor: 
Dr. Pia Thielmann

Date: 19-07-05

Supervisor: 
Mr. Bright Molande, Head of English Department

Date: 19-07-05



DEDICATION

To Emily and Erakani
Your patience was not for nothing

To the memory of
Anthony Joseph Mukomele Nazombe
Your name lives on

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Acknowledgements	1
Abstract	2
Chapter I: Introduction	3
Chapter II: A Voice of Hopelessness and Despair	17
Chapter III: Myth and Tradition in Nazombe's Poetry	51
Chapter IV: Echoes, Influences and Intertextuality	60
List of References	67
Appendix: "No Dreams Here and Other Poems"	75

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am deeply thankful to my supervisor, Dr. Pia Thielmann, for her untiring supervision of this thesis. Her critical comments and invaluable suggestions have helped to shape this thesis into what it is now. I am also grateful to all members of the Department of English, Chancellor College, for their support in various ways during my research and in the course of writing this thesis. In particular, thanks to Mr. Bright Molande (Head of Department) for his critical comments on the thesis and to Mr. damazio Mfuno and Professor Brighton J. Uledi-Kamanga for their encouragement when the going got tough.

I am also thankful for the critical comments, suggestions and reference material I got from Associate Professor Pascal Kishindo, Associate Professor Femi Abodunrin, Professor David Kerr, Mr. Zondiwe Mbano, Professor Eckhard Breitingner and Dr. Kisa Amateshe, and for the useful information from Jack Mapanje and Christopher Heywood. Finally, thanks to my fellow students and colleagues, Ms Timwa Lipenga and Mrs Jessie Kabwila-Kapasula for their supportiveness throughout our period of study and great trials, and to Mr. J. B. Chalera and Mr. H. K. Chabwera of Chancellor College Library and the entire library staff.

ABSTRACT

WNN

Though Anthony Nazombe's poetry has been published in various journals, nationally and internationally, it has received very little critical attention compared to that of other Malawian poets, such as Jack Mapanje, Frank Chipasula, Steve Chimombo and Felix Mnthali, who were writing during the same troubled socio-political environment as he. This thesis is a critical discussion of the poetry of this little known but equally important Malawian poet.

The thesis argues that, unlike that of other Malawian poets, Nazombe's poetry is highly contemplative and probing philosophical. Most, if not all, of Nazombe's poems deal with feelings of hopelessness and despair. The poetry shows a marked disillusionment not only with the leadership but also with humankind and life in general. As such it shows parallels with existential themes and exposes the futility and absurdity of life and humanity's precarious situation on earth.

Like the aforementioned Malawian poets, Nazombe is a social critic. He attacks oppression, exploitation and repression that were rampant during Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda's tyrannical reign in Malawi (1964-1994). He also exposes the poverty that Banda's cohorts tried to hide behind the lie that the country had developed tremendously during Banda's reign, and the post-independence disillusionment and sense of betrayal felt by many Malawians. Furthermore, Nazombe looks at the impermanence of human life on earth and at the issue of love.

With regard to style and technique, Nazombe, like Mapanje and Chimombo, uses myths, metaphors, symbolism and traditional aspects: beliefs, ritual, and national and tribal history. His choice of words and his syntax give his poetry a hopelessly sad tone, though in some poems the tone tends to be humorous and ironic. Echoes and influences from other poets and his readings are also a notable feature of Nazombe's poetry. However, these echoes and influences do not diminish the value and importance of the poetry, given the fact that works of art echo one another and the appreciation of any one poet is the appreciation of his relation to other poets, dead or alive.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The socio-political context of Anthony Nazombe's poetry

Anthony Nazombe can generally be grouped amongst the second generation of Malawian poets in English. This is a group of writers whose poetic skills were honed at the Writers' Workshop or Group that developed at Chancellor College in 1969 and was formally launched in 1970. Though this generation of poets started writing poetry as far back as the 1970s, most of which was published in student magazines such as *Odi* and *Denga*, the poetry never reached maturity until the early 1980s when some of it saw publication in international journals and anthologies. Apart from Nazombe, this generation, which is also called the Chirunga generation, as it coincided with "the university's move from Blantyre to Chirunga Estate at Zomba,"¹ includes such names as Catherine Lipenga, Jika Nkolokosa and Patrick O'Malley, among others.

In academic circles, possibly due to the fact that he does not have a published poetry collection, Nazombe is best known as a critic rather than a poet. His poems are scattered in various journals and anthologies, amongst which are: *Denga*, *Odi*, *Kunapipi*, *Marang*, *The Literary Half-Yearly*, *Caracoa* and *Matatu*. In 1984 he put together his poetry in one collection titled "No Dreams Here and Other Poems." It is this unpublished collection which is the focus of the present study.

As an editor Nazombe edited an anthology of Malawian poetry, *The Haunting Wind: New Poetry from Malawi* (1990), and *Operations and Tears: A New Anthology of Malawian Poetry* (2004). As a critic Nazombe contributed vastly to the appreciation of African poetry in general and Malawian poetry in particular. In his PhD dissertation (1983), for instance, Nazombe looks at myth and socio-political change in the poetry of Jack Mapanje, Frank Chipasula, Steve Chimombo and Felix Mnthali while in his MA thesis (1979) he looked at the labyrinth in Okigbo and James Joyce. His articles on the

¹ Adrian Roscoe, rev. of *The Haunting Wind*, ed. Anthony Nazombe, *Journal of Humanities* 5 (October 1991): 121-126.

poetry of the aforementioned Malawian poets also appear in various publications such as Nzunda and Ross (1995), Ngara (1996), and in various issues of the *Malawian Journal of Humanities*.

The context within which Malawian poetry evolved and developed has been exposed by many authors (Short 1974, Vail and White 1990, 1991, Lwanda 1993, Nazombe 1995, 1996, Moto 2001, among others). Malawian poetry developed within an oppressive regime characterized by stiff censorship laws (Maja-Pearse 1991, 1992). As a result the poetry tended to be cryptic, notoriously obscure in Nazombe's views² and relied heavily on myth and metaphors to elude the censors! For instance, Mapanje says of his own poetry in *Of Chameleons and Gods* (OCAG, 1981):

The verse in this volume spans some ten turbulent years in which I have been attempting to find a voice or voices as a way of preserving some sanity. [...] But the exercise has been, if nothing else, therapeutic; and that's no mean word in our circumstances! ³

Following the introduction of the Censorship and Control of Entertainments Act in 1968, a National Censorship Board was established in 1972 with a mandate to declare publications as undesirable.⁴ The Board, in Tiyaambe Zeleza's words, "discharged its calling with impeccable thoroughness, regularly issuing 'permits' and 'certificates of approval' and declaring numerous publications, pictures, statues and records 'undesirable'."⁵ Records indicate that from 1st August 1968 to 31st August 1979 over 1000 books, 62 periodicals and magazines, 20 films and 43 gramophone records were banned.⁶ Apart from books, periodicals, films and records, Banda's omniscient regime also "censored memories, stories, and words that contested and mocked its singular

² Anthony Nazombe, "The Role of Myth in the Poetry of Steve Chimombo," *New Writing From Southern Africa*, ed. Emmanuel Ngara (London: James Currey, 1996) 93.

³ Jack Mapanje, introduction, *Of Chameleon and Gods* [OCAG] (Oxford: Heinemann, 1981) n. p.

⁴ Francis Moto, *Trends in Malawian Literature* (Zomba: Chancellor College Publications, 2001) 5.

⁵ Tiyaambe Zeleza, "Banishing Words and Stories: Censorship in Banda's Malawi," *CODESRIA Bulletin* 1 (1996): 11.

⁶ *Catalogue of Banned Publications, Cinematograph Pictures and Records: From 1st August, 1968 to 31st August 1979*. Zomba: Government Printer, 1979.

authority, banishing and imprisoning numerous opponents, real and imaginary, hunting and murdering exiled 'rebels' [. . .]."⁷ Jack Mapanje (1997) leaves one in no doubt that it was this kind of censorship that saw him in the notorious Mikuyu Maximum Security Prison for three and a half years after what he calls "my peeping into the dictator's drawer"⁸ (exposing the evils of the Banda regime). Moreover, censorship which became "an iron veil to hide the lies, deformities and fantasies of a ruthless, unproductive power" begot self-censorship, "a numbing collective fear of meaningful social conversation, of public discourse, of openly questioning the way things are and imagining what they ought to be."⁹

Censorship in Malawi had its own dramatic moments. Leroy Vail and Landeg White observe that Mapanje recalls an occasion when Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda recommended to his cabinet a book given to him at Meharry College in the United States of America, which was in fact amongst the banned books in Malawi.¹⁰ It is from this background that Mapanje's and Chimombo's earlier poetry (*OCAG* [1981] and *Napolo Poems*, *NP* [1987] respectively) and Nazombe's poetry should be read.

As a result of the uncompromising censorship laws and the ruthlessness of the Banda regime in dealing with its critics many Malawians wrote escapist literature (the kind of literature that failed to address the crucial issues of misrule and corruption by hiding in the safe subjects of love and promiscuity, for instance, to avoid a frontal assault with the leadership) while others chose to remain silent. As I have already observed

⁷ Zeleza 10.

⁸ Jack Mapanje, "The Changing Fortunes of the Writer in Africa?" *Writing and Africa*, eds. Mpalive-Hangson Msiska and Paul Hyland (Harlow, Essex: Addison Wesley, 1997) 219. It is difficult, however, to link Mapanje's arrest to the activities of the National Censorship Board considering that his first collection of poetry, *Of Chameleons and Gods*, was published in 1981, six years before his arrest on 25th September 1987. Although the book was later banned, Mapanje was never arrested immediately and continued to teach at Chancellor College, a constituent college of the University of Malawi. The real reason for Mapanje's arrest may remain secret but one thing is obvious: he was arrested on political grounds.

⁹ Zeleza 10.

¹⁰ Leroy Vail and Landeg White, "Of Chameleons and Paramount Chiefs: The Case of Malawian Poet Jack Mapanje," *Review of African Political Economy* 48 (Autumn 1990): 43.

before, those poets who refused to be silenced chose a private and cryptic, vague, metaphor-ridden and in some cases, very obscure mode of writing to elude or outwit the censors and ensure their safety. This is not to say the meanings of the poems were lost, however. A perceptive eye could see the threads of protest, irony, grim humour and mockery of the leaders and the system embedded in the carefully chosen words, metaphors and rhetorical questions. Of course, in some cases there were fierce sparks of daring in some of the poems. Good examples here are Jack Mapanje's "On His Royal Blindness Paramount Chief Kwangala" and "When This Carnival Finally Closes"¹¹ which clearly reveal the culprit of the poet's scathing lines, namely the former president of Malawi, Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda.

It should be mentioned here that, ironically, censorship in Malawi had its positive side. It helped Malawians to produce the kind of poetry whose richness in meaning, metaphors and gripping sense of humour defies time and space. It is the kind of poetry whose witticism and appeal are still unmatched in spite of the fact that the crippling censorship laws were weakened when the country attained multiparty democracy in 1994. It can boldly be stated that Malawi is yet to produce poets of the calibre of Mapanje, Mnthali, Chimombo and Nazombe. This perhaps underscores Femi Abodunrin's observation that "Difficulties have always brought out probably the best in human beings and writing is not excluded from that."¹²

Nazombe, like many other poets who were writing during the troubled times in Malawian history, resorts to private symbolism, use of myths and metaphors, and, ironically, he sometimes even boards on "notorious obscurity," a term he uses to describe the work of his fellow poet, Steve Chimombo.¹³ Surprisingly, although he was writing even during the 1970s and 80s, a period dubbed the "turbulent years" in Malawian history by Jack Mapanje,¹⁴ Nazombe's poetry has not received the critical

¹¹ Mapanje, *OACG* 57, 61.

¹² Quoted by Mzati Nkolokosa, "Nurturing Brains Behind Bars," *The Nation*, 29 August, 2003: 13.

¹³ See Nazombe, "The Role of Myth," 1996. Nazombe's own "notorious obscurity" has to do with the socio-political background against which he was writing. Upon reading the poetry, one discovers that his cryptic and obscure poems are the most interesting as they engage one's curiosity and whet one's desire to unravel or discover more about them.

¹⁴ Mapanje, introduction, *OACG*, 1981.

attention it deserves. Most critics were/are too happy to turn their attention to such poets as Mapanje, Chipasula, Chimombo and at times Mnthali, even when it means repeating what other critics have said, thereby avoiding exploring new ground in Nazombe. Discussing the poetry of familiar and famous poets is good as it enriches their exploits and reveals hitherto ignored aspects of their poetry. But where this means ignoring new voices that may echo the same tune or sing a different one, it is detrimental to the much needed and desired literary development of a country and often leads to myopia. There have been attempts to comment on Nazombe's poetry but these are piecemeal and say nothing substantial about his poetry. I am yet to see a work that discusses Nazombe's poetry at length other than simply making unsubstantiated claims – "he is deeply spiritual and writes 'in response to an inner urge to co-create with God'"¹⁵ – or mentioning the fact that he is published widely in national and international journals.¹⁶

It is my conviction that although Nazombe's poetry has received little critical attention, its value cannot escape the attention of a careful reader. In his poems Nazombe tackles social and political issues just as the poets of his generation do. What distinguishes his poetry is its gloomy and contemplative tone, its quizzical stance on the meaning/lessness of life and the depressing effect it has upon the reader. A careful study of this poetry will be a great contribution to the appreciation of African literature in general and Malawian literature in particular.

Grey areas in the study of Malawian poetry

As I have mentioned above, for a long time now critical works on Malawian poetry have focussed on such poets as Jack Mapanje, Frank Chipasula, Felix Mnthali, Steve Chimombo and, to a certain extent, David Rubadiri. The poetry itself has often been seen as poetry of protest against political oppression and that which offers a social vision for a country dogged by tyranny and dictatorship. Mapanje is best known for his

¹⁵ Douglas Killam and Ruth Rowe, eds., 1.6.03. {<http://africadatabase.org/people/profiles/profilesforperson15971.html>}.

¹⁶ Adrian Roscoe and Mpalive-Hangson Msiska, *The Quiet Chameleon: Modern Poetry from Central Africa* (London: Hans Zell, 1992) 3.

criticism of Banda, Chipasula for his call to arms against the regime and Chimombo for his use of myths as a way of finding his identity.

When one critically looks at what has been going on in the critical circles certain questions begin to emerge. For instance, are the aforementioned poets the only ones in Malawi whose works merit serious study? A related question is: Are social criticism, protest and social vision the only thematic concerns of Malawian poetry?

Whenever critics mention Nazombe as a poet, more often than not, very little or nothing is said about his poetry. As I have already said before, Adrian Roscoe and Hangson Mpalive-Msiska in *The Quiet Chameleon* (1992) observe that Nazombe is published widely in international journals but they say nothing about the poetry itself. The question that immediately comes to mind is: What does Nazombe write on? Similarly, again as I have also already mentioned, Douglass Killam and Ruth Rowe observe that the Writers' Workshop at Chancellor College of which Nazombe was a member influenced his development as a poet. They consider him a deeply spiritual poet who seeks to co-create with God. But this says nothing about his style and thematic pursuits. How is this deep spirituality, assuming the claim is true, revealed in the poetry? How different from or similar to is Nazombe compared with other Malawian poets?

This study is an attempt to provide answers to such questions. It attempts to explore the range of subjects addressed in, and the style of, Nazombe's poetry. The study's claim to freshness is that it discusses the poetry of a hitherto ignored and little known Malawian poet whose poems, though scattered in various publications, reveal a common thread weaving through them, a thread which this study seeks to unravel and expose.

Pertinent questions for the study

The general objective of this study is to trace and analyse the leitmotifs of hopelessness and despair in the poetry of Anthony Nazombe. Specifically, the study investigates Nazombe's thematic concerns. What themes does Nazombe deal with in his poetry? Does he, like his counterparts, preoccupy himself with the issue of political oppression and exploitation? The study will constantly draw attention to the parallels

between Nazombe's and existential themes (absurdity, meaninglessness, hopelessness, despair, loneliness, suicide, death, anguish, finitude, and facticity).

It is also the objective of this study to analyse Nazombe's poetic style and technique. Malawian poetry of the 1970s and 1980s has gained renown and notoriety for its private tone and obscurity. Could the same be the case with Nazombe's poetry? Or does he exhibit other stylistic devices than those of his counterparts? The study is therefore going to compare the poetry of Nazombe with that of his counterparts, Mapanje, Chimombo, Chipasula and Mnthali. With Mapanje the concern is with the poetry that appears in his *OACG* and with Chimombo we are concerned with the poetry in *NP*. This comparative aspect shall help us to determine Nazombe's place amongst the Malawian poets of the 1970s and 1980s.

Distinctive features of Nazombe's poetry

As has already been observed above, Malawian poetry of the 1970s, 1980s and even of the early 1990s has been called poetry of protest against oppression and exploitation. One critic has gone so far as to call it "Poetry for Democracy in Malawi."¹⁷ Like his counterparts with a calling in poetry, Nazombe is a social critic. His poetry exposes the follies of dictatorship and tyranny. It reveals its postcoloniality by showing a pessimistic view of post-independent Africa and by rejecting "the nationalist project of the postcolonial national bourgeoisie,"¹⁸ a nationalism which by the time of writing (1970s and 80s) had obviously failed. Through its themes of "detention and torture, tyranny [. . .] despotism, exile and alienation and disillusionment with the leadership"¹⁹ the poetry "challenges the legitimating"²⁰ narrative of the Malawi Congress Party (the only party in Malawi during Dr Banda's reign).

¹⁷ Reuben Makayiko Chirambo, "Poetry for Democracy in Malawi," *Southern Review* 11.3 (January, 1998).

¹⁸ Kwame Anthony Appiah, "The Postcolonial and the Postmodern," *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*, eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (London and New York: Routledge, 1995, repr. 1995) 122.

¹⁹ Chirambo 17.

²⁰ Kwame Anthony Appiah, 123. In its rejection of legitimating narratives the poetry shows parallels with postmodernism which has "obvious distrust toward claims about truth, ethics, or beauty being rooted in anything other than individual perception and group perception" ("Postmodernism," From Wikipedia, the

But unlike that of other Malawian poets, Nazombe's poetry is highly contemplative and probingly philosophical. Most, if not all, of Nazombe's poems deal with feelings of hopelessness and despair. The poetry shows a marked disillusionment not only with the leadership but also with humankind and life in general. As such it shows parallels with existential themes and exposes the futility and absurdity of life and humanity's precarious situation on earth. In terms of style and technique, Nazombe, like Mapanje and Chimombo, uses myths, metaphors, symbolism and traditional aspects: beliefs, ritual, and national and tribal history. However, his powerful diction, hopelessly sad tone and direct verbal rendition put him in a class of his own.

Nature of this research and the approach to the poetry

This study is analytical in nature. It critically analyses Anthony Nazombe's poetry from an existential standpoint. It focuses on the poems that appear in the unpublished collection "No Dreams Here and Other Poems" (1984). Most, if not all, poems by Nazombe that appear in various anthologies are available in this collection. For example the poems in his anthology, *The Haunting Wind*, namely: "Guardian Fly," "In Memoriam," "For a Singer 1981," "A Kind of Death" and "The Racket" appear in "No Dreams Here," and so do "Emigrant Pole," "Modes of Freedom (After Annemarie Heywood)," "Blind Terror," "This Temple," "Song for a Hunter," "Tuberculosis," "Misty Presences," "Battle for Chingwe's Hole" and "Black Cat"²¹ which are in his *Operations and Tears*. The study also analyses Nazombe's style and technique to see how he brings his themes to life.

This being a qualitative research, much time was spent reading and analysing the poetry. Library research was also conducted to identify secondary sources relevant to the study. Further, Nazombe's close friends in the world of academics (Jack Mapanje and

Free Encyclopedia, 28.6.05 {http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Early_usage_of_the_term}n. p.). Another notable link between postmodernist and postcolonial theories is that, with regard to writing, both theories argue for expansion and celebration of fragmentation and multiplicity rather than the fear of it since both are interested in decentering centres.

²¹ This poem is titled "Black Kitten in "No Dreams Here" (1984).

Pádraig Ó Máille) and his MA supervisor at Sheffield, Christopher Heywood, were sent interview questions in trying to buttress the existential influences on him. Pádraig Ó Máille did not respond while Mapanje asked for Nazombe's poem "Guardian Fly" on which his response would be based but the awaited response never came. As for Christopher Heywood, he made it clear that he did not think that Nazombe had any existentialist influences at Sheffield. Samples of Nazombe's poems were also administered to two fellow MA students and two members of the English Department. The responses of these people who basically lamented Nazombe's obscurity have been helpful in this study.

Nazombe's collection is divided into four sections corresponding with the stages of his development as a writer and to the particular experiences or events that informed and inspired them. The first section is titled "Voices" and has sixteen poems. These poems address a wide range of issues such as political oppression, personal search for identity, and tradition. The second section titled "Of Love and Despair" comprises of thirteen poems which predominantly deal with issues of love and its attendant problems while the third section titled "Survival" has twelve poems which address the political situation in the country during Dr. Banda's rule. Finally, section four, "Seasons Abroad," has sixteen poems which deal with the poet's experiences at Sheffield in England where he went to do his MA and PhD degrees. Some of the poems in this section also deal with global issues and the political situation back home.

Structurally, this analysis does not follow Nazombe's division for some of the themes overlap between sections. Chapter Two discusses themes in the poetry across the board. It also draws parallels between Nazombe's themes and existential themes. Chapter Three analyses Nazombe's poetic style and technique, and Chapter Four assesses and evaluates the poetry and concludes my discussion.

In this essay I use both a historical critique and what T. S. Eliot calls "the Impersonal theory of poetry."²² There is some truth in the Impersonal theory of poetry. However, it

²² T[homas] S[tearns] Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Artist," *Contemporary Literary Criticism: Literary and Cultural Studies*, 3rd ed, eds. Robert Con Davis and Ronald Schleifer (New York and London: Longman, 1986) 30. The Impersonal theory of poetry holds that in his/her poetry "the poet has not a 'personality' to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which

ignores the fact that "literature does not grow or develop in a vacuum; it is given impetus, shape, direction and even area of concern by social, political and economic forces in a particular society,"²³ and that, in the views of Étienne Balibar and Pierre Macherey, literature "does not 'fall from the heavens,' the product of mysterious 'creation,' but is the product of social practice (rather a particular social practice) [. . .]."²⁴ By trying to universalise the poetry, by separating the poet from the poetry, the theory ignores the particular socio-political and economic background against which the poetry was written. Historical critique takes care of these problems. Nevertheless, this approach too runs the risk of equating the emotions in the poem to those of the poet and attempting to read the experiences in the poem(s) as those of the poet. This is taken care of by the Impersonal theory. It is for this reason that this study makes use of both approaches. The historical approach is particularly relevant for the study as it seeks to analyse the themes and style in the poetry of an African poet. Wole Soyinka rightly observed that "the artist has always functioned in African society as the record of the mores and experiences of his society and as the voice of vision in his time."²⁵ As such, the study does not shy away from "identifying actual references to history – allusions to actual people, political events, civic upheavals, economic trends, and so on."²⁶ Where I see no risk of losing a historical, social and economic factor or an allusion essential for the purposes of this

are important for the man may take no place in the poetry, and those which become important in the poetry may play quite a negligible part in the man, the personality" (Eliot 31). Historical critique on the other hand seeks to clarify a text "by identifying actual references to history – allusions to actual people, political events, civic upheavals, economic trends, and so on. This effort locates the text as a historical phenomenon." This approach also seeks to "describe the author/artist as having a past made up of certain events and, in light of that past, a predisposition to write in a certain manner and style." Furthermore, the approach seeks "to grasp a literary work as it reflects the historical forces that shaped it initially." (Robert Con Davis and Ronald Schleifer, "Historical Critique," *Contemporary Literary Criticism* 433).

²³ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Homecoming: Essays on African and Caribbean Literature, Culture and Politics* (London: Heinemann, 1972) xv.

²⁴ Quoted by Davis and Schleifer 435.

²⁵ Quoted by Kathleen B. Fatton, "The Novels of Alex La Guma: The Representation of Political Conflict," PhD diss., U of Notre Dame, 1984, 1.

²⁶ See footnote 22.

study I use the Impersonal theory. The term poet-protagonist should therefore alert the reader to the use of this theory while the term poet and the author's name tell the reader that the historical critique is being used.

From what I have said so far, the reader should be able to guess my answer to the question raised by Michel Foucault who supports the Impersonal theory: "What does it matter who speaks?" in his "Who Is an Author?"²⁷ It both matters and does not matter. It depends on what one's specific goals are in one's analysis of the work in question. This being the case, no attempt is made in this essay to privilege any one approach over the other.

Significance of the study

This study is significant in three major respects. Firstly, it analyses the poetry of an ignored Malawian poet whose poetry is as highly imaginative and critical as that of his well-known counterparts. It is my belief that any attempt to analyse or discuss newly published works or ignored works is a big step forward in appreciating and promoting Malawian literature. Further, this study is going to be a new source of information adding to the stock of critical studies on Malawian poetry.

Existentialism vis-à-vis Nazombe's poetry

Nazombe's characteristic disillusionment with life (hopelessness, absurdity and despair) has prompted me to turn to existentialism in an attempt to explain the underlying theoretical basis of Nazombe's poetry. This is in full awareness of the relationship between existentialism and postmodernism. Like existentialism, postmodernism is a revolt against traditional Western Philosophy which put emphasis on reason and its ability to give absolute truth. Both existentialism and postmodernism reject G. W. F. Hegel's Absolute spirit; Newtonian physics, especially his Principle of Universal Causality; and the determinism of Baruch Spinoza and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz.

²⁷ Michel Foucault, "Who Is an Author?" *Contemporary Literary Criticism* 342-353.

Further, I am aware that both postmodernism and existentialism claim that objectivity is an illusion and see meaning as arbitrary, relative and subjective.²⁸ They hold a pessimistic view of life which they see as empty and meaningless. But instead of dealing with postmodernism I have chosen to deal with existentialism which forms the philosophical basis of postmodernism²⁹ for I believe that it has more to offer than its philosophical product, postmodernism.

Existentialism, which can be defined³⁰ here as a philosophy of existence, is a philosophy that gained popularity amongst continental thinkers and writers “during the Second World War, when Europe found itself in a crisis and [was] faced with death and destruction [. . .].”³¹ The generally accepted fact about existentialism is that it is a philosophy which is concerned “with the human person in the drama of the ‘human condition,’ that is, the life of human beings as it is immersed in all the vagaries of a day-by-day existence.”³² Man in existentialism is viewed as possessing both reason and passions. As Sartre observed, man is “a useless passion” in the sense that he keeps searching for meaning in an otherwise meaningless world, perhaps because unaware that “man is condemned to his own absurdity.”³³ Existentialists believe that man is his own

²⁸ With regard to postmodernism’s rejection of truth and objectivity, Kwame Anthony Appiah sees a connection between the post in postmodernism and the post in postcolonialism. For him, both posts challenge “legitimizing narratives of truth and objectivity” (Kwame Anthony Appiah 123).

²⁹ Chris Lang, “A Brief History of Literary Theory IV,” 28.6.05 {<http://www.xenos.org/essays/lithry5.htm>} n. p.

³⁰ Many writers agree that existentialism is difficult to define because the term has been vulgarised to the extent that it has come to mean almost nothing at all. Some people consider existentialism as “the title of a set of philosophical ideals that emphasise the existence of the human being, the lack of meaning and purpose in life, and the solitude of human existence” (Tanweer Akran, “Essays on Existentialism,” *The New Nation*, March 7 and 21, 1986, 3.10.04 {<http://www.columbia.edu/~ta63/exist.htm>}). However they all agree that as a philosophy it begins from man rather than from nature. It is a philosophy of the subject and not object (Edith Kern, *Existential Thought and Fictional Technique* [New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970], John Macquarrie, *Existentialism: An Introduction, Guide and Assessment* [London: The Penguin Group, 1972]).

³¹ Tanweer Akran 1.

³² Albert Hakim, introduction, “Jean-Paul Sartre 1905-1980,” *Historical Introduction to Philosophy*, ed. and comp. Albert Hakim (New York: Macmillan, 1987) 683.

³³ Albert Hakim 684, 687.

creator in the sense that he is the sole determinant of the direction or course of his life in a hostile and indifferent world. This sounds anti-Christian or atheistic. But an existentialist need not be an atheist. He may believe in the existence of God while admitting the futility of life, for example, the existentialists Karl Jaspers and Gabriel Marcel were professed Catholics³⁴ while Jaspers and Heidegger were neither conventional Christians nor atheists.³⁵

The major themes in existentialism are freedom of choice and responsibility. Existentialists hold that "existence precedes essence." By this they mean that, in the words of Sartre, "man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards."³⁶ It is choices (tastes) that define him. As such man is in essence his own creator. Existentialism "puts every man in possession of himself as he is, and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his shoulders."³⁷ For existentialists man is condemned to be free and what he becomes later in life – his essence – is a result of the free choices he makes: what to do and when, what to believe and what not, where to go and how, and so on. In this process of choice, man, having no guide of how to make choices, is faced with anguish and despair, for responsibility is part of the freedom of choice. Anxiety, nausea, finitude, boredom, death and the cruelty of life are some of the themes in existentialism.

Although existentialism has been accused of subjectivity there is no attempt in this study to defend the philosophy. The major concern with existentialism here is to show that existential aspects find expression in Nazombe's poetry.

Since in any discussion of poetry it is inevitable to comment on style and/or technique, it should be understood that in my attempts to describe, interpret and evaluate Nazombe's poetry I shall be using stylistics. By stylistics I mean, in Leech's words, "the study of literary style" or "the study of the use of language in literature."³⁸ True to

³⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, "The Meaning of Existence (from Existentialism and Humanism)," *Historical Introduction to Philosophy* 689.

³⁵ Macquarrie 20.

³⁶ Sartre 690.

³⁷ Sartre 690.

³⁸ Geoffrey N. Leech, *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry* (London and Harlow: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd., 1969) 1.

Michael Short's words, the way I go about analysing the poems stylistically "depends partly on what [I am] trying to achieve [. . .]."³⁹ Technique is understood in this paper as "the sum of working methods or special skills" of a writer.⁴⁰

³⁹ Michael (Mick) Short, "To Analyse a Poem Stylistically: 'To Paint a Water Lily' by Ted Hughes," *Twentieth Century Poetry: From Text to Context*, ed. P. Verdonk (N.p: Routledge, 1994) 10.

⁴⁰ C. Hugh Holman and William Harmon, *A Handbook to Literature*, 5th ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1986) 499.

CHAPTER II

A VOICE OF HOPELESSNESS AND DESPAIR

This chapter investigates Nazombe's thematic concerns. It shows that the themes that Nazombe tackles in his poetry focus on feelings of hopelessness and despair and expose the futility, meaninglessness and absurdity of human life. The chapter also maintains that Nazombe's themes show parallels with existential themes, a thing that makes the poetry qualify as existential poetry and the poet himself as an existential writer.⁴¹

In the first poem of his collection titled "Voice," Nazombe deals with the therapeutic function of literature and, by extension, the political intolerance in Banda's Malawi. In the poem he shows how carefully one was supposed to choose one's words in an oppressive "omniscient regime" that "censored memories, stories and words that contested and mocked its singular authority," a regime that "waged an endless war against plurality, against voices that told different stories or sang different songs, stories or songs that did not glorify the everlasting King's infinite wisdom."⁴² The poet here shows how carefully, cautiously and meticulously he chooses the words for his poetry – to express his experiences, words which might not get him into trouble with the authorities.

I juggle with word-sounds,
Sift mountains of garbage
In an attempt to make meaning.

⁴¹ These are writers in whose works we identify the most striking resemblance to existentialism regardless of whether they had heard of the movement or not. Writers whose works show, for instance, "the alienation and strangeness of man in his world," "the contradictoriness, feebleness, and contingency of human existence" or "a pervading sense of the immanence of death and of the nothingness underlying all life." (R. W. Horton and H. W. Edwards, *Backgrounds of American Literary Thought*, 3rd ed. [New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1974] 512-513 and Macquarrie 262-263).

⁴² Zeleza 10.

The care or caution here is necessary for self-preservation and so is the labour underlined by the phrases “juggle with word-sounds,” “Sift mountains of garbage” and groping for a voice. The image of mountains of garbage also underlines the obstacles that the poet has to surmount. That the feelings and experiences in need of expression are enormous is evidenced by the hyperbolic expression “heaving forces,” which require a seismograph to record (7-8). The earthquake imagery here strengthens our awareness of the poet’s inner turmoil (cracked inside) that needs expression or venting to strike an equilibrium or a balanced state of mind and feelings. The therapeutic aspect of poetry here is evidently taken after Mapanje who in the introduction to his *OCAG* (1981) said his poetry was an attempt to find a voice to preserve his sanity (the equilibrium in Nazombe). As such, the term voice here as in Mapanje, according to Nazombe, must be understood as “the requirement of the writer’s style and the development of a coherent world-view.”⁴⁴ Thus, Nazombe in this poem requires proper style and a coherent world-view to effect communication with the reader.

By extension, the poem also reveals the troubled period (1970s and 80s) during which the poems in this collection were produced, and the disillusionment of the poet with the system that denied everybody the freedom of expression until the pent-up emotions threatened to break the floodgates and drown the individual’s sanity. As such, by writing poetry the poet seeks “both joy and necessary solace.”⁴⁵

⁴³ All page references of Anthony Nazombe’s poems are to “No Dreams Here and Other Poems,” Zomba: 1984. In the essay page numbers are preceded by the letter “p” while line numbers are either preceded by a colon (when they appear together with page numbers) or simply appear in brackets.

⁴⁴ Anthony Nazombe, “Malawian Poetry in English From 1970 to the Present Day: A Study of Myth and Social Political Change in the Work of Steve Chimombo, Jack Mapanje, Frank Chipasula and Felix Mnthali,” PhD diss., Sheffield U, 1983, 230.

⁴⁵ Don Burness, “The poetry of Antonio Jacinto and Jose Craveirinha: Journeys Beyond Survival,” *Beyond Survival: African Literature and the Search for New Life*, eds. Kofi Anyidoho, Abena P. A. Busia and Anne V. Adams (Trenton and Asmara: Africa World Press, 1999) 252.

On a different level, the poem sounds like an invocation. The poet is invoking his goddess-muse in the manner of Okigbo⁴⁶ to grant him the secret voice that he requires as a poet or seer, the kind of voice that will enable him to effectively record and communicate his feelings and experiences. This aspect of "the poet looking for direction and seeking to be heard"⁴⁷ is betrayed by the last two stanzas of the poem where we hear the poet declaring:

I need a seismograph
To record the heaving forces
That crack the inside,

A word to arrange, rearrange
Or even destroy, so as
To maintain equilibrium. (p. 2)

The reference to the "word" also reminds one of Okigbo's "watchword" in "Heavensgate: I The Passage." In this connection we might say that the poet is yearning for a password to the secret poetic world where he shall be in full communion with his goddess-muse. The strategic placing of the poem at the beginning of the collection supports this reading. The success of the invocation or the success of the poet in finding a voice and communicating his experiences shall be judged by the success of the poems that follow.

The political intolerance, oppression and exploitation alluded to in "Voice" find clear expression in the next poem, "No Dreams Here" (p. 3), the title poem of the collection. Again situated where it is, the poem warns the reader what to expect in the poetry, namely hopelessness and despair. The "here" of the title could refer to the poet's home country, Malawi, as well as to Africa and the world as a whole, while "dreams" refer to hopes and visions for the future. The title of the poem unequivocally announces the hopelessness and despair that pervades the poem, the country, the continent and the world at large. The opening lines, "Aspirations mounted on doubtful foundations/

⁴⁶ Anthony Nazombe, "Meaning in Okigbo's Poetry," *Odi: A Journal of Literature from Malawi* III.1 (June 1978): 35-36.

⁴⁷ Nazombe, "Meaning in Okigbo's Poetry," 36.

Evaporate with dawn;"(1-2) have a particularly interesting reference to Malawi and Africa. With regard to the former the "dawn" in the poem refers to Banda's slogan "Kwacha!" (It's dawn!). The slogan was meant to show that with the independence of Malawi and with Banda as president sun/light (freedom, peace and happiness) had come to the former British colony. But the poem spells out the disillusionment that followed closely at the heels of the country's independence as we are told that the aspirations of the people "Evaporate with dawn." One immediately has in mind the cabinet crisis that erupted within days after independence on July 6, 1964.⁴⁸

With regard to Africa, "dawn" refers to the dawn of independence in Africa as a whole. In this case, the first two lines of the poem show that the dawn of independence offered Africans the opposite of their expectations. The people's hopes for freedom from oppression and exploitation, peace and harmony were soon dashed. In many African countries "the dawn of independence did not bring the sun, but years and years of darkness, of civil war, of death, slaughter, suffering."⁴⁹ The poem therefore spells out the post-independence disenchantment that closely followed independence when the emergent leaders betrayed the hopes of the people who had just shed the shackles of colonialism. A trend that made Ayi Kwei Armah to resignedly observe:

⁴⁸ "It began on 26 July with a speech by President Banda on his return from the Cairo summit of the Organisation of African Unity in which he attacked unnamed members of his cabinet for questioning his policies" (Vail and White, "Of Chameleons," 32). This later led to the dismissal of several so-called rebel ministers, Kanyama Chiume, Orton Chirwa, Augustine Bwanausi and Rose Chibambo. In sympathy with the dismissed ministers, Yatuta Chisiza, Willie Chokani and later Henry Masauko Chipembere resigned. Two insurrections were consequently launched by Chipembere and Chisiza to try to depose Banda but he (Banda) squashed them both and proceeded to build his hegemony. (See also Leroy Vail and Landeg White, *Power and the Praise Poem: South African Voices in History* [Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1991], Bakili Muluzi et al, *Democracy with a Price: The History of Malawi Since 1900* [Blantyre: Jhango Heinemann, 1999], John Lwanda, *Kamuzu Banda of Malawi: A Study in Promise, Power and Paralysis {Malawi Under Dr. Banda (1961-1993)}* [Bothwell, Glasgow: Dudu Nsomba Publication, 1993] and Philip Short, *Banda*, London: Routledge, 1974, among others).

⁴⁹ Don Burness 253.

There is no difference [. . .]. No difference at all between the white men and [. . .] the apes of the apes, our Party men. And after their reign is over, there will be no difference ever.⁵⁰

It is not surprising perhaps that the aspirations evaporate for they were mounted/based "on doubtful foundations" in the first place. One may justifiably ask: How sure were the people that the leaders, some of whom had spent many years abroad, would fulfil their hopes and aspirations? To bring it to the context of Malawi on which the interpretation that follows is based, one wonders: How sure were Malawians that Banda, who had spent forty years away from home, would translate their dreams into reality? It was not surprising then that soon after independence life assumed the qualities of a nightmare as "Hopes clasped to sleep's heart/Crumble[d] and dissolve[d] in the sunlight" (3-4).

More disturbing is the fact that young men who are the leaders of tomorrow are left hopeless in this dungeon that was Banda's Malawi: "Young men no longer dream dreams" (5). The future never seemed to offer better prospects for the young while the old could no longer play their proverbial advisory role as they "succumbed to wrinkles" (7). They were equally helpless and hopeless, a situation strongly captured in the sepulchral metaphor: "Ant-eaten crosses sagging over earth-mounds" (8).⁵¹ The images of death and interment here underscore the bleak atmosphere and rot in a society whose future is uncertain. Moreover, the picture of the elders who have succumbed to wrinkles reminds us of Mapanje's persona in "The New Platform Dances,"⁵² a man who is equally

⁵⁰ Ayi Kwei Armah, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1968) 89.

⁵¹ The ruthlessness of Banda's regime produced fear-induced silence in many Malawians. Sam Mpasu captures memorably the political atmosphere in the First Republic when he says:

It is true that we had what looked like peace. But it was the peace of the cemetery. It was enforced silence which was misunderstood for peace. Our lips were sealed by fear and death. Our pens were silenced by long jail terms without trial. It is true that we had what looked like stability. But it was the kind of stability which is caused by overwhelming force. When the thick boot is on the neck of a person who is prone on the ground, there can be no movement. The jails were full and murders were rampant. The murderers were above the law.

Sam Mpasu, *Political Prisoner* 3/75 (Harare: African Publishing Group, 1995) 2.

⁵² Mapanje, *OCAG* 12.

helpless in the face of the ruthless regime as he can only watch as traditional dances are being corrupted.

The ruthlessness of the first republic is well captured in the third stanza where

Nightmares take shape

In the tortured marriage of flesh and metal;

Existence hangs on a thread

Dangles precariously from old penny pieces. (10-14)

There is special reference here to the long detentions without trial (“tortured marriage/Of flesh and metal”) and the politically orchestrated murders that rendered life uncertain. The images of uncertainty are carried into the fourth stanza which captures the robotic nature of life at a time when Malawians were reduced to the level of zombies⁵³ and dumb robots who were marched almost daily into “holes” (22) – prisons – from which they emerged “red-eyed” (22) after the ordeal. But this emergence was too late. It was already “sundown” (23) which suggests that the society and its people have already undergone a symbolic death. The forces of evil represented by the regime had triumphed since it was too late for the victims to do something worthwhile with their lives. Having lost their most productive years in prison they were as good as dead.

If we take the “here” of the title to stand for the world at large, the poem immediately assumes an unmistakable existential stance. It captures the despair of finding oneself in a hostile and indifferent world with no one to turn to for guidance as the elders who are supposed to play this role have succumbed to wrinkles. One is therefore left alone to map out one’s life amidst the dangers and uncertainties looming above one’s head. The “fundamental hopelessness [and despair] of human existence”⁵⁴ is here underlined and made palpable by the alliteration in the line “Young men no longer *dream dreams*” (5, emphasis mine).⁵⁵ The sombre mood created by the sad tone that the poet

⁵³ Adewale Maja-Pearce titled his article on censorship in Malawi “In the Land of the Zombies,” *Index on Censorship* 20.9 (October 1991): 9-12.

⁵⁴ James Park, “Existential Despair: Floating Down the River of Despair.” *Our Existential Predicament: Loneliness, Depression, Anxiety and Death*, Chap. 10, 3.8.04 {<http://www.tc.umn.edu/~parkx032/XP253.html>}.

⁵⁵ Nazombe evidently took these lines from Joel 2 verse 28 which partly reads

adopts in this poem and many others, as we shall see later, makes him share the criticism levelled at existentialists that there is a kind of morbidity in their outlook of human life.⁵⁶

Another poem that shows post-independence disenchantment is the unequivocally titled “Dawn” (p. 11). This poem shows that independence did not bring relief to the suffering of Africans in general and Malawians in particular. We are told in the poem that with a spark of light of dawn “fugitive pain/Rushes through the louvers [. . .]” (1-2). This is the suffering that Burness has clearly shown in the quotation above. After independence the people’s hopes of a brighter future still remain a mere dream. The “sunless dawn” and “insistent miaows (sic)/Piercing the concrete walls” (9-10) emphasise the gloomy and nightmarish world in which many Africans found themselves, and still do, after independence. The “concrete walls” could be an allusion to prisons for which dictators like Banda are famous.⁵⁷

In the third stanza we hear the poet-protagonist speaking to himself, underscoring his existential loneliness which is “deeper than the reach of love” for as the second stanza indicates he is and feels “alone, isolated, separated from others.”⁵⁸ The fear and silence that pervaded Malawi during Banda’s reign is well captured by the “coos of male pigeons” (speech in general) that can only be tentative and the voices that retreat into the mist bringing about the paradoxical “Audible flow of silence” (15-17). The rest of the stanza takes us to the zombie imagery of “No Dreams Here” as even the watch-dogs of

“Your old men shall dream
dreams,
Your young men shall see
Visions,”

Holy Bible, New King James Version (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 1990).
He only switches the nouns “old” and “young” around, and negates the sentences to show that Joel’s prophecy has not yet been fulfilled.

⁵⁶ Macquarrie 193.
⁵⁷ See Brighton J. Uledi-Kamanga, “The Symbolism of Bondage and Freedom in Jack Mapanje’s *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison*,” *Tizame* 6 (November 1998): 41-53.
⁵⁸ James Park, “Existential Loneliness: Deeper than the Reach of Love.” *Our Existential Predicament: Loneliness, Depression, Anxiety and Death*, Chap. 1, 3/8/2004 {<http://www.tc.umn.edu/~parkx032/XP25.html>}.

our hard-won freedom, the police and the army, symbolised by the barking dogs, failed or feared to speak out against the evils of the regime.

In this poem Nazombe, like Frank Chipasula and Felix Mnthali, inverts symbols of Malawi's nationhood (the "dawn," Kwacha! of the title and cock, symbol of the Malawi Congress Party, MCP) to "express [his] disenchantment with the Malawian political dispensation."⁵⁹ Notice that the crowing of the cocks is distant, that is, the party had not positively touched the lives of the people. Beyond commenting on the socio-political situation in Malawi, the poem "Dawn" also exposes the troubled mental landscape of the poet-protagonist who is not only lonely but is also in confinement. He is within "concrete walls" (10), a symbol of entrapment or bondage.⁶⁰

Nazombe's political commentary, his disillusionment and disapproval of the ways of the leaders continue in "Song for a Hunter" (p. 40) dedicated to Lupenga Mphande, a Malawian linguist and poet, found in section three of *NDH*. The poem is evidently a reaction to, or influenced by, Lupenga Mphande's poem "A Hunter's Song" (Typescript, henceforth ts.)⁶¹ which is adapted to an Izigubo or Ngoma dance song. Mphande's poem goes:

In Mage's garden
there's a cubbed lion,
In Mage's garden
There's a cubbed lion,
a cubbed lion
that prays (sic) on cattle;
the mighty goddess
the mighty goddess
that hews cattle.

⁵⁹ Anthony Nazombe, "Malawian Poetry in English," 65.

⁶⁰ See footnote 57.

⁶¹ Lupenga Mphande, ts., Nazombe's Collection, Malawiana, Chancellor College Library, U of Malawi.

The typescript is not paginated. Some of the poems in this typescript were published in his *Crackle at Midnight: Poems* (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1998).

In the poem "Song For a Hunter" Nazombe is basically saying the days of Mphande's influence are gone because the quarries, lions and elephants, are far too sensitive and subtle for him. In the poem Mphande assumes the guises of a hunter and a traditional chief while the lions and elephants refer to the Malawi Congress Party functionaries and Banda who enjoyed the title Ngwazi – Supreme Leader or Conqueror. While Mphande could have killed the "cubbed lion" in Mage's garden he cannot kill the lions and elephants that ravage the whole country. These lions and elephants could be the Malawi Young Pioneers (MYP) and Youth Leaguers who caused terror in the country. Using these archetypal animals (lions and elephants) Nazombe seeks to emphasize the power wielded by these MYP and Youth Leaguers such that Mphande's critical poetry ("bows and arrows")⁶² would be inefficient. The expression "That upstart from the hill-caves" (5) is a reference to Banda. This gets clearer when we hear that he "wandered the whole world/In quest for an elder's head" (6-7) which refers to Banda's forty-year sojourn in the West in quest of knowledge/wisdom – "an elder's head." In traditional African philosophy wisdom comes with age and so an elder's head is a depository of wisdom.

The expression "upstart from the hill-caves" is an adaptation from Mphande's poem "The Dwarf of the Hillcaves" (ts.) which is an uncompromising attack of Banda. In fact, a number of Nazombe's poems have evidently been influenced by Mphande's poems, the very poetry which in Nazombe's views does not merit serious critical appraisal, accusing the author of having attained "neither the technical sophistication nor the mature vision" of the likes of Mapanje, Chimombo, Chipasula and Mnthali.⁶³ What Nazombe means by a "mature vision" may not be immediately clear but the grammatical infelicities and poor choice of words testify to Mphande's lack of "technical sophistication" in his pre-1983 poetry. Though Nazombe does not acknowledge the fact

⁶² Reminding one of Chipasula's impassioned appeal in "We Must Crush The Parasite" – Banda:

"We must be ready with our sharpened pens and inkwells

[. . .]

We shall train our polished steel muzzles on him,

let the hand grenades of polished metaphors

get him right in the gut [. . .]"

(Frank Chipasula, *Whispers in the Wings: Poems* [Oxford: Heinemann, 1991] 109-110).

⁶³ Nazombe, "Malawian Poetry in English," 75.

anywhere,⁶⁴ Mphande has had a great influence on him, greater than that of Okigbo and Soyinka who draw fire from the *bolekaja* critics for their “‘euro-modernist’ tendency.”⁶⁵

“Song for a Hunter” shows that those who were traditionally or ethnically influential to the extent of giving their names, for instance, “to rolling plains/Cleaving the kingdoms of Mbelwa (sic) and Mpezeni” and “keeping at bay/The mighty regiments of Zwangendaba” (10-13) before the coming of Banda were less so when Banda assumed the reigns of power, a fact further strengthened by the title Ngwazi. Those who could not be silenced by his ruthlessness crossed the borders into exile and the “hunter” in the poem is one of them. The last stanza differentiates Banda’s judicial system and that of the pre-Banda era. Banda’s system emerges the worst as it capitalised on punitive measures while in the pre-Banda setting the emphasis was on peaceful resolution of conflict where “The aggrieved went home laden with goats/The wicked repaired to their huts wiser men” (27-28).

The tentacles of Banda’s oppressive regime spread far and wide instilling fear in even those who were thousands of miles away from home. This is evident in the poem “A Singer in 1981” (p. 61) which was originally dedicated to Jack Mapanje.⁶⁶ Actually the speaker in the poem, the “singer,” seems to be Jack Mapanje himself. The poem captures the fears of a Malawian poet on being asked to read his works in the West. Much as he

⁶⁴ In an interview with Bernth Lindfors (*Kulankula* (sic): *Interviews with Writers from Malawi and Lesotho*, Bayreuth African Studies Series 14, 1986, 28-41) he acknowledges Christopher Okigbo, Wole Soyinka, Steve Chimombo, Jack Mapanje, Felix Mnthali, Wordsworth, and Keats as his literary ancestors, or as people who had influence on him as a poet. One wishes he had acknowledged Mphande as one of them.

⁶⁵ Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie and Ihechukwu Madubuike, *Toward the Decolonisation of African Literature, vol. 1: African Fiction and Poetry and Their Critics* (Enugu, Nigeria: Fourth Dimension, 1980) 164. “[E]uromodernist tendency” is the tendency of assiduously aping “the practices of 20th-century European Modernist poetry” (163). On the other hand, *Bolekaja*, “a term applied in Western Nigeria to passenger lorries (‘mammy wagons’) from the outrageous behaviour of their touts,” means “Come down let’s fight!” Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike stress that in their criticism of African literature they do not seek fame or recognition, but they are “*bolekaja* critics, outraged touts for the passenger lorries of African literature [. . .]” (xiv).

⁶⁶ Evidenced by the draft of the poem in the author’s “Poetry and Meditation,” a notebook (1981-1982). Department of English, Chancellor College, U of Malawi.

would love to celebrate his freedom from “parochial anxieties” (7) of home he cannot help wondering whether the party has sent its agents – “feelers of the state” (8) – or not to monitor his activities. The “singer” is too aware of the fact that if party agents are monitoring his activities Banda will get to know of any mischief he might engage in. Experience has taught him the consequences of such a development:

Aging lions sharpen their claws,
Rehearse more rumbling roars
And, manes bristling, crouch in wait
For the ill-mannered prodigal
Who must return to his mother’s dugs. (14-18)

Dr. Banda’s well-known tirades against his enemies are the target of Nazombe’s satire and mockery in these lines.⁶⁷ Banda is symbolised by the “aging lions” in the poem for he was already sixty by the time he came back to Malawi in 1958. In spite of his anxiety the poet is hopeful that having been exposed to the outside world Mapanje was immune from the party’s ruthless ways, for whatever happened to him would arouse public curiosity. But this was false hope. On September 25, 1987, Mapanje was arrested and detained in the notorious Mikuyu Maximum Security Prison for “three years, seven months, sixteen/Days [. . .].”⁶⁸

Nazombe also captures the atmosphere of fear and dread that hung over the country like a cloud as a result of the widespread political murders and detentions in the poem “Blind Terror” (p. 36). On the literal level, this allegorical poem talks of death coming into a family disguised as a blind man searching for guidance only to cause untold misery and death. Notice the similarity of the sentiments here with the ones in Chipasula’s “Dusk” which is part of his long poem “Night Watcher, Night Song”:

⁶⁷ One is reminded here of Mapanje’s “No, Creon, There’s No Virtue in Howling” (*The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison* [Oxford: Heinemann, 1993] 12) where he advises Banda, Creon in the poem: “No, Creon, you overstate your image to your/People. No, there’s no virtue in howling so.” Obviously with reference to his characteristic outbursts against his enemies, one of which Mapanje quotes in “The Delight of Aerial Signs of Release” dedicated to Pat, David, Lan, Angus & Co.: “And there, rebels will rot, rot, rot!” with reference to Mikuyu. (*The Chattering Wagtails* 66).

⁶⁸ Mapanje, “The Release: Who Are You, Imbongi?” *The Chattering Wagtails* 71.

As dust fills the crowing cock's mouth taking it for dawn:
Then death goes hunting through men's huts with long

knives.⁶⁹

Metaphorically, however, the poem paints a horrible but true picture of the havoc and suffering the MCP regime caused in many families in Malawi. The poet-protagonist's own family and their house, which is his immediate frame of reference in the poem, is a microcosm of the whole country while the mother figure is a symbol for "Mother Malawi." The reference to the terror as blind could be a deliberate reference to the members of the Special Branch, sowers of fear and death in the country, who were notorious for their dark suits and dark glasses which made them look like blind people. These people were definitely a terror, which obviously invited the title "Blind Terror." Terror here also plays a role of emphasising the fear and dread that hung like a dark cloud over the land. People were engulfed by uncertainty, as nobody knew what tomorrow would bring. Everybody, even close family members, was a potential enemy that could betray one to the authorities. The ruthlessness and insensitivity of the Special Branch is alluded to in the poem by reference to death as "face of stone" (11) – a face that betrayed no emotion. Nazombe also seems to say here that even exile – hiding the children in the poem – was futile as people could be killed while in exile. The cases of Mkwapatira Mhango whose house was petrol-bombed in Zambia in October 1989 killing all the inhabitants, and Atati Mpakati who was found dead in March 1983 in a storm drain in Harare, Zimbabwe, obviously murdered by Banda's agents, prove this true.⁷⁰ Broadly, the poem comments on the inevitability of death. Humanity can never hope to hide from death.

Furthermore, in his dealings with the political atmosphere in the country Nazombe does not leave out the practice of members of the Special Branch of trailing

⁶⁹ Chipasula, *Whispers* 2: 9-10.

⁷⁰ Bakili Muluzi et al. 125, 118-119. Mkwapatira Mhango was a freelance journalist who escaped into exile in Zambia when he got wind that the Special Branch wanted to 'interview' him for his alleged seditious writings while Atati Mpakati was a leader of the League for a Socialist Malawi (LESOMA), an opposition party of exiled Malawians in Zimbabwe.

unsuspecting victims or citizens earmarked for investigation for alleged violation of the four cornerstones of the party – unity, loyalty, obedience and discipline. The poet satirises and ridicules this practice in his poem “Guardian Fly” (p. 35), a corruption of the Christian notion of guardian angel, which according to Jack Mapanje was “the first most effective poem that Anthony brought to the Writers’ Group [. . .] [that] marked him out and placed him among the best young poets Malawi was going to have.”⁷¹ That the poem impressed Mapanje who is well known for his irony and grim humour is not surprising. In this poem Nazombe employs irony, satire and humour to good effect. He also successfully hides behind a metaphor to attack a strong arm of the MCP, namely the Special Branch. On the superficial level the poet-protagonist suggests that he would sing a song to his guardian fly, like one would to a guardian angel, that follows him everywhere, even to the bathroom. In the context of Banda’s Malawi the guardian fly here is no ordinary fly but a member of the Special Branch who is trailing him. This was common practice when people suspected to be “rebels” were followed by the Special Branch with a hope of uncovering their conspiracy.⁷² The unlucky ones were either “accidentalised” or sent into detention without trial.

The lack of privacy for the victim is seen when the guardian fly perches on the toilet soap as the poet-protagonist takes a bath. Moreover, the guardian fly and its friends monitor every aspect of his life or part of his body – “my nose and hair are theirs” (18). What emerges here is that the guardian fly is obviously a nuisance and the song of praise is no praise at all but ridicule and condemnation. Nazombe’s scathing irony and satire find their mark on the Special Branch whose trade was demeaning and humiliating for them. They were reduced to “chasing” people all day long to satisfy the egos of their masters. Nazombe successfully picks out a harmful creature, fly, a vermin, for close association with the ways of the Special Branch. Like flies that trail foul smelling

⁷¹ Jack Mapanje, a letter to the author, 31. 5. 2004.

⁷² Pádraig Ó Máille and David Kerr record experiences of being trailed by the Special Branch because of their ‘traitorous’ meddling with the affairs of a detained ‘rebel,’ Jack Mapanje. (See Pádraig Ó Máille, *Living Dangerously: A Memoir of Political Change in Malawi* [2000] and Kerr, “A Renewable Contract,” unpublished memoir, [1996]).

individuals, the Special Branch trailed those considered rebels, and like flies that spread diseases the Special Branch sowed seeds of vice, fear and death in the country.

This poem shows similarities with Lupenga Mphande's "A Letter to Manase" which may have inspired it. In Mphande's poem the poet-protagonist accuses a lover of trailing him.⁷³

Upon the success of the "guardian fly," that is the Special Branch, in nailing or implicating the victim, either death or the experiences in "Tuberculosis" (p. 37-38) followed. In this poem the speaker is in prison – "this ward" (p 37:16) – as a victim of the violence and political turmoil that have rocked the country, or as a result of his dissenting views that require his being quarantined to avoid infecting others. The poet successfully picks out a tuberculosis epidemic for close association of its infectious nature, the violent coughing, suffering and pain caused by it with both the pain and suffering many Malawians went through at the hands of the MYP, the Special Branch and the Youth Leaguers.

The first stanza describes the wave of violence that periodically swept the country like a TB epidemic leaving many people dead or in prison.⁷⁴ That this periodic upsurge of violence claimed new victims is indicted in the fourth stanza where the inmates get "News from outside, [. . .]/[Through] new members of this club," (new prisoners, p. 37:19-20). As was typical in the Banda era after a new wave of imprisonment, people

⁷³ The first stanza of the poem reads:

Why do you have to follow me
Wherever I go? When I go about along
College corridors I can see your ambling
silhouette slouching slobberly (sic)
criss-crossing my paths peeping
behind crevices of adjoining alleys;
why do you have to follow me so
wherever I go?

(Mphande n. p.)

⁷⁴ The similes and the words "seething," "exploding" and "sapping" in the first stanza emphasise the violence and pain caused by TB and, by extension, the magnitude of the violence and suffering that the tyrannical Banda regime caused to many innocent Malawians.

wondered at the cause of such a development. This is captured in the poem by the “multiple accusations/Of the kind ‘Who has jumped who?’” (p. 37:21-22) a literal translation of a Chichewa expression “Wamudumpha mzake ndani” which comes from a traditional belief that epidemics result from failure by some members of society to follow that society’s norms. While the country’s citizens accused each other for possible betrayal of the victims the authorities blamed communism – “the eastern wind” (p. 37:24) which is a deliberate reference to the eastern bloc – for the dissenting views in the country. No wonder all Marxist books were banned in the country and possession of such books invited imprisonment.

The Bible (“sent [...] by pastors we have never seen,” – p. 37:29) from which the prisoners read texts was the only book allowed in Malawian prisons. But as we learn from Mapanje’s “Scrubbing the Furious Walls of Mikuyu Prison,” even these were insufficient for there would be only three bibles for ninety men.⁷⁵

In the sixth stanza Nazombe pokes fun at the sycophants who turned their music and poetic skills to praise or in Chipasula’s words, polish the dark feathers of “[o]ur fat national roosters.”⁷⁶ Banda never tired of listening to lavish praises heaped on him or watching traditional dances “Under the name of cultural revival” (p. 38:7). But as Mapanje makes clear in “The New Platform Dances,” the cultural revival was never effective as the traditional dances were often a corruption of the original, having lost their authentic value and contexts.

However, amidst the suffering and despair there is hope in the poem that “The epidemic will die a natural death” (p. 38:16). This anticipates the events of 1994 when Banda suffered a defeat in a Presidential election to Bakili Muluzi. The language here like in “Guardian Fly” is veiled but not enough to deceive a discerning eye.

While many Malawians died in prisons, in some cases through the practice of having been made to run a gauntlet of clubs and being clobbered to death by fellow prisoners, “even though they had not received death sentences,”⁷⁷ the lucky few got released after, as Nazombe puts it, “the last quake” (p. 37:33). The events after the

⁷⁵ Mapanje, *The Chattering Wagtails* 53.

⁷⁶ Chipasula, *Whispers* 61.

⁷⁷ David Kerr 17.

release of a prisoner are aptly described in “Festering Sores” (pp. 58-60), one of the poems in Section IV, “Seasons Abroad,” that look back to the experiences of home, particularly at the dehumanising effects of detention in Banda’s prisons. The first stanza of this poem whose title metaphorically compares the anger and bitterness with the injustice in the country of Banda’s ex-detainee to festering sores, describes the ex-detainee’s appearance and his feelings in a busy street or market in one of the country’s townships. The hardships of prison have left this man thin and haggard but he is nevertheless happy to mix with the “fickle crowd” (p. 58:4). The crowd is said to be fickle because it is composed of people who would blame Banda and the system at one moment and the next moment would rush to the airport or rally and dance themselves lame or sing themselves hoarse to please Banda.

But the man’s happiness for his return is marred by the discovery that his own brother had “disappeared into limbo” (p. 58:9) – typical of MCP Malawi where those related to people branded rebels were also victims of persecution. Worse still, the people feel uneasy to associate with him, a fact alluded to by the people’s “uneasy laughter” (p. 58:6). The perennial beggars underline the poverty and deprivation of the people in the country and are a clear indication to the ex-detainee that nothing had really changed in the people’s living conditions during his years of absence. This undermines the assertion by Banda and his cohorts that Malawians were living comfortably during his reign. The ex-detainee’s anger and bitterness are exacerbated when a police officer greets him, thereby awakening in him memories of the ruthlessness and brutality he might have suffered in the hands of these very people – the police.

In part two of the poem the poet-protagonist wonders how the ex-detainee of Mikuyu prison – “the grey labyrinth beyond the fig trees” (p. 59:11)⁷⁸ – should be welcomed and how he should be reintegrated into society. That the ex-detainee whom we learn was a member of the university needs reintegration reveals the disorientation, pain and traumas he must have gone through as a result of imprisonment. The dehumanising effects of imprisonment are also underscored by the ex-detainee’s spooky appearance (being “one recently returned/From the grave [. . .]” [p. 59:1-2] or Hades [p. 60:27]):

⁷⁸ Fig trees translate as *Mikuyu* in Chichewa.

[b]rown suit [h]angs down “limp and creased” (p. 58:1-2), “a skin [that is] whiter than that of an albino” (p. 59:3) and metaphorical deformities befitting a ghost, “a paralytic” with “shattered eardrums” (p. 59:7-8).

The dominant element in the poem is that of self-blame for doing nothing when the Special Branch – “the hawks” – came to pick the victim. The poet however finds an excuse in the fact that he had just joined the university, either as a staff associate or a student (“we were mere fledglings/Trying our wings in the corridors of academe” – p. 59:21-22). Here he shifts the blame to the old members of the university who equally could only watch helplessly as their fellow member was being arrested. In the end the poet only hopes that the ex-detainee would understand his friends’ helplessness in the face of the oppressive regime.

When we get to the third and last part of the poem we see the poet-protagonist outrightly blaming himself and all academics for complicity with the system. Whatever reason he or the academics invented for not doing something to avert the flood of imprisonment was insufficient. As such, everyone of them is guilty by omission. He believes that the academics should have done something but they did not, preferring to hide behind excuses. Here Nazombe reverts to Biblical imagery on the day of Jesus’ crucifixion and the images of assassins and criminals to buttress his point:

[. . .] whether we acknowledge it or not,
We are a chorus of bloodstained bystanders
Laden with the entrails of Judas Iscariot,
A band of assassins doomed to wander the earth
With crucifixes burnt into our brows;
We are escaped convicts dragging the chains
That bind our minds through the back streets of eternity. (p. 60:4-10)

The wickedness of the complicit academics and students is underlined by such phrases as “bloodstained bystanders,” “a band of assassins” with crucifixes burnt into their brows and “escaped convicts.” These images correspond with the poet’s reference to the prison as the grave or Hades which shows that he views imprisonment as a form of death, and release from prison as a resurrection. As far as the poet is concerned, sharing jokes and a

er with the ex-detainee does not help to drive away the guilty consciousness that all Malawians must feel for letting the oppression carry on for that long. However, one gets the feeling that the poet's charges against academics are rather too strong given the ruthlessness of the regime under which they lived, a regime whose ruthlessness the poet compares to a TB epidemic in the poem "Tuberculosis" (p. 37)

Finally, in the last six lines of the poem Nazombe takes a swipe at the government for contributing to the brain drain in the country and to untold suffering ("nightmares") to many innocent Malawians "on the dubious pretext of state security" (p. 60:31).

In addition to political persecution and oppression Nazombe also looks at deprivation and poverty in his poetry. While many Malawians lost their lives, languished in prison and crossed the borders in droves into exile, those who stayed in the country suffered poverty and deprivation as well. This comes out clearly in the poem "Cockroaches" (p. 43). This poem tackles the unemployment that turned most young men into mechanics overnight, and the scarcity of basic resources such as food, petrol and cooking oil. Nazombe does not seem to leave a stone unturned in his exposition of the ills of the First Republic. Corruption is also an issue here where a bag of mealie meal disappears "on the back/Of an official truck" (14-15).⁷⁹ The scarcity of basic necessities and their exorbitant prices when available led to the flourishing of black markets run by "cockroaches" as people learned to seek their "cooking oil behind shops/Or at the road junctions at night" (27-28). The choice of the cockroach as a metaphor of the black marketers effectively associates their behaviour with the nocturnal habit of the insect/vermin: its love for dark nooks and crannies.

Moreover, the poverty that prevailed at the time and still prevails today is also captured in "Misty Presences" (p. 44). In this poem, like in many others, the poet-protagonist shows his concern for the country's poor. While the rich live(d) in opulence, as we shall see in "Modes of Freedom" (p. 45), these spooky and fiendish creatures in "Misty Presences" have to live in "labyrinths/Of matchbox huts" (4-5). In the poem Nazombe tackles the problem of housing in cities. But instead of doing something about

⁷⁹ Notice the similarity between this event and what happened during the 2002 famine in Malawi when only United Democratic Front (UDF) loyalists were allowed to buy maize from some Agricultural Development and Marketing Corporation (Admarc) markets in the country.

the problem the authorities decide to plant a hedge that “vainly seeks to obscure the view/From incoming tourists and guests” (9-10). The self-deception and hypocrisy of the leaders, the proverbial ostrich syndrome of burying one’s head to avoid looking at the world’s problems, is clear here. The fact that the poor are misty or shadowy figures shows their insignificance in the eyes of the leaders.⁸⁰

The sentiments of poverty and deprivation of the majority amidst stinking wealth of the leaders are also clear in “Modes of Freedom (After Annemarie Heywood)”⁸¹ reminding one of Frank Chipasula’s post-independence disenchantment and sense of betrayal in his “Friend, Ah You Have Changed.”⁸² What the poet-protagonist is essentially saying here is that the leaders of independent African states and their people

⁸⁰ In “Song of a Motorist” (p. 39) Nazombe takes the opportunity to satirise the raw materialism of the politicians amidst all the poverty in the country. In this particular poem Nazombe satirises a politician’s alleged praise for his car. The praise is couched in sexual terms. This reveals the motorist’s folly in addressing the car as a woman and equating his passion for material goods such as cars – notice the brands of cars mentioned –, to his lust for sex:

I like to caress your soft skin,
Rise to your graceful gliding;
When your spell holds me (1-3).

The folly is also clear in the third stanza where the car is addressed with the endearment, “Baby” like a lover and, even more, when we hear him wondering how long it would take him to evolve into one, a car! Having ridiculed the politicians’ materialist tendencies thus the poet issues a warning against speeding, for it leads to accidents and death hinted at by the “condolences in the papers” (17). Here the poet shows that much as he is opposed to such folly he does not wish those who engage in it ill. It is more than mere coincidence that Lupenga Mphande also has a poem about a motorist titled “The Young Motorist” (ts.). Nazombe’s poem seems to have been inspired by this poem. In Mphande’s poem a “buoyant lad” who arrives from overseas “to take up an appointment in the colonial administration” (“The Young Motorist,” 10-11) dies in a car accident. It is no surprise then that Nazombe warns against speeding in his poem.

⁸¹ Nazombe models the title of this poem after Annemarie Heywood’s “Modes of Freedom: The Songs of Okot p’Bitek,” *First Quarterly* 113 (1980): 235-257. In this article Heywood differentiates two modes of freedom discernible in Okot p’Bitek’s songs: *freedom from* (colonial exploitation and alienation), traceable in the antinomy Lawino/Ocol, and *freedom to*, noticeable in the antinomy Prisoner/Malaya (235).

⁸² Frank Chipasula, “Friend, Ah You Have Changed!” *The Heinemann Book of African Poetry in English*, ed. Adewale Maja-Pearce (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990) 177.

have different modes of freedom. There is a mode of freedom for the poor ordinary citizens and another mode for the filthy rich leaders.

The poem shows us the modes of freedom of a prisoner (the inmate whose vision is blocked by steel bars – p. 45:1-2),⁸³ late shoppers, State House guards, and the President himself (“the father”). The poem reveals that the word freedom is ironic. Only “the father” (20) and the monkeys that “calmly peer into the recesses of power” (26) can be said to be free. It is a piece of grim irony to consider the prison inmate (1-2) to be exercising his own mode of freedom. Notice that his vision (sight and hope for the future) is blocked by steel bars. He is imprisoned both mentally and physically. The late shoppers who “gingerly weave their way/Through a terraced mosaic of birdshit” (9-10) can also only ironically be said to be free. The images of rot underlined by the birdshit show the moral and political rot in a society where the leaders have abdicated their duties – crows, a symbol of evils thrive unimpeded.

The guards to the State House are equally helpless. In spite of their closeness to the “recesses of power” they can only express their pain through barely legible graffiti scribbled “on the walls/In the ramshackle toilet behind the banana stall” (16-17). No wonder that instead of doing their job properly they engage in such trivia as “Scanning the mountain road/For [. . .] bottoms/Swinging under the weight of firewood” (28-30). The lack of freedom for the people, academics or otherwise, is also shown by the way the “cunning sociologist” (32) dashes off when in reply to his question the poet-protagonist mischievously says “I went to collect new tablets of law” (35) while “trotting past the main gate” (31) of the State House. The sociologist knows that such mischief could land them into trouble with the powers that be. Evidence such as “mountain road” (28) and monkeys that “scale the walls/Round State House” (22-23) points to the fact that the State

⁸³ The opening stanza of this poem

My mind floats clear of steel bars
Blocking the vision of the inmate,
Flapping wings sedately and leisurely
Against the vast blue dome
Now tinged with the crimson (hue of) twilight

resembles Lewis Nkosi's Sibiya in his prison cell in *Mating Birds: A Novel* (New York: Harper, 1986) 1.

House in question here is the one in Zomba. This poem proves the truth in Mpasu's observation referred to earlier.⁸⁴

In an oppressive and uncompromising situation like the one that obtained in Banda's Malawi, it was not surprising that some people committed suicide to escape.⁸⁵ The poem "In Memoriam" (p. 5) is an elegy to a young man who commits suicide by hanging. The deceased disappeared at dusk to be found at break of day hanging from a branch of a tree. The contrast between day and night here symbolises that between good/light and evil/darkness. The young man commits suicide at night, a time of evil, and is found "at break of day" (2), a time of good. The image of an "Athlete snapped in mid-leap" (4),⁸⁶ the natal image of "Umbilical cord prematurely broken" (7) and that of a "Young shoot so soon choked" (8) emphasise the suddenness or untimeliness of the young man's death. This is also achieved by the expression "Unfinished phrase..." (9). The poem seems to spell doom for the society since a society without the young, just as a tree without shoots, cannot hope to survive for long. Thus far, the hopelessness and despair that prevailed in Banda's Malawi, a society where, as we have seen above, "Young men no longer dream dreams" as the elders succumb to wrinkles, should be clear. To this young man life under this oppressive regime is absurd and meaningless, "pointless and empty, rather cruel and even a little mad."⁸⁷

As expected, the blame for the suicide is laid squarely on the shoulders of the fathers and mothers – the leaders – in the poem titled "Of Our Sons" (p. 6).

After firing the sons with ambition and giving them an education, the parents, in this case the corrupt and ruthless leaders, stand and watch the children's every move,

⁸⁴ See footnote 51.

⁸⁵ See Douglas Killam and Ruth Rowe, eds., 25.2.04 {<http://people.africandatabase.org/people/profiles/profilesforperson15971.html>}.

⁸⁶ In its reference to the death of an athlete the poem echoes A. E. Housman's "To an Athlete Dying Young" which laments the death of a successful young athlete (*The Range of Literature*, eds. Elisabeth W. Schneider, Albert L. Walker and Herbert E. Childs (New York: American Book Co., 1960) 319-320.

⁸⁷ Park, "Existential Despair," n. p.

policing their lives, virtually putting them in a panopticon,⁸⁸ and reaping the fruits of their labour, metaphorically put as “Sucking their sweat” (4). Pushed to the extreme these oppressed children, poor, oppressed Malawians, see death as a form of escape from these acts of folly. The metaphor of the “horse-voiced crow/That has lost its meat” (12-13) underlines the evil of the parents whose cry over the death is likened to that of the scavenging crow. Thus the cry is both hypocritical and uncalled for.

Having strongly and passionately attacked and criticised the government in the manner discussed so far, Nazombe proceeds to lamentably weaken his position in his “We Talk of Things” (p. 46). In this poem Nazombe tells his readers that life was not all hell during the Banda era. Though this appears as a touch of objectivity, one feels that it is unnecessary when even the poet himself admits in the poem that in the moments of light-heartedness and joy “the children’s cries of woe” could only “Soften into *tentative* smiles” (5-6, emphasis mine) and “Every calabashful of joy/Promise[d] hangovers on the morrow” (16-17). One feels that such a confession weakens his message to the party through the mouth of a cock, the party’s symbol, in “The New Year” (p. 13) that sings a new song to the rising sun: “Sweep the house clean/Of last year’s dirt” (21-22). Literally the poet advises the party to desist from its evil ways in the forthcoming year so that women should “sing new Chioda songs” (27) – other than those of praise – and men should “stamp and dance/To the rapturous rhythm/Of Ingoma shields” (29-30) – authentic Ingoma rather than the fake one performed during Banda’s rallies. Perhaps in “We Talk of Things” Nazombe wanted to give the same impression one gets in Dennis Brutus’ “Somehow We Survive.”⁸⁹ Nevertheless, I strongly feel that there was no need to state the obvious, for in every oppressive situation people manage to snatch moments of light-heartedness. As such the poem’s absence from the collection would not have made any difference.

⁸⁸ A nineteenth-century architectural design of a prison where individuals would be kept isolated in rings of individual cells, all of which would be observable from a central observation tower. The idea was to instil social discipline on the prisoners (see {http://www.geneseo.edu/~bicket/panop/subject_P.html} [3.8.04]).

⁸⁹ Dennis Brutus, “Somehow We Survive,” *When My Brothers Come Home: Poems from Central and Southern Africa*, ed. Frank Chipasula (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 1985) 163.

her own./She will have a lot to teach the world/About the conservation of animal species” (21-23) ironically means the rest of the world would learn from South Africa on how to deal with the issue of race. In this way he indicts the West for complicity with South Africa’s racist policies.⁹²

Nazombe’s horizons broaden even further in “Emigrant Pole” (p. 57) where he tackles the plight of Polish women refugees during World War II. Following the invasion of Poland by Russia during World War II, many Polish men and women were deported to various parts of the USSR where they were to provide cheap labour. Hitler’s invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 in Operation Barbarossa and the signing of a Polish-Soviet treaty in London, “arranging for the formation of a Polish army on Soviet soil led to the declaration of an “‘amnesty’ to all Polish citizens living in camps and prisons in the Soviet Union.”⁹³ This resulted in a mass movement of Polish refugees from the cold north to the warmer regions of Central Asia. Some of the refugees, especially women and children, went as far as India and Iran and parts of Africa such as Uganda, Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe and South Africa. In the poem Nazombe criticises the head of the Catholic Church (Poland is a predominantly Catholic country and the current Pope, John Paul II [Karol Josef Wojtyla] comes from Poland), “the shepherd in Rome,” (21) for doing nothing about the refugee problem beyond castigating the warring parties. He further issues a warning to the refugee woman (“apprentice huntress,” 29) who by virtue of being a European like the Afrikaans in South Africa is a perpetrator of violence, that Africa, particularly South Africa, referred to as “the veld” is agitating (“ablaze,” 30) for political liberation or reform. As such, her sought after freedom will not be realised there as she is moving from one troubled area to another. The “bald eagle” (35) is a symbol of America, which most likely would come to the rescue of the whites (“the predators,” [33]) running away from the political unrest in South Africa.

⁹² This becomes clearer when one realises that former American President, Ronald Reagan, and former British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, considered Nelson Mandela a terrorist and “supported the South African apartheid regime against him and his liberation movement, the ANC [African National Congress].” (Jika Nkolokosa, “The Dead Don’t Bite,” *Malawi News*, November 13-19, 2004: 3).

⁹³ Maryon Allbrook and Helen Kattalini, *The General Langfitt Story – Polish Refugees Recount Their Experiences of Exile, Dispersal and Resettlement*, 11.3.04 {<http://www.Immi.gov.au/research/publications/langfitt/langfitt15.htm>}.

Furthermore, in “The Racket” (p. 49), the first poem in the section “Seasons Abroad,” as Killam and Rowe rightly observe, Nazombe indicts the West’s show of aid and its literary establishment’s contempt for African literature.”⁹⁴ Nazombe compares the West’s behaviour with regard to aid to the Robin Hood saga enacted in reverse.⁹⁵ This shows how fraudulent the West is in the name of aid. That the centre for African studies is “a makeshift log cabin” when “a two-storied tomb,” a museum, houses “the remains of Eng. Lit.” (7, 11), precisely shows the West’s contempt for African literature. This is even clearer when the curators and guides in the “two-storied tomb” frown upon the efforts of the one working in the “log cabin” (15-16). Nazombe’s contemptuous language for English literature here is meant to interrogate the literature’s claim to greatness. He also attacks foreign African students’ failure to stand in defence of African literature for fear of jeopardising their pursuit of “hollow degrees” (28).

On reading *NDH* one also notices that political and academic issues were not the poet’s only concern. He also looks at various aspects and experiences of life in general. For instance, the poems “Heart of Stone” (p. 10) and “Boredom” (p. 8) show the absurdity and meaninglessness of life. The former invites us to see the mental landscape of the poet-protagonist who sits at the window of his room expecting a sign only to be confronted by “the blurred landscape/Of [his] mind” (3-4), simply, nothingness. After acquiring a lot of education, betrayed by the “Books hanging heavy on [his] head” (6) the poet-protagonist perhaps expected to know some secrets of life. But nothing of this kind happens. The nothingness and meaninglessness of his efforts and life in general are

⁹⁴ Killam and Rowe, 2004. From Adrian Roscoe we get the alternative view that in the poem “Nazombe indicts British graduate training as a racket in which the developing world is again being exploited” (Rev. of *The Haunting Wind* 124). The exploitation of poor third-world countries by hypocritical rich nations and International Banks through their show of aid is discussed at length by Graham Hancock in his book *Lords of Poverty: The Freewheeling Lifestyles, Power, Prestige and Corruption of the Multibillion Dollar Aid Business* (Nairobi: Camerapix, 2001).

⁹⁵ Robin Hood is a famous English legendary outlaw who together with his band of outlaws lived in the royal forest of Sherwood. Robin Hood and his band robbed those who had money to give to those in need. He hated greedy and corrupt leaders in society, such as the Sheriff of Nottingham and Sir Guy of Gisborne, whom he tricked, outwitted, robbed, bedevilled and even beheaded, 3.6.04 {<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Acropolis/4198/rh/robbeg1.html>}.

emphasised by the passage of time (stanza 2) and the “speechless mass” (14) or “heart of stone” (15) that take root in his eyes “year after year” (16-17). Besides this “heart of stone” there is nothing. This poem reminds one of Samuel Beckett’s play *Waiting for Godot* (1965) where two characters, Vladimir and Estragon, wait for Godot only to be confronted by nothingness, day in and day out.

It is no surprise then that life becomes boring and a form of entrapment as we see in “Boredom” (p. 8). The poem paints a nightmarish picture of the future as it unfolds before the eyes of the poet-protagonist: a future beset by chaos, danger and death. In the poem the future is likened to a “soot-stained thread” that unwinds before the poet-protagonist’s eyes (1-2). Thus it is dull, not tempting and uninviting. What comes clearly out of this poem is a deep, dark, despair – existential hopelessness or “a comprehensive loss of hope for existence.”⁹⁶ The hopelessness and despair are exacerbated by the sense of entrapment hinted at by the reference to the “oil from ruined tombs” that glues together feathers “Of the newly hatched” (3-5) in addition to the image of a wingless fly trapped in a silk noose (18). Notice that the fly is not only wingless but is also trapped in a silk noose. This means it is faced with obstacles it can never hope to surmount. These poems, like the ones that follow, show Nazombe’s disillusionment with humankind and life in general and expose the futility and absurdity of life and humanity’s precarious situation on earth.

The poem, “Boredom,” like “Heart of Stone” and “Dawn” (11), also gives insights into the troubled mental landscape of the poet-protagonist. The chaotic landscape where “Oil from ruined tombs/Glues together feathers/Of the newly hatched” (4-5), seaweed “gloats over the drowned” (11-13) and sea waves are “red-tinged” (16) with blood reflects the poet-protagonist’s fear for humanity which he sees as heading towards death and destruction. The sea imagery in the poem emphasises the chaos and destruction that the poet-protagonist foresees.

⁹⁶ Park, “Existential Despair.” James Parks distinguishes psychological despair from existential despair. The former arises from definite life-situations such as failure to achieve specific goals or realise certain values while the latter arises from the realisation of the futility of life and all its projects; it is “a comprehensive loss of hope for existence” (n. p).

Transience of life is another theme traceable in Nazombe's poetry. In the poem "Cycles" (pp. 17-19) he alludes to the cyclic nature of life; dealing with such archetypes as birth, growth and death. It is also a symbolic contrast between childhood, middle age and old age also associated with sunrise, noon and sunset. While the child is hopeful and excited by all that is around it, the mother is sceptical and pessimistic about life, and the grandmother ("granny") shows calm resignation. She knows that the old must die so that the young can live.⁹⁷ The image of the fire "lit on the ashes" (p. 17:5) shows that new life takes root on the remains of the old. In the poem the cyclic pattern of life is effectively compared to a water cycle when we read that "The river learns like men" (p. 18:1). From the sea the water begins "the ascent towards the clouds/And get set for another beginning" (p. 18:4-6).

Transience of life is also treated in "I Shall Not Return" (p. 4). In this poem Nazombe shows the irreversibility of life. Once one is born one moves progressively to the grave, and it is impossible to right the wrongs committed on the way. "[B]lanks left in haste" (6) remain forever unfilled. In a way, the poem discourages against crying over spilt milk. A word uttered cannot be retrieved and what is done cannot be undone.

Finally, Nazombe's dealing with transience of life is sealed in "The Last Act" (p. 33). In this poem he looks at the world in a Shakespearean way as a stage where we all act our roles/parts before disappearing behind the curtain – the grave – leaving behind "Only skeletons [. . .]/To haunt the stage/And stir memories" (4-6).⁹⁸ Just as nobody remains on a stage permanently, nobody remains in this world forever. Here, Nazombe treats death as "the great symbol of human finitude [/temporality and] of human

⁹⁷ See Jack Mapanje's "Your Tears Still Burn at My Handcuffs (1991)" where while lamenting the death of his mother he says: "we understand you had to go, to leave us space/To move" (*The Chattering Wagtails* 79).

⁹⁸ Shakespeare writes:

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967 repr. 1985), v.5: 24-28.

absurdity.”⁹⁹ In his poetry Nazombe also explores another factual aspect of human nature, namely our inability to predict the future with certainty. When man, to quote Sartre again, “encounters himself, surges up in the world” one of the things he learns is that it is impossible to tell for certain what tomorrow might bring. Nazombe tackles this in the poems “The Annunciation” (p. 55) and “Self Analysis” (p.75). As a Malawian student in the United Kingdom, Nazombe expresses shock at the behaviour of whites with regard to pregnancy in “The Annunciation.” While back home the news of a pregnancy is treated as a secret and with respect, in Europe “They announce the news from rooftops” (4). Aware of “fate’s acrobatic stunts” (“Of Our Sons,” p. 6:10) the poet-protagonist is left to wonder what would happen should there be a miscarriage or should the outcome prove to be “a Mongol child” (16). Here Nazombe echoes Soren Kierkegaard who holds that “[t]he only thing we know beyond doubt is that we are. Where we have come from and where we are going remains a mystery.”¹⁰⁰

“The Pater Noster” (sic) (p. 50) is another poem that documents Nazombe’s experiences in the foreign land. The poem shows his encounter with British racism. After being involved in a paternoster¹⁰¹ accident, help does not arrive in time until he struggles alone to safety. The man, who he ironically refers to as a Samaritan, who had “a white, wizened face” (22), simply promises to fetch help and disappears for good. The rest who come by, a cleaner, a so-called bearded Messiah and the porter never give a helping hand until he struggles free. One suspects that this is because he is one of the “wretched of the earth” (an allusion to Frantz Fanon’s book by the same title, [1967]) and a “foreign illiterate” (23, 30). Though couched in humorous language the poet’s bitterness about the racist attitude of the British is evident in the poem. This racism, however, is contrasted by the togetherness between different races in “Our Hyde Park” (p. 52). Here, common problems and interests bring together people of different races.

⁹⁹ Macquarrie 198.

¹⁰⁰ Macquarrie 190.

¹⁰¹ In this poem the term means “an elevator constructed of a series of doorless compartments hung on chains that move slowly and continuously allowing passengers to step on and off at will” (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed. 2000, 18.6.04 {<http://www.bartleby.com/61/0/P0110000.html>}).

Sentiments similar to the ones in "The Annunciation" are noticeable in "Self Analysis" (p. 75), which emphasises the impossibility of knowing one's fate beforehand. The poet wishes he could go back in time to discover whether the trials and tribulations he has gone through and continues to go through were predetermined. But as we saw in "I Shall Not Return" this is impossible as life moves progressively forward. This poem also underlines the existential element of "thrownness"¹⁰² in the world where one finds oneself with no rules to govern one's choices.

The poetry of Anthony Nazombe also deals with the clash between Africa and the West especially on matters of religion. The poem "Wreaths for a Wanderer" (p. 41) attacks the abandonment of traditional religious practices by the elders who ought to preserve them. In the poem an old man who has newly converted to Christianity, "late acquired faith," (4) prays beside his bed while the poet-protagonist – the wanderer – who is a non-believer sleeps comfortably. One gets the impression that the wanderer's disbelief is a result of his disillusionment with whites who he must have seen in their own country doing the opposite of the Christianity they preached in Africa. The loincloth worn by the "hoary-headed ancestor" (8) here, like in Nazombe's interpretation of Chimombo's "A Song of the Loincloth," is a sign of authenticity.¹⁰³ The fact that the loincloth in this case is tattered shows the loss of cultural authenticity by the old man. The "shadowy presences" ("Wreaths for a Wanderer," [13]) are in a similar predicament. The fact that they are shadowy shows that they are inauthentic beings.

The contemptuous tone of the poem which is created by such phrases as "ancient man" (1), "late acquired faith" (4) "hoary-headed ancestor" (8), "tattered loincloth" (9) and "shadowy presences" (13) shows the poet-protagonist's lack of respect for people who abandon their roots which they ought to uphold and protect.

The conflict between traditional religion and Christianity is also dramatised in "Easter Dawn at Chingwe's Hole" (p. 47). Easter is a time of repentance for Christians, and Easter dawn here represents the Resurrection. But in this poem instead of observing the vigil on Easter dawn in church the poet-protagonist seeks the guiding hand of the

¹⁰² Martin Heidegger, according to Macquarrie, has used this expression "as a somewhat vivid metaphor for man's factual condition" in the world. Macquarrie 191.

¹⁰³ Nazombe, "Malawian Poetry in English," 89.

ancestors at Chingwe's Hole,¹⁰⁴ thereby tracing his identity. But nothing happens. His traditional religious values seem to have succumbed to the pressure of the alien values as witnessed by the church bells that toll "far down the slope" (29-30). In the poem, Nazombe interrogates the role and meaning of Easter or Christianity in the life of the African in the manner of the poet Abioseh Davidson Nicol.¹⁰⁵

In "Thunderbolt" (p. 7) where traditional worship and ritual sacrifice are upheld the poet-protagonist adopts an incantatory and invocative technique to the thunderbolt or Mphambe (god of thunder) to shower his blessings on the elders who are going to conduct a burial and offer a sacrifice at Chingwe's Hole. The traditional authenticity of these elders is also emphasised by the loincloth. Notice that unlike the "hoary-headed ancestor" in "Wreaths for a Wanderer" (p. 41) these elders' loincloths are intact. The poem shows that sacrifice "on the crown" (3) is only part of a ritual, possibly of initiation, that the poet-protagonist and his friends (notice the use of the first personal plural pronoun "we") are supposed to undergo. The success of this first part would lead to the second one which involves the anointing with oil from potsherds and trapping of a red cock probably for a burnt offering. This poem is exemplary in Nazombe's use of his tradition as it exploits Evance Chaputalu's findings in his research into the beliefs surrounding Chingwe's Hole, namely that the hole served as a place of burial and sacrifice. In the poem Nazombe exploits both functions.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Chingwe's Hole is found on the western edge of Zomba plateau. It is believed to have been a burial place and site for sacrifice for people living on the plateau. It is also believed to have been a place for punishment where witches were thrown alive to die in its recesses. (See Evance Chaputula, "Chingwe's Hole." *Kalulu*, no. 3 [May 1982] and Nazombe, "Malawian Poetry in English" [1983]. During Banda's reign Chingwe's Hole was used as a metaphor of prison, especially Mikuyu Maximum Security Prison which, like the hole, is found in Zomba.

¹⁰⁵ Abioseh Nicol, "African Easter: III Easter Morning," *West African Verse: An Anthology*, ed. and comp. Donatus Ibe Nwoga (London: Longman, 1967) 25-29.

¹⁰⁶ In his research on Chingwe's Hole, Evance Chaputula discovered that originally the hole was called Chigogolo meaning "bumping sound." The name changed to Chingwe in the late 19th Century following the mishaps of a curious white man who sought to examine the dark recesses of the hole. He descended down the hole using a rope (chingwe) but the rope proved short. When he was pulled out he had turned black and seriously ill. He died a few days later. Chaputula also discovered that the hole was used as a burial place by the Yao people of chief Mulumbe. Three days after death had occurred the body was

The baffling "This Temple" (p. 54), on the other hand, deals with the archetypal theme of a sinner seeking expiation. It is baffling because of the private symbolism that makes it hard to follow the content with any precision. It is not immediately clear who the "pilgrim from the north" (17) and what the speaker's role in a Christian church (hinted at by the reference to the Holy Communion in the second stanza) are. The poem is also not consistent with the three discussed above as the poet-protagonist here seems to confess allegiance to Christian beliefs. As such, it appears that Nazombe is torn between traditional religious practices and Christianity.

Further, like many other poets, living or dead, in Africa or beyond, Nazombe looks at the most universal aspect of human emotions: love. Basically there are two forms of love motifs in Nazombe's verse: enduring love and the pain of unrequited love. Unlike the other themes discussed above these themes are confined to the section aptly titled "Of Love and Despair." The poems in this section though are rather simple and straightforward to merit a long discussion. The first poem in the section, "Hang Glider" (p. 21), details the poet's love for a particular woman. The whirlwind described in the first stanza of the poem like in Chimombo's "Beggar Woman" is a symbol of confusion,

wrapped in a mat, slung on a long pole and carried to Chingwe's Hole for burial. Since women were perceived as being unable to climb the rest of the steep slope they remained at Mtulo, somewhere mid-way up the plateau, as the men proceeded to the hole. Once at the hole the men gathered around it, tied long ropes to both ends of the mat and lowered it into the hole. When the ropes reached their limits the body was released and later a bumping sound (Chigogolo) was heard from the hole. This sound confirmed to the mourners that the body had been received by the ancestors. The men then joined the women at Mtulo and solemnly walked home. On this occasion two doves were also released at the hole to carry a message to the ancestors that such a person was coming. Another use of the hole that Chaputula uncovered was that it was a place of sacrifice for the Yao. Three pots which were used during sacrificial ceremonies to Chauta, whether in gratitude for a good harvest or to present grievances, were placed under a tree that grew from the wall of the hole. In case of a draught, for instance, the chief and the elders took flour and beer to the hole while the rest of the people remained at Mtulo where they danced Chindimba (a traditional dance). At the hole the chief poured beer into the three pots and sprinkled flour into the hole while invoking the names of his forefathers. All the while the elders clapped their hands, and when a roaring sound was heard from the hole it meant that their prayers had been accepted. They left the hole dancing to join the others at Mtulo after which a heavy down-pour would come (Chaputula 28-30).

uncertainty and insecurity surrounding the lovers' relationship.¹⁰⁷ But as in a real whirlwind where the things carried by the air current "come crushing to the ground" (7), the confusion, uncertainty and insecurity surrounding the relationship slowly disappear. The calmness and composure of the poet-protagonist amidst the confusion is highlighted by the image of the kite that flies above the whirlwind (stanza two) until a chance opens up for him to swoop down on his love – to finally unite with her. The imagery of a bird of prey, a kite, that swoops down upon the lover weakens the power of love here and reveals the underlying patriarchal undertones as the woman is portrayed as conquered while the man emerges as a victorious victimiser. Nevertheless, the enduring love the poet-protagonist has for his woman remains as is evident in "Our Load" (p. 27). The advice in "City Lights" (p. 26) appears to have gone unheeded and the village girl who is the poet-protagonist's lover comes home with a baby on her back. Instead of abandoning her, as many a man would have done, the poet-protagonist decides to stay with her, advising her: "We must help each other carry this load" ("Our Load," [14]). "I Return to You" (p. 22) and "Coming Home to Roost" (p. 28) also show the poet-protagonist's love for his lover.

However, the relationship turns sour along the way. Several poems testify to the fact that the man, the poet-protagonist, endures the pain of unrequited love. "A Kind of Death" (p. 24), for example, emphasises the pain the poet-protagonist goes through as a result of the deception he receives from the woman. The two are away from each other but instead of writing to the man as she promised, the woman decides to remain quiet. This silence brings deep psychological despair to the poet-protagonist who compares his suffering to some kind of death. Prompted by the woman's unpredictable behaviour the man wishes he knew whether the woman still loves him or not in "The Arms You Courted" (p. 23) and "The Unwanted" (p. 25). In the former, the corrupting influence of the city to the migrants from the village is hinted at when the poet-protagonist wonders "[. . .] what have the neon lights/Done to you?" (5-6).

The poet-protagonist's deep psychological suffering on account of his unpredictable and wayward lover(s) comes out clearly in the poem "Respite" (p. 29) when he gets the chance to stay with her again. The words "bruised heart" and "feverish mind" (21, 23) and the fact that on listening to the woman's voice "A strange radiance

¹⁰⁷ Nazombe, "Malawian Poetry in English," 129.

suffused [his] mind" (4), underlines this suffering in the manner the Courtly love poets used to express it. As time passes, the poet-protagonist's patience with the woman wears thin and he decides to be done with her once and for all. His anger is evident in "This Thing Between Us" (p. 30), written after Joe Mosiwa's "This Parcel of Bitterness."¹⁰⁸ In "This Thing Between Us" the poet-protagonist tells the woman to "Scrape [her] frozen [or false] confessions" (15) for he is aware that she harbours ill intentions against him. The woman's cunning and cruelty are seen when she causes the poet-protagonist to suffer psychologically for a long time ("frayed my nerves too long" [10]), gnaws his toes and blows air over them and her sinister wish to "dig a dagger" (16) into his heart. The perception that the woman is incorrigibly evil leads to the exorcism of her spirit in a poem titled "Exorcism" (p. 31). Here, like in Lupenga Mphande's "Mandase" and "The Jilted Lover" (ts.) which may have influenced the present poem, the man confesses to have nothing more to do with his ruthless and unfeeling lover.

To conclude my discussion on themes in Nazombe's poetry I turn to the poem "Battle for Chingwe's Hole" (pp. 62-69) in which Nazombe celebrates the revolutionary nature of the human spirit. In this poem where he pokes fun at his fellow poets for seemingly struggling for Chingwe's Hole¹⁰⁹ Nazombe also shows that he sees history as progressive. As such the poem offers hope to the oppressed people in Africa that liberation would come their way. In the poem the poet contrives a perennial myth of an archetypal all-conquering hero, Namarohi, a Lomwe chief in Mozambique during the colonial period who stood against the Portuguese occupation of Lomwe land. In the poem Nazombe extends the range of Namarohi's exploits to Malawi where he acts as John Chilembwe's advisor during the Chilembwe Uprising of 1915 against the colonialists, and to Zimbabwe where he takes part in the battle of Chimurenga.¹¹⁰ Nazombe elevates

¹⁰⁸ In Mosiwa's poem, a man registers his sadness and sense of betrayal from a wife he loves: "Hermits at least have a basis/but not this feeling of having been betrayed/The loving finding themselves unloved" ("This Parcel of Bitterness," *Odi: A Journal of Literature From Malawi* 4.1 [May, 1982]: 67).

¹⁰⁹ In an interview with Bernth Lindfors Nazombe says in this poem he was teasing his fellow poets such as Mapanje and Chimombo, saying "It looks like we're all struggling for this hole." (Nazombe, *Kulankula* [sic] 30).

¹¹⁰ A Shona word which means to fight or struggle, here refers to Zimbabwe's guerrilla war of liberation from the British (1972-1979), also called the second revolution, 19/8/04 {<http://struggle.ws/africa/safrica/>

Namarohi above Chimombo's Napolo and compares his mischief to Chiluwe.¹¹¹ In this poem, Nazombe seems to say preoccupation with Chingwe's Hole is not enough; poets should also turn to their tribal or national histories to get inspiration for their poetry.

This far I have attempted to show that Nazombe deals with various issues such as oppression, repression, exploitation, disillusionment, transience of life and love, among others, in his poetry. The socio-political situation under which he was writing is his immediate frame of reference in his dealings with issues of oppression and exploitation. However, whatever he says on the above issues can also apply anywhere in the world where tyrants wield power. Out of the poetry emerge a deep, dark despair, hopelessness and disillusionment with the leadership and political environment, and life in general.

The next chapter seeks to show how Nazombe's style fosters his hopelessness and despair, his disillusionment with the socio-political environment and with humankind and life in general.

unrest/zimbabwe1.html}.

¹¹¹ A "trickster god whose schemes and intrigues periodically force Napolo [a "mythical subterranean serpent residing under mountains and associated with landslides, earthquakes, and floods in Malawi" (Steve Chimombo, Preface, *NP*, iiv)] to leave his resting place in the abyss and wreak havoc on earth and its inhabitants" (Nazombe, "Malawian Poetry in English," 153).

CHAPTER III

MYTH AND TRADITION IN NAZOMBE'S POETRY

This chapter analyses Nazombe's poetic style and technique. It shows that, like Chimombo and Mapanje, Nazombe uses myths and tradition in his poetry. It also looks at Nazombe's use of language in general focusing on such aspects as tone, irony, and imagery, among others, and maintains that Nazombe's style in *NDH* enhances his hopelessness and despair and his interrogation of the meaning/lessness of life.

One of the myths exploited in Nazombe's poetry, like in that of other Malawian poets such as Mapanje and Chimombo, is that of Chingwe's Hole which is found on Zomba plateau. In his poem "Thunderbolt" (p. 7), as indicated in the discussion above, Nazombe combines two of the beliefs attached to the hole: that it was a religious or ritual site and a burial place. His use of the myth is very innovative and economical. He does not mention Chingwe's Hole directly. He simply alludes to its location through the act of climbing (1) and the contrasting phrases "on the crown" (3) and "at the foot" (6). He also manages to exploit the two beliefs attached to the hole within this short poem.

"Easter Dawn at Chingwe's Hole" (p. 47) also exploits the same myth but in this case it is more of a place of worship or a religious site than anything else. The presence of the poet-protagonist at Chingwe's Hole on Easter Dawn is a symbolic return to his roots to determine their survival in the wake of the encroachment of Western values onto African traditional terrain. In this light, Chingwe's Hole embraces all strands of tradition which have suffered abandonment as a result of the influence of Western values on the African psyche.

In "Battle For Chingwe's Hole" (pp. 62-69) Nazombe also exploits the myth of Chingwe's Hole, though in a deprecating manner.¹¹² His purpose here is to teach his fellow Malawian poets by example that there is a lot to inspire a poet in the country's history. It is interesting to note that the myth of the hero, Namarohi, that Nazombe contrives in the poem exhibits some elements of a hero pattern, especially those outlined by Jan de Vries, namely (a) his youth is threatened (p. 62:6-7), (b) he often acquires

¹¹² See footnote 109.

invulnerability (Namarohi fights many battles), (c) he fights with the dragon or other monster (Namarohi challenges Napolo to a wrestling match [p. 68:19]), (d) he makes an expedition to the underworld (p. 63:1-27, p. 68:16-18).¹¹³ The poem also introduces another version of the Chilembwe myth, which holds that Chilembwe escaped death at the hands of the whites to an island on Lake Chilwa where he died an old man in 1953.¹¹⁴ Attached to this is a millenarian or messianic myth that Chilembwe would come back in the second millennium.

Another poem that exploits myth or local belief is "Hang Glider" (p. 21). In this poem Nazombe uses a local belief that at the centre of a whirlwind and indeed what causes it is a double-headed worm. This worm can be seen by covering the whirlwind with a winnowing basket. The truth of the matter however is that these worms are mythical creatures, rarely seen, if at all, for nobody in their sane mind would attempt the daunting task of covering a whirlwind with a winnowing basket. These creatures are also "associated with spirits and at times portend ill-luck."¹¹⁵

"I Shall Not Return" (p. 4), as we saw above, underlines the impossibility of reversing the past. To buttress this Nazombe refers to the myth of the origin of life and death which is found in central and southern parts of Africa. This myth has it that Chameleon was once sent to find out from Chauta/God whether human beings shall die or not. God gave him the good message that man shall not die. But he procrastinated on the way back until Lizard was sent with the same question to God. But sadly he came

¹¹³ Lord Raglan, "The Hero of Tradition," *The Study of Folklore*, ed. Alan Dundes (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1965) 143.

¹¹⁴ One version of the Chilembwe myth holds that though he was killed by the British, he would in some way return to deliver his people from the colonial yoke. As such other people saw the return of Banda in 1958 after many years abroad as a form of reincarnation or mysterious resurrection of Chilembwe. Another version, to an extent like the one in the poem, denies Chilembwe's death at the hands of the British, holding that he eluded them and went abroad (South Africa, Germany or the United States) from where he shall come to deliver the people at an opportune time. Yet another variant has it that Chilembwe kept a horse behind his church and in the heat of the battle rode it over Mulanje mountain to the sea where he boarded a ship to America (See Nazombe, "Malawian Poetry in English," 35-36). In his "Before Chilembwe Tree" Mapanje holds that Chilembwe did not die but went up to heaven through the *nsolo* tree (OCAG 18).

¹¹⁵ Nazombe, "Malawian Poetry in English," 140.

back with a message of death to humanity after overtaking Chameleon on the way. This message was irreversible and has not been reversed since, as people still die today.

In his poetry Nazombe is not confined to local or traditional myth. Greek myths and legends of the Western world also find expression here. In "Battle for Chingwe's Hole" Nazombe alludes to the Greek myth of Odysseus, also Ulysses, by referring to the now proverbial Scylla and Charybdis.¹¹⁶ The myth of Hades or the underworld is also alluded to in "Silent Surgeons" (p. 9), a poem that shows the transience of life and reads like a prayer to God to receive bodies of people who had failed to exploit their full potentials while alive: They buried them in the sand (2) or mounted them on doubtful foundations. The lines "We are not worthy to ferry them across/Only sleepwalkers span these waters" (4-5) remind one of the rivers ("these waters") of the underworld – the Acheron, the Cocytus, the Phlegethon, the Styx and the Lethe – and Charon's ferry across the Acheron. As such the prayer in the poem is not a prayer to the Christian God but to Hades, king of the underworld, which is referred to as "the earth" (8) in the poem, to punish the souls of the dead in the manner of Sisyphus or Tantalus for their failures on earth, "the sky" (7) in the poem. The punitive aspect in the poem is alluded to by the reference to the worms that should work on the remains of the dead. Another interesting stylistic feature in "Silent Surgeons" is the invocative voice in the poem that compares favourably to that of Okigbo in "Heavens Gate: I The Passage." The lines "Receive them, eternal Lord,/Despite talents they buried in the sand" (p. 9:1-2) sounds very close to Okigbo's "Before you, mother Idoto,/Naked I stand."¹¹⁷ This shows how much influence Nazombe got from the Nigerian poet.

Nazombe's allusion to Western myths or legends is also seen in "The Racket" (p. 49) where he alludes to the legend of Robin Hood, the legendary English outlaw

¹¹⁶ Scylla was a mythical six-headed monster that dwelt high up on the cliff from where she thrust forth her long necks to seize one of the crew of every vessel that happened to pass within reach. Charybdis on the other hand was a gulf nearly on a level with the water. The water rushed into a frightful chasm thrice each day and thrice it was disgorged and any vessel that came near the whirlpool when the tide was rushing in was inevitably ingulfed. Odysseus, also Ulysses, was to pass between the two on his way home. In the poem Scylla and Charybdis "denote opposite dangers which beset one's course."

3.06.04 {<http://www.bartleby.com/181/293.html>}.

¹¹⁷ *Labyrinths with Path of Thunder* (London: Heineman, 1971) 3.

prowling Sherwood forest. All this shows Nazombe's open-mindedness and the large extent of his frame of reference in the poetry. Much as he is searching his roots or identity, as we noticed in "Thunderbolt," "Easter Dawn at Chingwe's Hole" and "Battle for Chingwe's Hole," he feels free to use what other cultures have put at his disposal.

Another stylistic feature of Nazombe's poetry is the use of archetypes. Most poems by Nazombe treat the fundamental aspects of human existence such as growing up, initiation, love and death to expose the futility of human endeavours and the transience or finitude of human life. A poem like "Initiation" (p. 14), for instance, deals with a rite of passage – initiation. In "Cycles" (pp. 17-19) we see the same archetypal pattern of birth, growth and death. All the poems in part two of the collection *NDH* titled "Of Love and Despair" deal with the archetypal theme of love. Most poems in this section which treat the theme of pain of unrequited love also show the archetype of a person, the poet-protagonist, who is more sinned against than sinning, take "This Thing Between Us" (p. 30) for example. Furthermore, in "This Temple" (p. 54) we see the archetype of a guilt-ridden figure seeking expiation while "Exorcism" (p. 31) gives a picture of a *femme fatale* who is being exorcised. Our final example here is "Battle For Chingwe's Hole" (pp. 62-69) which gives us an archetypal all-conquering hero, Namarohi.

Tradition is yet another stylistic feature in Nazombe's poetry. "Thunderbolt" (p. 7), for example, tackles ritual sacrifice and burial at Chingwe's Hole in a manner that reminds one of the Negritude Poets' respect of ancestors. In "Easter Dawn at Chingwe's Hole" (p. 47) Nazombe makes reference to Nantongwe, a Lomwe spirit-possession dance, and the Nankungwi and guard rattlers who are associated with it. In "City Lights" (p. 26) we hear the traditional advice given to the village girl going to the city. Local proverbs also find expression in the poetry. A good example is found in "A Singer in 1981" (p. 61) where there is mention of linen washed abroad. This recalls the Yao proverbial saying: *Mwakwenda mwangachapira kasoti* which warns against divulging the secrets of one's home elsewhere.

Moreover, Nazombe's poetry thrives on use of powerful imagery. This stylistic feature enables the poet to lay bare the underlying hopelessness and despair of the poetry. It also gives the poetry its gloomy and contemplative tone, its quizzical stance on the

meaning/lessness of life and the depressing effect it has upon the reader. In a poem like "Boredom" (p. 8), for example, the hopelessness of the situation is highlighted by the simile "The future unwinds/Like soot-stained thread" (1-2). The "Oil from ruined tombs" (3) coupled with the pathetic fallacy of sea weed gloating over the drowned (11) create a nightmarish and hopeless world comparable to the one in Soyinka's "Abiku."¹¹⁸

The way Nazombe handles syntax and structure in "Boredom" is also very impressive. The combination of the abstract term "future" with the verb "unwinds" enables us to visualise the unfolding future. Structurally, the last stanza returns the reader to the beginning to appreciate the poet-protagonist's fears for the future. While in the first stanza we encounter a non-inviting future unwinding "Like [a] soot-stained thread" (2), a future fraught with chaos and destruction, in the final stanza we notice that chaos and bloodshed are in progress as the future now "unwinds/Above red-tinged waves" (15-16).

Nazombe's imagery in "Dawn" (p.11) also paints a nightmarish picture. The image of "the sleeper's head/Perched on a white alter stone" (7-8) is so strong that it gives one a queasy feeling. The psychological suffering of the poet-protagonist in the poem is underscored by the "insistent miaows (sic)/Piercing the concrete walls/Between darkness and light" (9-11) while the "Voices retreating into the mist" and the "Audible flow of silence" that haunts "the trees and the grass" (16-18) powerfully paint a world peopled by spooky figures devoid of speech.

Nazombe's choice of negative images mostly associated with death gives his poetry a characteristically hopelessly sad tone. The gloomy mood that one encounters in the poem "No Dreams Here" (p. 3) seems to pervade the whole collection. In this poem ("No Dreams Here") where hopes are dashed, a fact emphatically captured by the harsh word "crumble" (4), the metaphor of the "ant-eaten crosses" sagging over earth mounds (8) captures the impotence, the powerlessness of the elders and the rot that pervades

¹¹⁸ In Soyinka's poem the defiant Abiku paints a world of nightmare when he says

The ground is wet with mourning
White dew suckles flesh-birds
Evening befriends the spider, trapping
Flies in wind-froth;

(*West African Verse*, 63).

society. The repetition of “No dreams here” (9, 15) also emphasises the unhappy predicament of the people in this society and heightens the gloomy mood of the poem. The fear-induced silence that pervaded the country is also captured by the image of “trampling zombie faces” that disappear into holes and emerge red-eyed at sundown (21-23). This poem is built on a set of contrasts: day or light/night or darkness, old/young, dawn or beginning/sundown or end, and flesh/metal. The contrast between day and night links up very well with the one between knowledge and ignorance, or truth and falsehood. Malawians, for example, ignorantly embraced high hopes during the hour of night or darkness (during the fight against colonialism) only to realise the bitter truth that they had “clasped” (3) false hopes at daybreak (after independence). On the other hand, the contrast between old and young links up very well with the one between beginning (of day) in the first stanza and end (of day) in the last stanza. These contrasts emphasise the hopelessness of the situation. The poet-protagonist seems to say, as it is for the young, so too with the old, and as it is at daybreak, so it is at sundown: no hope for anybody, at any time. Furthermore, the contrasting values between metal (hard) and flesh (soft) emphasise the physical suffering of prisoners, especially when we take the metal as a metonymy for handcuffs and flesh as another metonymy for a human being.

Powerful visual images are all too clear in “I Shall Not Return” (p. 4). One can almost see the “tracks of memory” lying strewn along the road and the “blanks left in haste” plus the “syllables sown in the wind” (2-3, 6,8). Nazombe’s syntax in the poem is central to the visual imagery and the sense of hopelessness of return. The reference to tracks (visible) of memory (invisible) that “Lie strewn all along the road” (3) enables us to visualise the “road of life” through which the poet-protagonist has travelled. The phrases “retrieve syllables” (8), “measure tears” (9) and “count the laughter” (10) which spell out the impossible underscore the impossibility or hopelessness of return. The repetition of “I shall not return” (1, 4 and 7) gives the poem a musical effect or its lyricism. Powerful visual imagery also works to good effect in “In Memoriam” (p. 5). Here one can almost visualise the athlete being “snapped in mid-leap” (4). This imagery emphasises the suddenness of death. The suddenness and prematurity of the death is also captured by the natal imagery “umbilical cord prematurely broken” (7) while the

graphology – the ellipsis after “Unfinished phrase” – points to the choking of the poet-protagonist’s voice as a result of sorrow.

Nazombe’s success in painting deep psychological despair of the poet-protagonist following his unrequited love in the section titled “Of Love and Despair” also relies heavily on his use of imagery. In “The Unwanted” (p. 25) for example we encounter “Pigeon’s feathers” that flap in the poet-protagonist’s face (4). These underscore the poet’s confusion and suffering as the distance between him and his lover grows. This also emphasises loss of the lover who is symbolised as a pigeon. Such tactile imagery as pinpricks that return “into already swollen flesh” (13-15) captures the emotional and physical suffering of the poet-protagonist.

The poet-protagonist’s great psychological pain is also evident in “This Thing Between Us” (p. 30) and “Respite” (p.29). In the latter we learn that a “strange radiance” (4) suffuses the poet-protagonist’s mind on listening to the woman’s voice. This is the moment when the pain abates. Great choice of words to paint psychological suffering is seen in the last stanza. Here the poet-protagonist yearns that the woman should massage his “bruised heart,” mop his brow with her lovely hair and sooth his feverish mind with the poultice of her voice (21-24), reminiscent of Léopold Sédar Senghor’s “Woman, rest on my brow your balsam hands/gentler than fur” in his poem “Night of Sine.”¹¹⁹ The words “fray” and “gnaw,” and the alliterative phrase “dig a dagger” (10-11,16) in “This Thing Between Us” paint a ruthless picture of the woman and great suffering of the man. It is this choice of words, phrases and images that makes the poetry gloomy, sad and full of pain and suffering. Exact verbal rendition that makes one suspect that Nazombe was experimenting with Imagism¹²⁰ is seen in the notoriously obscure “Black Kitten” (p. 70), which could be anything from a fable about power, where the victimiser becomes the next victim, to the poet-protagonist’s hallucinations.

As we saw in chapter two Nazombe’s poetry is highly associative and allusive. Titles of poems like “Guardian Fly,” “Cockroaches” and “Tuberculosis” are associated

¹¹⁹ *Modern Poetry from Africa*, eds. Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier (Baltimore and Maryland: Penguin, 1968) 48.

¹²⁰ Imagism is a “European literary movement which advocated complete freedom of subject matter for the poet, the use of free verse, great exactness of diction, and the perfect verbal rendition of an image” (Horton and Edwards 368).

with the experiences or events described in the poems. Sexual innuendoes appear in "Initiation" (p. 14) and in "Song of a Motorist" (p. 39). In "Initiation," which shows similarities with Sam Mchombo's "Ulimi,"¹²¹ the pestle symbolically stands for the penis while the mortar stands for the vagina. The flour, by its colour and being the result of the labour of the pestle in the mortar, is semen. The booming clouds symbolise the sexual encounter while the "potent rain-drops" (17) also refer to semen. This is consistent with initiation when the initiates are now considered grown ups who should be taught the secrets of procreation. Again, as we saw in Chapter Two, Nazombe uses irony in such poems as "Silent Surgeons," "Song of a Motorist," "Blind Terror" (p. 36) and "Modes of Freedom" (p. 45) to communicate to the reader his disillusionment with the leadership and the political system of the day.

Finally Nazombe's use of history is an important stylistic feature worth mention here. In "Emigrant Pole" (p. 57), Nazombe alludes to some experiences of the Polish during World War II. In "Battle For Chingwe's Hole" (pp. 62-69) he exploits history of the Lomwe during Portuguese occupation of their land and the events of the Chilembwe uprising with great detail¹²² to demonstrate to his fellow poets and would-be poets that there is a lot to inspire them in history.

¹²¹ Moto 69-70.

¹²² In the poem "Battle For Chingwe's Hole" which has eight movements and is the longest in the collection, history and criticism of the other poets' fascination with myths, especially that of Chingwe's Hole, are interwoven with great skill. In the first movement Namarohi whom we gather dwells in the dark depths of Chingwe's Hole decries the poets' overfamiliarity with the legends and myths surrounding the hole as if there are no other things, the Nantongwe ritual – a Lomwe spirit possession dance – for example, to inspire them. In the second movement the poet introduces a legend which he must have heard from his parents or relatives (which this author also got from his father) of a Lomwe chief, Pulu. The legend has it that after a great feast with his subjects, Pulu walked to the bank of Lake Chiuta where he bid his people farewell before striking the water with his stick to create a path through which he and his bride walked before the water closed above their heads forever. In the poem Namarohi claims to be that chief. The third movement takes us to Lomwe land in Mozambique before Portuguese occupation of that area. When the Portuguese came to Lomwe land led by Lieutenant Rego they gathered all the Lomwe chiefs at the headquarters of chief Khumbanyiwa near Murumbu Hill and asked them: "Do you want the English or the Portuguese?" John Gray Kufa Mapantha of Chinde (Tchinde in the poem) who must have connived with the colonialists interpreted Rego's question with much intimidation on the consequences of refusing to be

under the Portuguese. The chiefs and their followers clapped hands and said in Emihavani (Lomwe dialect): "Pwiya, pwiya nnokhwelani nyuwano." (Lord, lord, we want you) (Lewis Mataka Bandawe, *Memoirs of a Malawian: The Life and Reminiscences of Lewis Mataka Bandawe* [Blantyre: CLAIM, 1971] 40). Where upon they were given coats and calico. On hearing of the harsh treatment of the people under Portuguese occupation, chief Namarohi, whose area was forty miles from Murumbu, put up a fight against the Portuguese. But he surrendered a year later. By "the confusion that still dogs us" (p. 64:16) Nazombe refers to the consequences of colonialism, one of which is the corruption of names by both the colonised and the coloniser. In Lomwe land for instance, the place and chief's name Kuruwe was corrupted into Guruwe by the Portuguese while the Lomwe corrupted the Portuguese name Rego and the word "quartella" to Rekoni and Karitela respectively. The fourth movement evokes the encounter between the Lomwe and the migrating Ngoni where history has it that a good number of Ngonis died after eating *Kalingonda*, a type of beans which are poisonous when not thoroughly cooked, which they found in huge pots in a deserted Lomwe village. This movement also introduces us to the Chilembwe uprising of 1915. John Gray Kufa Mapantha who was to lead a third battalion of Chilembwe's men deserted at the eleventh hour, "vanished when he was needed most" (p. 65:32). The fifth movement supplies more details about the events that happened during and soon after the uprising. Kaduya was the master tactician of Chilembwe's 'army,' but, as the poem rightly puts it, he was shot in the leg and captured by the British soldiers. This movement also introduces the version of the Chilembwe myth which denies his death at the hands of the *askaris*, soldiers of the colonialists, but that he died an old man on an island on Lake Chilwa and would come back to save his people from colonial oppression. All this shows that Nazombe is greatly indebted to tribal and national history in his 'Battle For Chingwe's Hole.' (See D. D. Phiri, *Malawians to Remember: John Chilembwe* [Lilongwe: Longman, 1976], Bandawe [1971] and George Simeon Mwase, *Strike a Blow and Die: The Classic Story of the Chilembwe Rising*, ed. Robert I. Rotberg [London: Heinemann, 1975]).

CHAPTER IV

ECHOES, INFLUENCES AND INTERTEXTUALITY¹²³

Having looked at Nazombe's themes, technique and style in chapters two and three respectively, this chapter focuses on the influences of other poets on Nazombe's poetry. The chapter argues that these influences do not diminish Nazombe's importance as a poet.

When asked in an interview with Bernth Lindfors to characterise his poetry in 1986, Nazombe replied:

I don't know whether I have found a voice as yet that could be labeled (sic). I think basically I'm experimenting with various forms. I've written poetry inspired by my colleagues and by Soyinka and Okigbo. I've written poetry which I thought was entirely original, but of course other people may find echoes there. I am continuing to experiment, and I wouldn't say I have found a particularly suitable mode as yet.¹²⁴

Echoes and influences do in fact abound in Nazombe's poetry. From Okigbo and Soyinka, the two poets whom he identifies as his favourites, he inherited the private symbolism and solipsism evident in "Black Kitten" (pp. 70-72) and the wide frame of reference that the two are renowned for. From Okigbo in particular Nazombe seems to have inherited the incantatory and invocative technique of "Heavensgate" and "Siren Limits" in such poems as "Voice" and "Thunderbolt." But unlike Okigbo and Soyinka he is not prone to archaism or Latinism that has gained notoriety in the poetry of the two Nigerians.¹²⁵

The experimentation that Nazombe is talking about in the interview referred to above is clear in the collection. We see him experimenting with imagism in "Black

¹²³ This chapter assesses and evaluates Nazombe's poetry. The assessment makes ample use of Nazombe's own findings in his research into the poetry of Steve Chimombo, Jack Mapanje, Frank Chipasula and Felix Mnthali – (Nazombe, "Malawian Poetry In English" (1983).

¹²⁴ Nazombe, *Kulankula* (sic) 28.

¹²⁵ See Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike (1980).

Kitten,” dramatic poetry in “Cycles” (pp. 17-19) and lyric poetry in several of the pieces in the collection. One gets the impression that the lyrical mode was his favourite. In the lyrical pieces stanzaic divisions and repetition, for instance in “I Shall Not Return” (p. 4), “No Dreams Here” (p. 3) and “A Tear For Joe” (p. 51), (which laments the fate of professor Joe, possibly one of the poet’s professors at Sheffield who lost his teaching job due to his eccentric teaching of Spinoza, and his membership to the university’s Union Bar for upsetting “an Asian student’s fish and chips” [31]), contribute immensely to the musicality or lyricism of Nazombe’s poetry.¹²⁶

In his use of “proverbs, fragments of customs and beliefs” and history “to root the experiences of his poems more firmly in the Malawian landscape and consciousness”¹²⁷ Nazombe follows in the footsteps of such poets as Mapanje and Chimombo. This also proves his assertion that “In terms of genre, the Malawian poets’ approach to oral literature is not selective but comprehensive. He eagerly borrows elements from history, myth, folktales and proverbs.”¹²⁸ Like many other Malawian poets, Nazombe has used the myth of Chingwe’s Hole, the Chilembwe myth and the chameleon and lizard story.

Upon reading Nazombe’s poetry one also discovers that in his combination of symbols and images to make life a nightmare or to create a nightmarish picture of the world peopled by shadowy presences as in “Boredom” (p.8), “Festering Sores” (pp. 58-60) and “Misty Presences” (p. 44), Nazombe is echoing Chimombo’s “Beggar Woman,” among other poems.¹²⁹ Existential aspects are also traceable in the poetry of Chimombo and Mnthali. The image of existence as a trap noticeable in Nazombe’s “Boredom” is, as Nazombe himself observed, familiar in Chimombo’s poetry.¹³⁰ Moreover, Mnthali’s poem “He Was Next” according to Nazombe “calls into question the meaning of existence.” Here men’s lives are perceived as “puny scratches on the back of an

¹²⁶ Christopher Okigbo, one of Nazombe’s favourite poets, is also known for lyricism. See Catherine O. Acholonu, “From Rhetoric to Occultism: The Word as Music and Drama in Okigbo’s *Labyrinths*, *African Literature Today* 17 (1991): 131-141.

¹²⁷ Nazombe, “Malawian Poetry in English,” 87.

¹²⁸ Nazombe, “Malawian Poetry in English,” 12.

¹²⁹ Nazombe, “Malawian Poetry in English,” 92.

¹³⁰ Nazombe, “Malawian Poetry in English,” 96.

indifferent earth.”¹³¹ Furthermore, in his analysis of Mnthali’s poetry Nazombe concluded that the poetry does not suggest “a truly Malawian sensibility” but shows parallels with literary movements of the West: Romanticism, Symbolism and Modernism.¹³² Regarding the poetry’s existential manifestations Nazombe traces the influence to Modernism, which is believed to incorporate the other two, and in its “artistic manifestations [. . .] expresses man’s existential exposure to meaninglessness or absurdity.”¹³³ To a certain extent, therefore, these two Malawian poets, Chimombo and Mnthali, especially the latter, influenced Nazombe’s existential stance in *NDH*, in addition to James Joyce, whose work *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1977) he analysed in his MA thesis, and his study of French Literature in his undergraduate days at Chancellor College.

Moreover, despair and pessimism are not confined to Nazombe’s poetry. Mnthali’s poetry also exhibits the same which Nazombe traces to traditional English literature.¹³⁴ But while Mnthali’s despair is mostly psychological, in Nazombe it is both existential and psychological.¹³⁵ Psychological despair in Nazombe is clear in poems that touch on matters of love (which trace their influence to Lupenga Mphande, an unacknowledged literary ancestor of his) and political ones in which he shows his disillusionment and sense of betrayal. Existential despair on the other hand is traceable in a number of poems such as “Boredom,” “No Dreams Here” and “Heart of Stone” (p. 10). This existential despair together with the existential themes of suicide in “In Memoriam” (p. 5), loneliness in “Dawn” (p. 11), death, temporality, finitude and facticity in “No Bridge Will Link These Banks Again” (p. 32), (which mourns a lover who dies during childbirth) “I Shall Not Return,” “The Last Act” (p. 33), “Cycles” and “The Annunciation” (p. 55), among others, prompt one to classify Nazombe amongst existential writers such as Samuel Beckett, James Joyce, William Shakespeare, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Albert Camus and Jean Paul Sartre.

¹³¹ Nazombe, “Malawian Poetry in English,” 330.

¹³² Nazombe, “Malawian Poetry in English,” 323.

¹³³ Nazombe, “Malawian Poetry in English,” 323.

¹³⁴ Nazombe, “Malawian Poetry in English,” 345.

¹³⁵ Refer to footnote 96.

Nazombe's concern with existential themes distinguishes him from his Malawian counterparts who though they touch on one or two of these themes are less concerned with them. His constant despair and hopelessness make his poetry overly depressing. The experience one gets on reading these poems is comparable to groping in a dark tunnel that seems to have no end, and the picture one gets of the poet-protagonist is of one who is forever suffering both at the hands of fellow human beings and the hostile and indifferent world.¹³⁶

According to Omafume Onoge, there are three tendencies discernible in post-independence African literature, namely, art for art, critical realism and socialist realism.¹³⁷ Nazombe falls within critical realism like Mapanje and Mnthali of the post-detention era. He criticises the political and social reality in the country thereby exposing himself to the wrath of the powers that be for, although he resorts to veiled and cryptic language, a discerning eye can unravel the truth behind the veil.

However, Nazombe's critical attack on Mnthali can also be used to attack him. Against Mnthali he says

[H]is poetic achievement suggests that he has not yet strayed beyond merely reformist parameters. Though he obviously has the interests of the underprivileged at heart, it is significant that his poetry is not directed at them but at the intellectual elite who, he feels, have for too long shied away from their historic mission to lead the masses on the path of social rebirth." One also observes that for all the useful hints he drops along the way, Mnthali does not offer a systematic social vision for Africa."¹³⁸

Yet Nazombe does not seem to "offer a systematic social vision for Africa" either. He does not seem to move beyond exposition and criticism of the ills of the First Republic.

¹³⁶ Though Nazombe makes use of existential themes in his poetry as this study shows, he holds a different view from other existentialists on one of the major themes of existentialism, namely freedom. In his poetry Nazombe portrays human beings, especially the poor and powerless, as entrapped rather than free (See "Boredom" [p. 8]). Their lives are determined by those who wield political power in society (See "No Dreams Here" [3]).

¹³⁷ See more in Nazombe, "Malawian Poetry in English," 78.

¹³⁸ Nazombe, "Malawian Poetry in English," 79-80.

Like in Mnthali's poetry, Nazombe's social vision is implied by his criticism of the Banda era.

In the preceding assessment one notices that Nazombe's poetry is not entirely original. He consciously or unconsciously echoes other Malawian writers. His treatment of existential themes seems to echo Mnthali and Chimombo. This, however, does not undermine his poetic achievements. The great choice of words (for instance, the combination of verbs and nouns in "I Shall Not Return"), grammatical thoroughness, powerful imagery and technical and organisational skills (for instance, the beginning and ending of "No Dreams Here" and "Boredom") that reveal the poetry's quizzical stance on the meaning/lessness of life remain his own. Besides, on the question of mimesis not all imitators imitate well. The ability to imitate without repeating the shortfalls of those being imitated and without being a copycat is a creditable achievement. After all, no writer would claim that a work is entirely his/her own given that works of art echo one another. This is what is meant by intertextuality.¹³⁹

Conclusion

This study has attempted to analyse Nazombe's themes and style in his unpublished collection of poetry, "No Dreams Here and Other Poems" (1984). The study

¹³⁹ This is a "term coined by Julia Kristeva in 1966 to denote the interdependence of literary texts, the interdependence of any one literary text with all those that have gone before it." According to her "a literary text is not an isolated phenomenon but is made up of a mosaic of quotations, and that any text is the 'absorption and transformation of another'." ("Intertextuality," *Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, 3rd ed. 1991). T. S. (Thomas Stearns) Eliot made this observation before Kristeva. In his essay "Tradition and the Individual Artist" he observed that "if we approach a poet without [. . .] prejudice we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously." He further contends that "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast or comparison, among the dead." (T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Artist," *Contemporary Literary Criticism* 28-33). As the reader will notice from the analysis in this essay there is a lot of intertextuality between Nazombe's poetry and that of his contemporaries and predecessors.

has shown that Nazombe, like other Malawian poets such as Mapanje, Mnthali, Chimombo and Chipasula, to mention but a few, deals with political oppression and exploitation during Dr. Banda's thirty-year dictatorial reign. It also looks at post-independence betrayal and disenchantment. This disenchantment leads to psychological despair, as the future looks bleak and dreary. It has also shown that Nazombe's poetry exhibits existential despair, meaninglessness and absurdity in such poems as "Boredom" (p. 8), "Heart of Stone" (p. 10) and "Dawn" (p. 11). Psychological and existential despair, meaninglessness and absurdity, have invited the title of this study, "Broken Hopes and Fractured Dreams." That is to say, hopes for a better future were ruthlessly broken and fractured by the dictatorial and corrupt behaviour of the new elites of post-independence Africa while dreams or visions of tomorrow can only be fractured or fragmented in the increasingly uncertain, absurd, meaningless, hostile and indifferent world. Given the temporality and factual nature of life, it is hard to postulate a clear vision of tomorrow. Regarding themes, the study has shown that Nazombe's poetry touches on poverty and deprivation thereby deconstructing the official view of Banda's Malawi as a land of milk and honey, transience of life and the pain of unrequited love predominant in the second section titled "Of Love and Despair."

Furthermore, the study has also shown the stylistic aspects of the poetry. Writing within an oppressive regime Nazombe had to, ironically, resort to a cryptic voice which in some poems led to obscurity to escape from political persecution. He also uses imagery to good effect. The cryptic voice and the imagery make the poetry rich in meanings and the process of unravelling the hidden meanings more satisfying. The study has also shown that Nazombe's poetry echoes his readings and fellow poets to a great extent, especially those whose works he analysed in his PhD dissertation including Lupenga Mphande whose pre-1983 poetry he analysed possibly for inclusion in his PhD dissertation before he discovered that it lacked technical sophistication and a mature vision.

Like many other Malawian poets Nazombe uses myths, traditional beliefs and history. In this regard it is as if he is trying to prove his assertion that

[t]o the Malawian poet writing in English, the whole corpus of literature in local languages is useful mainly as a source of oral literary material; for in addition to novelettes, plays and poetry, it includes tribal histories, collections of myth, proverbs, riddles and accounts of traditional customs".¹⁴⁰

Finally, this study has shown that in spite of the resonance of other poetic voices in some areas such as in his dealings with existential aspects as we see in Chapter Four, Nazombe exhibits great maturity in word choice, use of idiosyncratic imagery and organisation that lead to his lyricism and the deep, dark despair and depression that he is capable of painting. These aspects give the poetry its characteristic gloomy and contemplative tone and interrogative stance on the meaning of life, which situate him in the fold of existential writers.

¹⁴⁰ Nazombe, "Malawian Poetry in English," 10.

LIST OF REFERENCES

- Acholonu, Catherine O. "From Rhetoric to Occultism: The Word as Music and Drama in Okigbo's *Labyrinths*." *African Literature Today* 17 (19991): 131-141. ✓
- Akram, Tanweer. "Essays on Existentialism." *The New Nation*, March 7 and 21, 1986. 3.10.04 {<http://www.columbia.edu/~ta63/exist.htm>}.
- Allbrook, Maryon and Helen Kattalini. *The General Langfitt Story – Polish Refugees Recount Their Experiences of Exile, Dispersal and Resettlement*. 11.3.04 {<http://www.Immi.gov.au/research/publications/langfitt/langfitt15.htm>}.
- Appiah, Kwame Anthony. "The Postcolonial and the Postmodern." *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*. Eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. London and New York: Routledge, 1995, repr. 1995. 119-124.
- "Archetype." *Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. 3rd ed. 1991.
- Armah, Ayi Kwei. *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. Oxford: Heinemann, 1968.
- Bandawe, Lewis Mataka. *Memoirs of a Malawian: The Life and Reminiscences of Lewis Mataka Bandawe*. Blantyre: CLAIM, 1971.
- Beckett, Samuel. *Waiting for Godot: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts*. 2nd ed. London: Faber, 1965, repr. 1977.
- Bodunde, Charles A. "Oral Traditions and Modern Poetry: Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* and Okigbo's *Labyrinths*." *Orature in African Literature Today* 18⁴ (1992): 24-33.
- "Bophuthatswana." *The Columbia Encyclopedia*. 6th ed. 2001. 27.5.04 {<http://www.bartleby.com/65/bo/Bophutha.html>}.
- Brutus, Dennis. "Somehow We Survive." *When My Brothers Come Home: Poems from Central and Southern Africa*. Ed. Frank Chipasula. Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 1985. 163. ✓
- Bullfinch, Thomas. "Scylla and Charybdis." *Age of Fable: Vols. I and II: Stories of Gods and Heroes* (1913). 3.6.04 {<http://www.bartleby.com/181/293.html>}.
- Burness, Don. "The Poetry of Antonio Jacinto and Jose Craveirinha: Journeys Beyond Survival." *Beyond Survival: African Literature and the Search for New Life*. Eds.

- Kofi Anyidoho, Abena P. A. Busia and Anne V. Adams. Trenton and Asmara: Africa World Press, 1999. 251-255.
- Catalogue of Banned Publications, Cinematograph Pictures and Records: From 1st August, 1968 to 31st August 1979*. Zomba: Government Printer, 1979.
- Chaputula, Evance. "Chingwe's Hole." *Kalulu* 3 (May 1982): 28-30.
- Chimombo, Steve. *Napolo Poems*. Zomba: Manchichi Publishers, 1987.
- "Chimurenga." 19.8.04 {<http://struggle.ws/africa/safrica/unrest/zimbabwe1.html>}.
- Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie and Ihechukwu Madubuike. *Toward the Decolonisation of African Literature, Vol. 1: African Fiction and Poetry and Their Critics*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1980.
- Chipasula, Frank. "Friend, Ah You Have Changed!" *The Heinemann Book of African Poetry in English*. Comp. Adewale Maja-Pearce. Oxford: Heinemann, 1990. 177.
- _____. *Whispers in the Wings: Poems*. Oxford: Heinemann, 1991.
- Chirambo, Reuben Makayiko. "Malawian Literature under Dr. Kamuzu Banda and Its Place in the New Democratic Malawi." *Tizame* 6 (Nov. 1998): 28-32.
- _____. "Poetry for Democracy in Malawi." *Southern Review* 11.3 (January, 1998): 16-21.
- _____. "Protesting Politics of 'Death and Darkness' in Malawi." *Journal of Folklore Research* 38.3 (Sep – Dec. 2001): 205-227.
- Davis, Robert Con and Ronald Schleifer. "Historical Critique." *Contemporary Literary Criticism: Literary and Cultural Studies*, 3rd ed. Eds. Robert Con Davis and Ronald Schleifer. New York and London: Longman, 1986. 433-443.
- Elimimian, Isaac I. "Kofi Awoonor as a Poet." *Orature in African Literature Today* 18 (1992): 35-48.
- Eliot, T[homas] S[tearns]. "Tradition and the Individual Artist," *Contemporary Literary Criticism: Literary and Cultural Studies*, 3rd ed. Eds. Robert Con Davis and Ronald Schleifer. New York and London: Longman, 1986. 28-33.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967.
- Fatton, Kathleen B. "The Novels of Alex La Guma: The Representation of Political Conflict." Diss. U of Notre Dame, 1984.

- Foucault, Michel. "Who Is an Author?" *Contemporary Literary Criticism: Literary and Cultural Studies*. 3rd ed. Eds. Robert Con Davis and Ronald Schleifer. New York and London: Longman, 1986. 342-353.
- Gibaldi, Joseph. *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. 5th ed. New York: The Modern Languages Association of America, 1999.
- Hakim, Albert. Introduction. "Jean-Paul Sartre 1905-1980." *Historical Introduction to Philosophy*. Ed. and comp. Albert Hakim. New York: Macmillan, 1987. 683-688.
- Hancock, Graham. *Lords of Poverty: The Freewheeling Lifestyles, Power, Prestige and Corruption of the Multibillion Dollar Aid Business*. Nairobi: Camerapix, 2001.
- Heywood, Annemarie. "Modes of Freedom: The Songs of Okot p'Bitek." *First Quarterly* 113 (1980): 235-257.
- Heywood, Christopher. A Letter to the Author. 31. 5. 2004.
- Holman, C. Hugh and William Harmon. *A Handbook to Literature*. 5th ed. New York: Macmillan, 1986.
- Holy Bible*. New King James Version. Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 1990.
- Horton, R. W. and H. W. Edwards. *Backgrounds of American Literary Thought*. 3rd ed. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1974.
- Housman, A. E. "To an Athlete Dying Young." *The Range of Literature*. Eds. Elisabeth W. Schneider, Albert L. Walker and Herbert E. Childs. New York: American Book Co., 1960. 319-320.
- Hunt, J. M. "Places in the Greek Myths." 11.6.04 {<http://edweb.sdsu.edu/people/bdodge/scaffold/GG/place.html>}.
- "Intertextuality." *Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. 3rd ed. 1991.
- Joyce, James. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. London: Graft Books, 1977, repr. 1986.
- Kern, Edith. *Existential Thought and Fictional Technique*. New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1970.
- Kerr, David. "A Renewable Contract." Unpublished Memoir. 1996.
- Killam, Douglas and Ruth Rowe, eds. 1.6.03 {<http://www.africadatabase.org/people/>}

- profiles/profilesforperson15971.html}.
- Lang, Chris. "A Brief History of Literary Theory IV." 28.6.05 {<http://www.xenos.org/essays/litthry5.htm>}.
- Leech, Geoffrey N. *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry*. London: Longmans, Harlow: Green, 1969.
- Locher, David. "Unacknowledged Roots and Blatant Imitation: Postmodernism and the Dada Movement." *Electronic Journal of Sociology* (1999). 28.6.05 {<http://www.sociology.org/content/vol004.001/locher.html>}.
- Lwanda, John. *Kamuzu Banda of Malawi: A Study in Promise, Power and Paralysis {Malawi Under Dr. Banda (1961-1993)}*. Bothwell, Glasgow: Dudu Nsomba, 1993.
- Macquarrie, John. *Existentialism: An Introduction, Guide and Assessment*. London: Penguin, 1972.
- Maja-Pearce, Adewale. "In the Land of the Zombies." *Index on Censorship* 20.9 (October 1991): 9-12.
- _____. "Malawi." *Index on Censorship* 21.4 (April 1992): 52-57.
- Mapanje, Jack. "The Changing Fortunes of the Writer in Africa?" *Writing and Africa*. Eds. Mpalive-Hangson Msiska and Paul Hyland. Harlow, Essex: Addison Wesley Longman, 1997. 216-33.
- _____. *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison*. Oxford: Heinemann, 1993.
- _____. A Letter to the Author. 31. 5. 2004.
- _____. *Of Chameleon and Gods*. Oxford: Heinemann, 1981.
- Mnthali, Felix. *When Sunset Comes to Sapitwa*. Lusaka: Neczam, 1980.
- Mosiwa, Joe. "This Parcel of Bitterness." *Odi: A Journal of Literature from Malawi* 4.1 (May, 1982): 67.
- Moto, Francis. *Trends in Malawian Literature*. Zomba: Chancellor College Publications, 2001.
- Mpasu, Sam. *Political Prisoner* 3/75. Harare: African Publishing Group, 1995.
- Mphande, Lupenga. *Crackle at Midnight: Poems*. Ibadan: Heinemann, 1998.
- _____. Ts. Nazombe's Collection, Malawiana, Chancellor College Library, U of Malawi, n. d.

Muluzi, Bakili et al. *Democracy with a Price: The History of Malawi Since 1900.*

Blantyre: Jhango Heinemann, 1999.

Mwase, George Simeon. *Strike a Blow and Die: The Classic Story of the Chilembwe Rising.* Ed. Robert I. Rotberg. London: Heinemann, 1975.

Nazombe, Anthony. "Guardian Fly," "In Memoriam." *Denga* (June 1977): 7, 8.

_____. ed. *The Haunting Wind: New Poetry From Malawi.* Blantyre: Dzuka, 1990.

_____. "Hide and Seek." *Denga* (June 1977): 14-17.

_____. Interview with Bernth Lindfors. *Kulankula* (sic): *Interviews with Writers from Malawi and Lesotho.* Bayreuth African Studies Series 14. (1986): 28-41.

_____. "I Shall Not Return." *Umodzi Magazine*. 4.1 (1977): 8.

_____. "The Labyrinth as a Ritual Initiation Pattern in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and Okigbo's *Labyrinths*." MA Thesis. Sheffield U, 1979. ✓

_____. "Malawian Poetry in English from 1970 to the Present Day: A Study of Myth and Social Political Change in the Work of Steve Chimombo, Jack Mapanje, Frank Chipasula and Felix Mnthali." PhD Diss. Sheffield U, 1983. ✓

_____. "Malawian Poetry of the Transition: Steve Chimombo's *A Referendum of the Forest Creatures* and Jack Mapanje's *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison*." *Church, Law and Political Transition in Malawi 1992-94.* Eds. Matembo S. Nzunda and Kenneth R. Ross. Gweru, Zimbabwe: Mambo Press, 1995. 135-152.

_____. "Meaning in Okigbo's Poetry." *Odi: A Journal of Literature from Malawi* III.1 (June 1978): 34-42. ✓

_____. "Myth and Literature in Africa: The Theoretical Issues." *Tizame* 3 (July 1992): 28-36.

_____. "Nantongwe: A Lomwe Spirit Possession Ritual." *Religion in Malawi* 1.2 (November 1988): 15-18.

_____. "No Dreams Here and Other Poems." Unpublished Collection. (1984). Malawiana, Chancellor College Library. U of Malawi.

_____. ed. *Operations and Tears: A New Anthology of Malawian Poetry.* Zomba : ~ Kachere, 2004, Copyright 2003.

- _____. "Poetry and Meditation." An Unpublished Notebook. Department of English, Chancellor College. U of Malawi. 1981-1982.
- _____. "The Role of Myth in the Poetry of Steve Chimombo." *New Writing From Southern Africa*. Ed. Emmanuel Ngara. London: James Currey, 1996. 93-107.
- Nicol, Abioseh. "African Easter: III Easter Morning." *West African Verse: An Anthology*. Ed. and comp. Donatus Ibe Nwoga. London: Longman, 1967. 25-29.
- Nkolokosa, Jika. "The Dead Don't Bite." *Malawi News*, November 13-19, 2004: 3
- Nkolokosa, Mzati. "Nurturing Brains Behind Bars." *The Nation*. 29 August, 2003: 13.
- Nkosi, Lewis. *Mating Birds: A Novel*. New York: Harper, 1986.
- Nowotny, Winifred. *The Language Poets Use*. London: The Athlone Press, 1962, repr. 1968.
- Nwoga, Donatus Ibe. "Abioseh Nicol." *West African Verse: An Anthology*. Ed. Donatus Ibe Nwoga. London: Longman, 1967. 147-151.
- Okigbo, Christopher. *Labyrinths with Path of Thunder*. London: Heinemann, 1971.
- Ó Máille, Pádraig. *Living Dangerously: A Memoir of Political Change in Malawi*. Blantyre: CLAIM, 2000.
- "The Panopticon." 3.8.04 {http://www.geneseo.edu/~bicket/panop/subject_P.html}.
- Park, James. "Existential Absurdity: Is Life Worth Living?" *Our Existential Predicament: Loneliness, Depression, Anxiety and Death*, Chap. 3. 3.8.04 {<http://www.tc.umn.edu/~parkx032/XP53.html>}.
- _____. "Existential Despair: Floating Down the River of Despair." *Our Existential Predicament: Loneliness, Depression, Anxiety and Death*, Chap. 10. 3.8.04 {<http://www.tc.umn.edu/~parkx032/XP253.html>}.
- _____. "Existential Loneliness: Deeper than the Reach of Love." *Our Existential Predicament: Loneliness, Depression, Anxiety and Death*, Chap. 1. 3.8.04 {<http://www.tc.umn.edu/~parkx032/XP25.html>}.
- _____. "Existential Meaninglessness: The Collapse of 'Meanings' and Illusions." *Our Existential Predicament: Loneliness, Depression, Anxiety and Death*, Chap. 4. 3.8.04 {<http://www.tc.umn.edu/~parkx032/XP69.html>}.
- "Paternoster." *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed. 2000. 18.6.04 {<http://www.bartleby.com/61/0/P0110000.html>}.

- Peck, Richard. "Condemned to Choose, But What? Existentialism in Selected Works by Fugard, Brink, and Gordimer." *Research in African Literatures* 23.3 (Fall 1992): 67-84.
- Phiri, D. D. *Malawians to Remember: John Chilembwe*. Lilongwe: Longman, 1976.
- "Postmodernism." From Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia. 28.6.05
{http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Early_usage_of_the_term}
- Raglan, Lord. "The Hero of Tradition." *The Study of Folklore*. Ed. Alan Dundes. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1965. 142-157.
- "Robin Hood." Allen W. Wright (1998). 3.6.04 {<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Acropolis/4198/rh/robbeg1.html>}.
- Roscoe, Adrian and Mpalive-Hangson Msiska. *The Quiet Chameleon: Modern Poetry from Central Africa*. London: Hans Zell, 1992.
- Roscoe, Adrian. Rev. of *The Haunting Wind*. Ed. Anthony Nazombe. *Journal of Humanities* 5 (October 1991): 121-126.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. "The Meaning of Existence (from Existentialism and Humanism)." Ed. Albert Hakim. *Historical Introduction to Philosophy*. New York: Macmillan, 1987. 689-694.
- Senghor, Léopold Sédar. "Night of Sine." *Modern Poetry from Africa*. Eds. Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier. Baltimore and Maryland: Penguin, 1968. 48-49.
- Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967, repr. 1985.
- Short, Michael (Mick). "Literature and Language." Eds. M. Coyle et al. *Encyclopaedia of Literature and Criticism*. N.p: n.p., 1990. 1082-1097.
- _____. "To Analyse a Poem Stylistically: 'To Paint a Water Lily' by Ted Hughes." Ed. P. Verdonk. *Twentieth Century Poetry: From Text to Context*. N. p: Routledge, 1994. 7-20.
- _____. "Who is Stylistics?" *Shanghai Foreign Languages Journal* I-II (1984): 14-21; 37-42.
- Short, Philip. *Banda*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974.
- Soyinka, Wole. "Abiku." *West African Verse: An Anthology*. Ed. and comp. Donatus Ibe Nwoga. London: Longman, 1967. 62-63.

- Thiong'o, Ngugi wa. *Homecoming: Essays on African and Caribbean Literature, Culture and Politics*. London: Heinemann, 1972.
- Tembo, Mdika Nick. "Portrayal of Women in the Malawian Novel: A Study of James Ng'ombe's *Sugarcane With Salt* and Tiyambe Zeleza's *Smouldering Charcoal*". Unpublished Bed. essay. Department of English, Chancellor College. U of Malawi, 2002.
- Uledi-Kamanga, Brighton J. "The Symbolism of Bondage and Freedom in Jack Mapanje's *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison*." *Tizame* 6 (November 1998): 41-53.
- Vail, Leroy and Landeg White. "Of Chameleons and Paramount Chiefs: The Case of Malawian Poet Jack Mapanje." *Review of African Political Economy* 48 (Autumn 1990): 26-49.
- _____. *Power and the Praise Poem: South African Voices in History*. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1991.
- Warnock, Mary. *Existentialism*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1970.
- Zeleza, Tiyambe. "Banishing Words and Stories: Censorship in Banda's Malawi." *CODESRIA Bulletin* 1 (1996): 10-15.

APPENDIX

ANTHONY NAZOMBE, "NO DREAMS HERE AND OTHER POEMS"

PART I: VOICES

VOICE (p. 2)

I juggle with word-sounds,
Sift mountains of garbage
In an attempt to make meaning.

I grope for a voice
With which to capture
The passage of lightning.

I need a seismograph
To record the heaving forces
That crack the inside,

A word to arrange, rearrange
Or even destroy, so as
To maintain equilibrium.

NO DREAMS HERE (p. 3)

Aspirations mounted on doubtful foundations
Evaporate with dawn;
Hopes clasped to sleep's heart
Crumble and dissolve in the sunlight.

Young men no longer dream dreams
The old who should see visions
Have succumbed to wrinkles:
Ant-eaten crosses sagging over earth-mounds.

There are no dreams here
Nightmares take shape
In the tortured marriage
Of flesh and metal;
Existence hangs on a thread
Dangles precariously from old penny pieces.

No dreams here:
Movement, silence and sleep
Are determined by dumb robots:
Red...green...amber...
Or the ear shattering siren at dawn.

No dreams on the endless march
Hurrying, trampling zombie faces
Disappear into holes and emerge, red-eyed,
With the muezzin's call at sundown.

I SHALL NOT RETURN (p. 4)

I shall not return
Though tracks of memory
Lie strewn all along the road;
I shall not return
Though my heart thirsts
To fill blanks left in haste.

I shall not return
To retrieve syllables sown in the wind
Measure tears that sprung from the eyes
Or count the laughter
That took off from the throat.

There is no dawn at sunset,
No river empties into its own source,
And the lizard can never go back
To ask Chiuta to change His mind.

The roots that gave sap to this shrub
Have spawned wrinkles
And I cannot return to the beginning:
Looking back invites hallucinations,
Blurred images that mock the will.

IN MEMORIAM (p. 5)

You disappeared at dusk
To be found at break of day
Dangling from branch of tree.

Athlete snapped in mid-leap,
Arms poised and muscles taut,
you would not reach ground alive.

Umbilical cord prematurely broken,
Young shoot so soon choked,
Unfinished phrase...

Was that torn shirt,
Hangman's rope,
Your farewell?

OF OUR SONS (p. 6)

Perhaps we ask too much of our sons.
When we have loaded them with praise
We proceed to shred their shirts
Suck their sweat
Generally shouldering them
To more acts of folly
Till the dizzy height
Makes the noose inevitable.
Then we stand back in wonder
At fate's acrobatic stunts:
Dangling gently in the wind
The hoarse-voiced crow
That has lost its meat.

THUNDERBOLT (p. 7)

Rage over climbers in loincloths
Clasping in rings the stricken stem
Towards the sunlight on the crown.

Pierce the flesh-bag at branch-end
Scattering the muted mourning
Of frightened worshipers at the foot.

We are waiting at this hour,
Waiting beyond the precincts of the thunderbolt
For diviners and guard-rattlers

To slash the dead wood and trap the red cock,
Annoint (sic) us with oil from potsherds.

BOREDOM (p. 8)

The future unwinds
Like soot-stained thread;
Oil from ruined tombs
Glues together feathers
Of the newly hatched.

The octopus relaxes its hold
Only to strengthen it again;
Depths undermine crests
Where the salmon
Might leap from.

Sea-weed that the fisherman
Once used to make pumice
Now gloats over the drowned
And tears raw flesh from the bones.

The future unwinds
Above red-tinged waves;
Splashes smother the struggle
Of a wingless fly in a silk noose.

SILENT SURGEONS (p. 9)

Receive them, eternal Lord,
Despite talents they buried in the sand
Or eggs they hatched before their time

We are not worthy to ferry them across
Only sleepwalkers span these waters,
Only the robed ones make it to the entrance.

As the sky has refused to adopt them
May they find a house in the earth
Where metal, mats and gourds come to rust.

Shut off the searching sun
And let worms work on the remains:
Silent surgeons at the post-mortem.

HEART OF STONE (p. 10)

I have looked out of this window
Through wire gauze seeing nothing
But the blurred landscape
Of my mind.

Perched on a stool
Books hanging heavy on my head,
I have scanned the light outside
For a sign.

Grass has grown and fallen
Trampled underfoot or slashed in season,
Clouds have gathered and gone,
Rain splashed and evaporated.

But this mountain,
This speechless mass,
This heart of stone
Has year after year
Taken root in my eyes.

DAWN (p. 11)

A spark, then fugitive pain
Rushes through the louvres...

A dawn witnessed alone
Through visions of a blue smock
And interlaced fingers
Rising where the dark angel fell.

A sunless dawn where the sleeper's head
Perched on a white alter stone
Rings with insistent miaows
Piercing the concrete walls
Between darkness and light
Speaking of unknown horrors
Then fading without trace.

Hearken to the distant crowing of cocks
Tentative coos of male pigeons
Voices retreating into the mist
Audible flow of silence
Haunting the trees and the grass
Muffling barks of dogs
Smothering the first horns
On the famished road.

END OF YEAR RETREAT (p. 12)

Darkness in the streets
Betokens connivance

While the face in the dock
Feigns innocence

And the midwife of the hour
Seeks a sign from bloodless lips

Marks of the cross cutting
The air seal absolution

And secret whispers break
Into feverish fits of penance

Where burdened mourners trot
In the wake of blind-folded death.

THE NEW YEAR (p. 13)

The seasons have run their course:
Marrow-chilling June
Gave way to blazing August
Which in turn yielded
To the sky-rending November
Herald to the rich greenery of January.

Water flowed from its source
To return with the rains;
Trees surrendered their leaves
To regain them green
The moon faltered and waned
Only to wax again.

And now life hovers
Between what has been
And events to come;
Night marking the end
Dissolves in the light of the beginning
And the snake casts away its skin.

The cock sings a new song
To the rising sun:
Sweep the house clean
Of last year's dirt;
Empty the pots of yesterday's beer
We shall brew new masese
For New Year throats;
Clad in crisp wrappers
The women will sing new Chioda tunes
And men will stamp and dance
To the rapturous rhythm
Of Ingoma shields.

INITIATION (p. 14)

Yielding to the flow of the calabash
Round the edge of the grain-bin,
We took a sip of the sour brew;
For our turn had finally come.
The taste tormented and teased us
Yet we refused to let go of the spell.

Where the mother's hand had rested
Like dew on grass at dawn
Now scorched the sun;
Streams of sweat coursed freely
Down our flanks.

We of the masese age-set
Had learnt from the earth
That the pestle must toil in the mortar
For grain to turn into flour
That clouds must boom and crack
To unleash potent rain-drops.

AMAO (p. 15)

The call of the stream
Reaches the ears only
Of the select few

The riddle that makes
The cock crow
Yields its knots to the fingers
That knead the earth

Sister of my father's
You must wake up
With the dew
Face the morning wind
Childless hands joined at the back

This wrapper has weathered
A myriad showers and rats
This ear that is now hard
Has seen many tobacco rolls
Dry skins of maize cobs
From yester year's harvest

Call of the rise after the stream
Wafts to the ears only
Of those who endure the frost
Hard-bitten toes and soles
Defying stumps and stonepricks
Hoes diminished by rust and age
Handles polished by sweat and sand.

ALIEKE (p. 16)

He detached himself from the rest
Built his hut across the stream.

You saw him descend to the water
Limping, one leg was useless.

As ants sought to undermine his abode
He merely watched, never felt.

When his grand-children came
From his son's town,

He gave them pop-corn or bananas;
The sunken eyes twinkled then,

The wrinkles attempted to smile:
The goatee shook under the cavern.

But Alieke is now dead, his hut is no more
Though the banana trees still stand.

Yet across the stream words clash:
Who will inherit the patch of land?

CYCLES (p.17)

CHILD: I see the sun rise where before
We were singing to moonlight
Revealing dew and mist over the ground.
After the cocks have crowed, chickens stir,
Fires are lit on the ashes as we
Rub our eyes and cast off our shrouds.

MOTHER: I too have seen the sun rise above the earth
And far above the tree tops, casting shadows
Long, short, then long again. I have seen it

Vie with hills for height. For a moment
It balanced the rise and the fall.

GRANNY: I awakened to sunset after the climax
When only trees and hills remained
And the sun's embers glowed.
And the moon wept, in its womb
Several seeking birth at dawn.

CHILD: Moonlight is hide-and-seek and stories
For Granny to tell. I like it full, the moon.

MOTHER: I have seen it in fullness but for a time;
Growing from the crescent to the whole;
Only it waned after waxing.

GRANNY: Days when it waxed and waned, I was there.
I saw all its faces and watched it drown in the sea.

CHILD: Sea like lake, lake like river or stream;
I like to pass my fingers in running water,
Feel the touch of currents, leaping over rocks and roots
Like goats over grass.

MOTHER: The fast river destroys, child,
In its haste sweeping earth and leaf,
Digging game-pits fit for pigs.
Give me water that's not so fast,
Calmly bearing the burden of distance,
Settling, expanding, healing wounds
Of an earlier age.

GRANNY: The river learns like men. (p. 18)
After the rashness of mountain slopes,
It takes its time round the bends,
Leading to confluence and on to the sea;
There to begin the ascent towards the clouds
And get set for another beginning.

CHILD: Clouds assemble to pelt
Rain drops on the roof.
They create puddles: new games in water.
Rain is carpet of termite wings lost by lamplight.
Come rain and maize shoots up in the fields.

MOTHER: After rain and planting
There is growth and withering;
Freshness is lost to worms and sun;
Fruit ripens, heralding decay.

GRANNY: I watched over harvest
Over the fate in flames of stalks
And the moths awaiting the cobs.
Yes, I have watched the turning of earth
For another crop, exposing the decay
Of the previous effort.
Wisps that rose from the fire
Formed a circle, spiralling to the clouds
There to await the call of the rain dance.

CHILD: Leaves on the fig remain green
When maize-stalks collapse
And other fronds wither and fall;
The fig braves drought.

- MOTHER: Like the fig, the banana tree.
Only appearance cheats, child:
The leaves, once supple, yielding
And unfurling like cloth
Grow stiff and coarse.
- GRANNY: And stooping under the weight of birth,
Face to earth where shoots will come from,
I have seen the banana tree:
Green turned yellow as the trunk
Discarded its slough like a snake
Seeking rebirth.
- CHILD: I am still waiting, mother,
Waiting to see the snail's eyes
Only the shell and the slimy path
Do I find.
- MOTHER: I too awaited the fulness (sic) of breasts, (p. 19)
Waited like water in a still pond,
Waited only to see frost bite.
I have known babies to die unweaned,
And milk turn sour in the breasts.
At times too death strikes the trunk
Leaving the fruit cold, as when
The horned chameleon mourns in labour.
- GRANNY: The chameleon mourns, knowing the pod
Must break and the stalk fall
For the seed to pop out and strike root.
- CHILD: I see the sun rise where before
We were singing to moonlight,
Revealing dew and mist over the ground.
After the cocks have crowed, chickens stir,
Fires are lit on the ashes as we
Rub our eyes and cast off our shrouds.
- MOTHER: I too have seen the sun rise above the earth
And far above the tree tops, casting shadows:
Long, short, the long again. I have seen it
Vie with hills for height. For a moment
It balanced the rise and the fall.

GRANNY: I awakened to sunset after the climax
When only trees and hills remained
And the sun's embers glowed.
And the moon wept, in its womb
Several seeking birth at dawn.

CHILD: Did the sun hide from the moon?

MOTHER: Child, the moon wept
Knowing it would never see
Beyond the moment of birth.

GRANNY: I saw my house rise
On poles and clay from the earth
You two will see it crumble, smouldering.
On the ashes, sow pumpkin seeds;
The broken pots and the gourds
Place at the crossroads;
For in death all paths meet.

PART II: OF LOVE AND DESPAIR (p. 20)

HANG GLIDER (p. 21)

A worm in the centre
Dust on the periphery
Up and up the cloud goes
Leaves and clothes
Float upon the currents of air
Like the wax-winged swine
To come crashing to the ground.

But this count down bodes well
As the kite circles the sky
Leisurely drawing patterns
Of light upon its beak
High above the whirlwind.

Mesmerised, the mother hen
Gives senseless directions
And I am a hang glider
Swooping down on my love.

I RETURN TO YOU (p. 22)

A return to you
Creeping with the night,
Rise with the wind
To induce slumber with perfume

Hair strewn with seeds
Of wandering generations
I breath into you the air
That makes my race move.

I return to you
Griot when the occasion arises
Out of your limbs
To suck boredom.

A necklace of incense I give to you
Alone at the bedside
Far away from confusing accents.

THE ARMS YOU COURTED (p. 23)

Shall I hear no more
From your crooning lips
Nor bathe in the warm waters
Of your snail's eyes?

O love, what have the neon lights
Done to you? What secrets
Do these sudden flights
Hide from the worshipper's sight?

Will you not heed my pulse's whisper
Drink from the handle of granny's gourd,
Return to those arms you courted
On the eve of the drunken night?

A KIND OF DEATH (p. 24)

I thought of you
Not with longing but a little weariness
For I had been through those windswept pathways
Before, tatters clinging to the anonymity
Of the deserted hour.
Memory foresaw this transformation
From flesh and blood I could quarrel with
To a shadow, a distant image
A black and white pattern of letters and lines
Speaking in a code I can no longer decipher.
Yet I had never suspected that time zones
Could play such havoc with communication:
Take, for instance, that promise
To call at 4 o'clock SA time the following week;
I should have known better than to wait
Day in day out in my loft.
And then that letter and the parcel you were going to send,
They must still be floating somewhere
Between Durban and Dover.

THE UNWANTED (p. 25)

May I know whether those dove eyes
Have anything to offer
To a desperate suitor?

Pigeon's feathers flap in my face,
Ride the skyline with ease
And the desire to tame
Wanes with the distance.

I would turn you loose
If only you let me peep
Into your inscrutable will,
Undid the knot of suspense.

Silence greets me across the miles
And, with the bird's absence, return
Pinpricks into already swollen flesh:
This is the portion of the unwanted.

CITY LIGHTS (p. 26)

Now that flashy city boys
Wait over the lunch hour
To whisk you to a restaurant,
Inspiration must run dry.

No doggerels will strain your patience
No pale presences haunt you
Yet best wishes stick in the throat
Checked by the memory of robots
At the crossroads: each route has a turn
And street lights go out at dawn.

And this is my modest prayer:
When the womb swells
The salesgirl may not lose sight
Of her flamboyant suitors.

OUR LOAD (p. 27)

It must be safe where you now live
Road barriers greet the visitor
Fences give way to subfences
Barbed wire to bamboo strips.

Did I not leave you
Many rush hours away
Where traffic lights
Determined our movements and feelings?

On your back now sleeps a child,
Clearly not your own
But what shall we say
About the other one
The absent man's token of lust?

We must help each other carry this load
Now that time and space
Have brought us together again.

COMING HOME TO ROOST (p. 28)

If I must err again
Let it be for the last time.

Slipping mud breathes heavily
On stagnant waters
And ripples leer at banks;

Mothers spray breast feed
At this watershed hour
To the corners of the earth.

I have groped too long
Wandered too far afield
Let me come home to roost.

RESPITE (p. 29)

I cannot recall half the things you said
But each time I bent my head
To listen to your voice
A strange radiance suffused my mind;

The lips broke into silent song
And fingers hungered to clutch you once more
But at our journey's end
Your suffering smile

Reminded one lost in dreams
That each self must go alone
And learn to cushion blows
With snatches of song.

It is true one cannot tell
Where one stands with you
When so many friends
Have drunk from the same pool

But these moments of rest
Between the uncertain tides
That guide my life have done much
To ease the pain.

Massage then this bruised heart
Mop my brow with your lovely hair
And soothe a feverish mind
With the poultice of your voice.

THIS THING BETWEEN US (p. 30)
(After Joe Mosiwa)

I cannot believe you have changed
Since we last sat down
To discuss this thing between us.
My head has reeled so many times
And my heart screeched to a standstill:
I see through your apologies
The soothing hand that steered your future
Away from me then
Without piercing my pride.

You have frayed my nerves too long,
In turns gnawed my toes
And blown air over them.
Now the pain has begun to tell.
Take away these polite noises,
Scrap these frozen confessions:
All you want is to dig a dagger
Into my heart and turn it there twice or thrice
To suit your mentor's sinister taste.

EXORCISM (p. 31)

May I not see you again
Nor dance to your tune
Bound by your spell;

I have met you before
In another form
Your claws betray you;

I was a child then
Led by the hand in a sleepwalk
Blind to the wreckage at your feet;

These platforms,
The luminous wood on your face
Make no difference.

NO BRIDGE WILL LINK THESE BANKS AGAIN (p. 32)

No bridge will link these banks again
Though the sun caressed each in turn
Between waking and sleeping;
The male pigeon will no longer coo
Across these waters.

Eyes watched the womb where
The spirit would come from-
Promise of fullness in harvest tide;
Child-bearers rehearsed welcoming songs
For the itinerant cock;
Diviners and healers lined the passage
With charms and incantations.

Alas! Poisonous shoots
Stole into the sacred grove
Picking holes in the blind traveller's bag:
The medicine the father of children
Gave you for fear of exposure,
The herbs the lover administered
Even after the mangoes were ripe...

Within the disinfected walls
The surgeon gaped helpless at the womb
Where bloated maggots would float from,
Sneering at the short-changed infant.
Outside, a chorus of chaperons
Intoned a double threnody as the rumour
Of cob and stalk in common perdition
Confounded forgers of riddles and proverbs
And a low rattle announced your end.

The medicine the father of children prescribed
Has blasted the foundation on these banks
And no bridge will span these waters.

THE LAST ACT (p. 33)

After the curtain call
The actors go their separate ways
Never to meet again in this experience.
Only skeletons remain
To haunt the stage
And stir memories.

Beloved, I desired you at that moment
But you would not come;
I sat on this rock, throat burning,
But hounds soon fell onto my scent
And the hunted, who must come to drink,
Perished by the stream.

PART III: SURVIVAL (p. 34)

GUARDIAN FLY (p. 35)

I shall sing a praise song
To my guardian fly;
Crosswinged he takes off
Upon my waking
Having listened to my dreams
And followed saliva across the cheek.

When for the bathroom I leave
Or for the dinning-hall
He rides on my shoulder
From time to time
Whispering advice into my ear.

He perches on the toilet soap
While water flows down my back.
He presides over the taking of soup
And announces fish from a mile away.

Sometimes when he is bored stiff
He invites friends to join the watch
My nose and hair are theirs
Only I am drawn into their arguments,
Slapping myself in the process.

In the evening, weary but satisfied,
He takes his usual stand, mops his brow
After the day long chase;
With a long sigh
He looks on as I drift into sleep-
Goodnight, my guardian fly.

BLIND TERROR (p. 36)

Death came hidden under the hand
Of this blind man
He strayed into our house one night
Looking for guidance;
But, hand searching beyond the staff,
He strangled this sister of mine.
She wailed to the sky and to the earth
As her brothers looked on paralysed.

After the scream to deafen death
Came the weight of silence
And that face of stone
Disappeared in the gloom
Leaving wailing in its wake.
He came again through the door
Groping about and rattling his staff
Again seeking a guide;
Before mother could shout or move
His left hand silenced this brother of mine
Again there was a corpse on our hands.

Mother wept, we all wept
Hurling impotent curses
At the blind salesman of death.
Mother implored,
Clinging to the last born,
"Child, that you may not die!"

But in a mirror I saw death
Spring from the hand of this blind man
Weaving through the living
To fall on those he had already marked;
In vain had mother hidden them.

I feared death
From the groping hand
And the rattling staff;
I feared the unseeing eyes
And the unfeeling face.

I shuddered to think I might be blind
Sowing death among the seeing
All the time only seeking a guide.

TUBERCULOSIS (p. 37)

It begins all the way down the lungs
Like a whirlwind or a storm
Seething upwards, gathering momentum
Exploding in the throat like thunder
The spittle, sapping blood and weight,
Flows into spittoons – under a lid
And I await another quake.

Yes, it has always been like this
Inhaled and exhaled
Only at first words flowed instead
And, finding no lid, roared on the wind
To invade other chests.

Some say fresh air is all we need,
Two or three months on a mountain top
But such air is hard to get
And we live quarantined in this ward
Bored with counting our ribs
Awaiting another quake.

News from outside, brought
By new members of this club,
Points to multiple accusations
Of the kind “Who has jumped who?”
But even suspects carry the symptoms.
Then they blame the eastern wind;
Coughs burst on their lips
And the spray claims more victims.

Sometimes when the whooping stops
We read texts from the Bible,
Sent to us by pastors we have never seen,
To fight against the malady.
Plans are underway for a church of our own,
With a shepherd from this flock,
So we can go, after the last quake,
To spread the Word among those outside.
We hope they won't persecute us,
Fearing the word is infected.

Disturbing news gains ground (p. 38)
About poets and seers
The disease inspires back home;
Musicians have found something
To celebrate ever since napolo.
Already it's a tourist attraction
Under the name of cultural revival.
Thinkers too warm up to the discussion
Of the concept of TB as a god-sent remedy
For population explosion.

But we of the TB ward still receive treatment
And only wish our relatives
Had spittoons into which to channel
Their infectious breath.
Perhaps when the air has cleared
The epidemic will die a natural death.

SONG OF A MOTORIST (p. 39)

I love to caress your soft skin,
Rise to your graceful gliding;
When your spell holds me
My hands melt into the steering wheel.

The art of Ford, Chrysler or Nissan
Emerges, subtle, above the Michelin tyres,
And I drink of the essence from the filling station-
Never mind the pollution at the back.

Baby, you are more advanced than I
How many millennia will it take
Before I evolve into
Such a petrol-sucking intelligence
Complete with spare parts?

Efforts to break the time-barrier
Uproot concrete pillars,
Lead to ecstatic tree-climbing,
And condolences in the papers.

SONG FOR A HUNTER (p. 40)

(for Lupenga)

Your days are gone, master stalker of Bunda;
The lions and elephants that ravage this land
Are far too subtle for your bow and arrows
And even if they weren't, your rival,
That upstart from the hill-caves
Who wandered the whole world
In the quest for an elder's head,
Would quake at your echoing crow.

I see you bent-backed in exile
Who gave your name to the rolling plains
Cleaving the kingdoms of Mbelwa and Mpezeni
Hunter for all seasons keeping at bay
The mighty regiments of Zwangendaba.
Now you wait for the sinking sun

At the foot of Mulanje Mountain
In a travesty of a zoo
Built in the years of thangata
To facilitate the collection of tax.
What twist of fate brings you here
Who once accepted the stool of chiefship
From a people overwhelmed by gratitude?

Your days are gone, master stalker of Bunda,
Whose stunning speed on the battlefield
Was matched by the patience of a tortoise,
Unravelling the tangled tongues of men
Under the shade of the kachere tree:
The aggrieved went home laden with goats
The wicked repaired to their huts wiser men.

WREATHS FOR A WANDERER (p. 41)

An ancient man crouches by his bedside
In the mosquito-infested gloom
Wrapped in loud prayer, mouthing formulas
Of his late acquired faith.

Long ensconced between mattress and net,
I test the edge of my unbelief;
The seeds of laughter rattle in my throat.

A hoary-headed ancestor kneels on the floor
Barefoot and in tattered loincloth
The stale tang of sweat and tobacco
Filling the room like incense
As he crosses and recrosses himself
Leading shadowy presences in supplication.
The collective voice pursues me deep into sleep
To unlock memories of a devout past.

THE POET'S PROGRESS (p. 42)

He was skiing smoothly on the lake
For the benefit of the tourists;
An umbilical cord of twine
Linked him to a motorboat,
Churning out a path of surf
Through patterns of waves.

On his right palm a tray
Laden with Vodka and Champagne bottles;
The left hand held the cord to his navel,
As he recalled how, in his youth,
A crude contraption on wooden wheels
Once sent him crashing down the hill,
Picking holes on his shorts
And lacerating his bum.

But now he glided unimpeded
Resplendent in white tunic
And matching trousers
With a token hole at the knee
(An indelible impression upon the visitors,
A touch of local colour).

Alas! On the route to the island
A hippo suddenly announced its presence,
Forcing a swift change of course.
The sharp tug at the cord
Sent the happy rider digging toeholds
Into the treacherous tides where the tray
Came tumbling in his wake
While he took a sip from the lake.

COCKROACHES (p. 43)

An instant garage shoots up
In the parking lot opposite the market.
Unemployed mechanics in yester year fashion
Elevator shoes and flared trousers
Yet surprisingly complete with tool kits
Set to work on croaking lorries
Or the occasional taxi suddenly come to grief,
Joking, laughing, wiping their hands
With oil-soaked rags; counting notes
With practiced caution.

In these days of shortages
When men and women queue for days on end
To see the first bag of mealie meal
Quietly disappear on the back
Of an official truck; when lines of cars
At the gas station spill over carelessly
Into the main road, cockroaches have learnt
To take their position, armed with twenty litre cans,
On the other side of the road where business,
Though brisk, is carried out in subdued tones.
Nobody asks where the juice comes from
Trust rests on ragged trousered but familiar faces
That lounge about car parks over the lunch hour
Sharing half-rotten bananas and mouldy bread,
Replacing a tyre for a fifty tambala or one kwacha note.

In this age of shortages and soaring prices
One seeks one's cooking oil behind shops
Or at road junctions at night.

MISTY PRESENCES (p. 44)

I have heard them trudging along the gravel path
In the small hours of the morning
Misty presences murmuring in the wind
Across streams, through labyrinths
Of matchbox hunts and waking markets
Travellers from the rim of the city
Earmarked long ago for swift demolition
Yet proliferating to panic proportions
Till a hedge vainly seeks to obscure the view
From incoming tourists and guests;
They have trodden through my dreams
Marching as to war in discarded boots
To feed conveyor belts at the heart of the web.

MODES OF FREEDOM (p. 45)

(After Annemarie Heywood)

My mind floats clear of steel bars
Blocking the vision of the inmate,
Flapping wings sedately and leisurely
Against the vast blue dome
Now tinged with the crimson hue of twilight.

Above the blue gum trees
Crows hover, matching feather for [with] feather
Before disappearing into their nests;
Down below late shoppers gingerly weave their way
Through a terraced mosaic of birdshit.

Nobody really bothers about these scavengers
Only the occasional curse when the paste
Scores a direct hit or even laughter
At being caught off one's guard.

Crouched as if in Muslim readiness for evensong,
A man scribbles his pain on the walls
In the ramshackle toilet behind the banana stall:
A combination of big-bellied b's and backward-looking s's.
Momentarily relieved, he returns to his post
At the entrance to the banquet hall of the father.

As the mellow morning light seeps through
Layers of foliage, monkeys scale the walls
Round State House to play hide-and-seek
At the meeting-point between branch and barbed wire;
Ignoring the nervous barks of neighbouring dogs,
The scouts calmly peer into the recesses of power.

But the guards look elsewhere,
Scanning the mountain road
For daring photographers or bottoms
Swinging under the weight of firewood.

I am trotting past the main gate
When a cunning sociologist inquires:
"Where are you coming from, Chief?"
Inspired by sudden mischief, I reply:
"I went to collect new tablets of law."
You should see him dashing off.

WE TALK OF THINGS (p. 46)

We talk of things
As if were all were (sic) heaviness of heart

But the sun also rises in this part,
The clouds drift away if heaven so pleases
And the children's cries of woe
Soften into tentative smiles.

It is not the best we can hope for
Still it marks a break, a getting of breath
Before the next assault
When fresh floods deepen the gullies
Traced by their ancestors.

We cannot forget, no we cannot,
The ceaseless pains of the little ones,
The unsettling thunder of the elders,
The pointless starts of idle sons:

Every calabashful of joy
Promises hangovers on the morrow.

EASTER DAWN AT CHINGWE'S HOLE (p. 47)

A cloud blankets the mountain top,
A shroud unevenly spread,
And I, chilled to the bones on this vigil
At Chingwe's Hole, await a guiding hand.

Only a tree top emerges
Broad, fresh, in full leaf.
Does it, like the banana tree,
Hold a message?

Is there no hope of return for those who fell
Into the bowels of this mountain
To demand asylum away from the crowd?

The dull thud of stones against earth
Confirms a burial complete:
I shall not walk in the valley of death
Witness bones putting on flesh again.

But the Namitembo River echoes
Among rocks and reeds far down
Washing the remains
In preparation for the journey to the sea;
A dirge is intoned
As the procession turns East
Where the sun will come from.

The cloud lifts off like a lid
Lake Malombe glitters in the distance
And the Shire, a gorged python,
Wiggles across the plain,
As birds, crickets and plants
Sing with me at this dawn.
And far down the slope
Church bells toll.

Perhaps those who rejoined the earth
Are beyond death and one with the sun;
They shall rise along the thread of the years.

PART IV: SEASONS ABROAD (p. 48)

THE RACKET (p. 49)

The reverse of the Robin Hood saga
Is solemnly enacted year in year out
On the crown of this hill
As our reverend dons steal from the poor
To give to the rich in the name of civilization,
Full economic costs and government cuts.

Our centre, a makeshift log cabin,
Is wedged between two Gothic structures;
A soot-coated church now turned theatre,
Marking the transition from ritual to drama,
And a two-storeyed tomb housing the remains of Eng. Lit.

Only curators and guides thrive here
Dutifully dusting the bones of Chaucer and Shakespeare,
Inducting neophytes into the mysteries of the race,
Occasionally frowning from mythical heights
At the pointless exertions of the lumber in the hut.

But this latter too is a necromancer,
Returned from a year long pilgrimage
To the celebrated shrines of Ile-Ife.
With the industry of a squirrel, he gathers
Batiks, masks, tomes and maps
To prove some point or other about the origins
Of African art, religion or slavery.

The stiff upper lip: a dead end chocking with trivia.
Sleepwalkers through these august corridors
Are bound by a vow of silence and fear,
A conspiracy to ensure renewals of tenure
And continual peddling of hollow degrees.

THE PATER NOSTER (p. 50)
(For Sibongile Mtimkulu)

In the heat of the rush hour
We availed ourselves of technological advancement
To glide down the floors of the Tower of Babel
In an electric carriage for two;
The signposts flashed by: ONE, MEZZA, PATER NOSTER
And the tantalizing TRAVEL BEYOND THIS POINT IS NOT
DANGEROUS. What had at first alarmed with evocation
Of plants sealed off with barbed wire bearing
Bold-lettered warnings in red now promised a joy ride.
The next inscription read: CARRIAGE NOW GOING UP;
But lo! The magic of lightning suddenly snapped
And man's progress ground to a halt.
Realization came like the jab of a syringe
But repeated bangs on the graffiti-ridden wall
Hardly disturbed the flow of laughter and the click
Of cups from the coffee bar. The well-documented plight
Of our predecessors was sobering: ANDY WAS HERE FOR TWO HOURS
(2/5/'78), HELP! I WANT ME MOM! and so on.
The temptation grew to add to this bleak litany
A cryptic snippet such as MAYO, NDAFA INE!
But the shouts of my fellow sufferer had caught
The attention of a Samaritan; a white, wizened face
Peered down at the wretched of the earth
And promised to fetch the porter. Well, we never saw it again.
In the meantime, an unsuspected residue of gallantry
Prompted me to shoulder my companion to safety;
Hearing further animated pleas, a lady cleaner wandered over.
She scrutinized the remaining captive, now without shoes;
YOU SHOULDN'T BE DOWN THERE! She cried, not without some satisfaction
That one of these foreign illiterates had finally been caught,
And went on her way. A bearded Messiah then came by,
Having got lost in the maze; but even he had his doubts:
I WONDER WHETHER WE ARE SUPPOSED TO PULL HIM UP. This was after
The porter had been and had advised with ill-concealed glee:
STAY THERE! He then ran off in search of the electricity board.
But lo and behold! I clambered to the light, poking my neck
Into the jaws of this city of steel, and my resurrection owed
Naught to the goodwill of porters or electricians.
I will never come this way again.

A TEAR FOR JOE (p. 51)

Professor Joe, now on the dole,
Loves jazz and Africans;
The record boxes in his attic bedsit
Bulge with vintage blues albums
Which, when the mood takes him
And with a black fellow around,
He will select and play on a rickety gramophone,
The scratching sounds urging him to clap and shout.

Professor Joe, now on the dole,
Used to come to the Union Bar every evening
(There was always someone to sign him in)
pockets almost bursting with books.
Of late he had taken to African poetry;
Through the unkempt hair, the greying stubble
And the stench of yesterup wine
He unleashed a stuck-in-the-groove question:
"Have you finished that dissertation on Okigbo-o?"

Professor Joe, now on the dole,
Was once an authority on Spinoza
Until his employers and colleagues
Expressed alarm at the spirit in which
He preached the man's thought, and ditched him.
Thenceforth the professor sought his audience
Among the assorted frequenters of Bar One.
He wouldn't rest till he had found a bunch of Africans
To whom he proclaimed the virtues of Marxism,
Breaking glasses to reinforce his point.

Professor Joe, formerly don in this place
And now ensconced in the dole queue,
Has been banned from the Union
(He upset an Asian student's fish and chips)
The news came as a surprise even to the porters,
Who said they had been watching him closely.
Once in a while you may see him,
Among socialist fellow travellers,
On Ecclesall Road in Hunters' Bar
But no longer on this side of town.

OUR HYDE PARK (p. 52)

You are unlikely to hear
Strident anti-government tones
While the bobby looks the other way
In this Hyde Park
Which is no park at all
But steel and concrete pathways
Arching high over the crossroads
Linking the pavement slabs in High Street
With towering structures of brick, mortar
And more outgrowths of concrete and steel.

We are a multiracial society
Made up of foreign students, pensioners
And one parent families;
Children play ball in the cages and
In the evening youths practice kung fu
Or lounge about the local pubs
Accepting halves of cider
From well meaning veterans.

INFESTATION (p. 53)

Fingernails creep warily
Beyond tucked shirt to nether regions,
Scratch unobtrusively
Where a myriad needles
Tear through flesh and hair roots.

Is this then what the street poet sang of
For a tambala piece or a packet of beer
How it wasn't the queen bee's fault really
If you took her for a bud
About to break into flower?

The hand withdraws thwarted,
The voice tapers off,
Choking a catalogue of conquests
As darting eyes scan the faces
Of captive listeners.

Was it this or that companion
Shyly refusing to derobe (sic) completely
And afterwards feigning innocence
Or the last two: a scary tale of leprosy
And a country belle bedecked with beads?

The mind starts at the thought of scabies
But memory consoles with precedents:
Maybe it is just a silly rash as at the beginning,
Some fungoid growth playing tricks again;
Yet the itching simply won't go away.

Anguish turns to mortification
As a diviner gravely diagnoses
And a sales girl with a knowing smile
Pushes an alcohol compound across the counter:
A standard cure for head lice!

THIS TEMPLE (p. 54)

This temple you are about to enter
Through outstretched tongue
And half-closed eyes,
This temple is unclean.
Layers of dust dating back
Half a decade lift and dance
In rays that filter through
Cracks in the boards.

I am not worthy to receive you;
My lips tremble, my nose twitches
As the lore of wizards dropping dead
At the raising of the host
Or laymen stricken dumb by the power of the Grail
And palms the wafer bored through,
Blood and water collecting where it melted,
Haunts me from the days of my youth.

A pilgrim from the north, I have presumed
For the sake of this child whose tones of the wilderness
Echo as salt touches his lips
And spring water soothes his brow.
Let me lace his shoes and gird his loins
When he begins to cleanse our pig-sties
In readiness for your second coming.

THE ANNUNCIATION (p. 55)

The presumption of these people sometimes shocks:
Where brides would whisper to their grooms,
Wavering between joy and fear,
They announce the news from the rooftops;
The punters vie with each other
Over the baby's sex, genealogists fix
Its position and name, old ladies cheerfully wonder
If it happened the day of the stag.
Even mayors dare toast before the event
And the groom already begins to reminisce.

What if the womb refused to nurture
This seed, emptying it into the nearest loo?
What if the stars that strung together
Guy Fawkes, nuclear warheads
And the freedom of a surgeon
Returned with the spectre of a Mongol child?

RHINO-HUNTING (p. 56)

On the screen, camouflaged landrovers
Hurtle after fleeing rhinoceros,
While marksmen cock their dart-loaded rifles,
Take aim, and fire; soon harpoons
Hang down patchy flanks.
The animal staggers drowsily then falls
Heavily on its side; a kick from a black ranger
Finishes it off, the boot resting momentarily
On the aphrodisiac-laden horn:
That is Kruger National Park.

On the screen, massive juggernauts
In fast moving convoy
Thread through dirt roads
Bound for Bophuthatswana
Where the rhinos' human counterparts await them.
Still dazed, the beasts roll off the back,
Stop briefly to survey the new homeland,
Then, head down, dash into the nearest thicket.
The BBC commentator gleefully observes:
"When South Africa finally comes into her own,
She will have a lot to teach the world
About the conservation of animal species."

EMIGRANT POLE (p. 57)

I can see your figure silhouetted
Against the skyline as you trudge
Across the mountain range
Into exile, weighed down by children
And suitcases bursting with bread and underwear.
Only the music concealed in the blade of the wind
Soothes your brittle ears; fleeting airs
Of The Messiah salve your chapped lips
And massage your fluttering heart.

I can see you standing in the lengthening queue
Outside the embassy, your feet sore and eyes red
For lack of sleep; you shuffle forward,
Every step bringing you nearer the gift
Of another life. Oh! How thankful you must be
That the earth still breeds men of goodwill;
Your lungs swell with the tones of the Magnificat
And your face beams with blessedness.

But, sweet woman, I fear for you,
I dread the road your feet have chosen;
For there is no rest where it leads.
I have seen the shepherd in Rome
Lash the marauding soldiers in your land
Till they squirmed and cried, 'Enough!'
Yet not once has he stopped to look which way
His panicking flock is fleeing,
And in desperation some of the sheep have grown
Strong claws and an insatiable appetite for flesh;
See how they migrate south, stalking African herds!

I fear for you, apprentice huntress,
For already the veld is ablaze,
The spirits of the land have woken
From countless seasons of slumber
And even now the predators are in full flight,
Scampering towards the sea, where they will certainly perish
Unless the bald eagle comes to their rescue.

FESTERING SORES (p. 58)

I

Brown suit once too tight
Hangs down limp and creased
From a scarecrow basking in the sun
And happy to mix with the fickle crowd:
Names and faces here and there remembered,
Stale jokes, uneasy laughter,
Or the animated chatter of passers-by
Seeking news of a brother or an uncle
Long disappeared into limbo.
These are followed by
Reassuring murmurs and gestures
From one who knows only too well
His own powerlessness to do anything
For the poor souls. And the crowd moves on,
Clutching babies, baskets or newspapers,
Or glancing at perennial beggars and curios.
An officer shouts a greeting
With cheerful familiarity
But the wounds are still fresh
And for a moment the smart
Registers on the death mask.

II (p. 59)

How are we to handle one recently returned
From the grave with a handful of flour
And a skin whiter than that of an albino,
Seeking the dark recesses of his mother's hut
Like a man rebuked by the ancestors
For dying before his turn?
How shall we slip comforting words past shattered eardrums
Or teach a paralytic the art of walking?
A strange silence strikes root in those
Who surrendered their minds
To the grey labyrinths beyond the fig trees.
Elsewhere piercing eyes disturb the flow of beer
After the honours have been done,
Before receding into the night.
We search our memories for whatever insult or injury
We may have inflicted on this ghost
But the only recollections that come up
Are those of a shape in a white Volkswagon
Careering round the periphery of the campus
Under the banner of Extension Studies.
When the hawks came for him we were mere fledglings
Trying out our wings in the corridors of academe.
What grudge, then, could he have against us,
Fellow grovellers in this rotten mess?

III (p. 60)

Echoing words float over our puzzled silence:
"Brother, the system has really worked!"
We look at each other with renewed interest
And it is clear that whether we acknowledge it or not,
We are a chorus of bloodstained bystanders
Laden with the entrails of Judas Iscariot,
A band of assassins doomed to wander the earth
With crucifixes burnt into our brows;
We are escaped convicts dragging the chains
That bind our minds through the back streets of eternity.
Yet sometimes when the sky is clear
And you clamber up the plateau for a cold beer
You may meet untarnished images from the past,
Metaphors that somehow drifted away
From the intricate cobwebs of our pine grove:
This man branched off into the guild of money-lenders
Long before the harbingers of the holocaust;
That other fellow, his brother, was escorted from his office
At high noon by inscrutable men in three piece suits;
We last saw him slowly descending the steps to the car park,
Thoughtfully jingling his keys.
But on the mountain we do not talk as if all revellers
Have detention orders in their coat pockets;
Instead, we celebrate our reunion in the idiom of dance.
Flanked by two lovely maids, our former prisoner
Now even jokes about his ordeal: he narrates, for instance,
How every night he would emerge from Hades
To take a sip at the airport club – never mind where
He got the money from. More seriously, we discuss our
Common plight: human resources blasted or banished
On the dubious pretext of state security,
Destined to roam the subcontinent and beyond,
Selling our labour or skills to any taker
And striving all the time to put our nightmares behind us.

A SINGER IN 1981 (p. 61)

I dreaded this moment
When those who might have passed you by in the subway
With no more than a glance or a nod at best
Return in droves with cameras, tape recorders,
And notebooks so that nothing gets lost.

I dreaded this moment
When the joy of breaking free of parochial anxieties
Mingles curiously with the fear of the feelers of state
Extending beyond the boundaries of country and race
And converging, as enlarged eyes and ears,
On neutral ground to indulge in brain teasing.

Yes, I feared the moment
When hearing of linen washed abroad,
Aging lions sharpen their claws,
Rehearse more rumbling roars
And, manes bristling, crouch in wait
For the ill-mannered prodigal
Who must return to his mother's dugs.

Yet in the uncertainty of such moments
Begins the shoring up of one's defences;
For after Western eyes have picked one clean
A mantle of immunity envelopes one,
A second skin boots and bayonets cannot breach,
A charm to guide one past snoring guards
When the next witch hunt begins.

BATTLE FOR CHINGWE'S HOLE (p. 62)

I

Laughter issues from the cavern below,
The wicked peals of Namarohi
Lying on an ancient bed of navel strings.
He who came into the world
Complete with teeth, a grey beard and a tail,
Who strutted in the midst of controversy
As old wisdom recommended his death,
Claiming he was a sign of the times
When dead trees arose to take their former places
And locusts stood poised on the horizon.
Laughter spills out of the hollow below,
The convulsive guffaws of a dwarf possessed:
"Who told you that witches plummeted this way once
Or that my path leads to Scylla and Charybdis?
Which grandmother poking at burnt potatoes
Ever sang of the Christian God
Meeting his death on these heights
To redeem the victims of Arab slavers?
Brood of deserters, must you purge
Your guilt over my shaven head,
Blame your misfortunes on speechless depths?
Whatever happened to the nantongwe ritual
That, shameless tourists all,
You should flock here for a cure?
Has the nankungwi abdicated
In preference for a Party post?
Then go seek him at this year's state banquet,
Tell him I am the one reminding him of his burden;
For I shall not have invalids for warriors
When the season of bloodshed comes round again."

II (p. 63)

Who in the year of famine
Summoned the best drummers
And after a month of dancing
In the village square
Led his people to the banks of the Mnembo.
How we gyrated that time
Oblivious of pangs of hunger,
Limbs lifting despite themselves,
Compelled by the magic tail of Namarohi.
We danced till the moon hung over the waters,
Watched as the bearded dwarf, our chief,
Hacked a path through the torrents.
First the drummers, followed by the women,
Babies strapped onto their backs,
Heads laden with baskets and pots;
Then the men, axes on their shoulders,
Spears or pangas in their hands
(Some carried guns from Mbwani);
Namarohi brought up the rear
And the water closed over his head.
For many days and nights
We danced on the banks of the Mnembo
To the rhythm of submarine drums
That grew fainter with each sunset;
In their wake our fishermen
Reported baskets of smoked chambo
Found floating on the waters.

III (p. 64)

Who tore the hair from his chest
When Mapantha, that interpreter from Tchinde,
Beguiled Khumbanyiwa into surrendering the land
To the Portuguese intruders and their sepoy
In exchange for coats and calico.
The duped ones clapped their hands and chanted:
Pwiya, pwiya, nnokhwelani nyuwano!
But whose grand-father's spirits
Were these monsters from the sea?
Observing this treachery from the mists
Beyond Murumbu Hill, Namarohi sensed
In his blood that such folly
Would sap our warriors' morale
In the numerous engagements to come;
He knew too that this was the beginning
Of the confusion that still dogs us:
Kuruwe, the place named after its partridges,
Turned into the meaningless Guruwe;
Then our people twisted their captors' tongue
Into words strange enough to send the frogs
On the banks of the Nikhuku
To premature death by drowning:
'Rekoni', 'Karitela', and bloated carcasses
Floated on the once clear waters.
My ancestor descended from the hills
And for a whole year wreaked havoc among the bandits.
Smouldering boma posts marked the route he followed
Behind dispossessed men, women and children
On the westward march to a new home at Nsoni.
But Mapantha, that ubiquitous son of a chameleon,
Was there again to meet them.

IV (p. 65)

Who lured raiding impis into the quagmires
Where overjoyed crocodiles found them;
Who in the recesses of Malabvi Hill
Taught a fugitive people
Not only the art of rolling rocks
But also warfare with cauldrons of kalingonda:
The Ngoni regiments of nachikopa fame
Wilted in the very hour of seeming triumph.
When overseas predators fell upon our men,
Pressing them to toil for rolls of tobacco
Or breaking their backs with guns for an alien war,
Namarohi grew restless in the adopted abode;
His memory drifted back in time
To youths dragged from their villages
To sweat it out on the prazos along the Zambezi,
Leaving fields untilled and granaries gaping.
Where on earth could a man find peace?
He was there at the secret meetings
As the elders cracked the riddles of the new age;
When the kernel pointed to the sharpening of spears,
He it was that supervised the taking of the oath
And the departure of the couriers,
All this against the carnival background of tchopa.
With ground herbs from Murumbu he put to sleep
Plantation owners, DC's and the Governor,
Who saw and smelt the smoke of battle
Yet continued to frequent waterholes.
The warriors proceeded under cover of darkness
To sever the heads of their tormentors
But those who ventured farthest
Encountered the grotesque grin of a familiar mask:
Mapantha had vanished when he was needed most.
The fleet-footed fled, leaving the dead behind,
Or captives to be shot in the market-place at dawn.

V (p. 66)

Who advised Kaduya on the manner of attack
The day the askaris were routed at Malindi;
But after the tactician had been shot in the leg
And a deserter had alerted the enemy,
My ancestor, master of the underworld,
Guided Chilembwe through the thick lines
Of armed zombies and would-be traitors
To a remote island on Lake Chilwa.
Thwarted, the hound-dogs killed a passer-by,
Serving him up to their masters
As the leader of the rebellion:
The white sea-god required a blood sacrifice.
But those who knew the truth
Discreetly visited the lake
Bringing gifts of fowls and flour.
Because his wife had brought death to so many,
He swiftly dispatched her to the spirit world;
As for Mapantha, his harsh ending absolved him:
He who had dodged action found it in himself
To make a brilliant defence of the rising
At the moment of reckoning, stunning the inquisitors.
Chilembwe himself died an old man in 1953;
He will come again at the next millennium
When the fat and powerful among us,
Adopting the perverse wisdom of Livingstone,
Once again appropriate the land
That so many bled and died for,
Urging the rightful owners to work it for them
In the name of progress.

VI (p. 67)

Namarohi then fought on the side
Of the young men of the forest,
Sojourned under stagnant pools,
Breathing through reed snorkels,
Till mouldy boots bred worms
And the skin peeled off the warriors' feet.
Those were the days when,
Possessed of the madness of dogs,
The sepoys used pregnant women for target practice
And set fire to wailing children.
Lately he fought in the battles
Of the century old Chimurenga,
Dug tunnels into prison villages
And redistributed the captured land;
His tail still smarts
Where stray shrapnel pierced it.
In memory of those who fell
He has carved the following:
A woman, child strapped to her back,
Balancing on her head
A delicate bundle of grenades,
And a wounded white soldier
Riding on the shoulders of a native son:
No foreign hosts can ever hope
To triumph over the spirits of the ancestors.

VII (p. 68)

Laughter flows from the depths of the Hole
As Namarohi inspects poets
Entangled in the dark legend of Napolo:
Is this perhaps the monster
That unnerved Shaka,
Fold upon endless fold
Protruding above the waters of the Mfolozi
To conjure up visions of empire?
Is this the answer to the riddle
That bounces back from the walls of Chinge's Hole?
But my ancestor scorns pointless fascination with myth,
Preferring the daring of the latecomer;
Who, in the year of the Great Flood,
Ferried distressed maidens singlehanded
From Mzimu Ndirinde to the shore.
He then followed the subterranean spoor
Of the much vaunted serpent
To its lair in the womb of the mountain,
Challenging Napolo to a wrestling match ;
But Alas! The monster was blind,
Massive eyelids closing over empty sockets.
In his hour of shame, Napolo offered Namarohi
Unsurpassable knowledge of herbs.
But my ancestor declined,
Knowing full well the duplicity
Of shattered behemoths.
Yet compassion fell so heavily on the warrior
That he quickly fashioned a bangwe
To play lullabies to the stricken anarchist.

VIII (p. 69)

It is true mountain rivers break their banks,
Brick walls crumble under the onslaught
And the embarrassed residents
Scurry for shelter on hilltops elsewhere.
That happens when Napolo's anguish is too much
For him (such is the weight of enforced idleness)
And he bangs his colossal head
Against the mighty pillars of his den.
That is when Namarohi has put his harp aside,
Temporarily broken off his eerie laughter
And quietly slipped down south
Through subterranean pathways
To check whether the mines he planted years ago
Are now ripe for the final conflagration.
My ancestor chronically chafes at his laurels,
Itching to move on to new battlefields.

BLACK KITTEN (p. 70)

I

I watched, transfixed, as a black kitten
Stalked a giant white mouse;
It was carefully edging forward,
Hugging the ground as felines are wont to do.
The prospective victim appeared hypnotized
And curiosity mingled with the predatory urge
In the hunter's eyes.
Suddenly the mouse changed into a mongoose;
The kitten drew back in fear
But soon continued circling its protean quarry,
Taking care to skip out of reach
Each time a giant paw lashed out in its direction.
My heart jumped then yet I could not move,
However much I tried,
To steer the kitten out of danger.

II (p. 71)

As I watched, transfixed,
A yellow and brown cobra slithered onto the scene;
It made as if to by-pass the stalemated pair
But the mongoose quickly spotted it
And, ignoring the kitten, gave chase.
A furious battle ensued as cobra, head raised
And forked tongue unleashed
Sought to puncture mongoose's coat
Or stamp the light out of his eyes.
But the rodent's mass belied its agility
For it wove magic skeins round the ophidian
And when the trance was complete,
Pounced upon the puffed gullet.
Execution was swift and, as I watched,
The mongoose set about swallowing the cobra
After the manner of a python.
Its limbs expanded with each disappearing coil
Until the head had grown threefold
The legs four and the maw five.
The colour of its coat gradually changed;
Yellow and brown spots replaced the white.

III (p. 72)

After its heavy meal the mongoose went to sleep
On its haunches; it had hardly started snoring
When the kitten leapt from nowhere
And, as I watched transfixed, opened its mouth wide
And started swallowing the mongoose,
Beginning with the mammoth head.
Before long the kitten's head had grown fifteenfold
The legs twenty and the maw twenty-five
The colour of its coat gradually changed
First from black to white
Then to the cobra's yellow and brown.
After its massive meal the giant kitten
Issued a blood-curdling battle-cry
Then leapt into the nearest thicket,
Leaving my heart pounding in my ears.

FITZWALTER ROAD (SHEFFIELD) (p. 73)

In the small hours,
Before the tread of traffic
Deflates the calm,
Buzzing these ancient structures,
A strange peace settles on this road,
Set off by the humming of the fridge,
The tireless heart of the city.
The timid rays through the attic window
Recall the view from the sixth floor
Of the Students' Union building at nightfall
When the lights across this amorphous village
Tremble and flicker
As if touched by the moon.

HOWL (p. 74)

The wind hurls itself against this tower
Howling, shrieking, breaking and regrouping,
Like waves of warriors storming a stockade.
Any moment now the rattling pane will blow out
And the whirlwind suck me out of complacency.
The fever rises, the skin itches,
The pillow smells of sweat;
These are the wages of swooning heights:
Lone watchman overlooking turbulent sea,
My Cyclop's eye rolling sleepless in its socket;
In the unmediated distance flickering
Columns of light call my name.

SELF ANALYSIS (p. 75)

Let us go back then to the incubator,
Ask it whether the omens at birth
Presaged a fettered tongue
Or a term in the loony bin.
Before your lights go out,
Lead me back to the playing-fields of long ago
Where boys vied for a bundle of rags
And a stone from the nearby washing-place
Flew into the mouth of a deaf player,
Shattering his teeth and launching him
On the path to the head shrinkers
At the foot of the mountain.
Perhaps we shall find a footprint
The wind overlooked or the rain bypassed
To unlock for us the riddle of the sands.