

“Haunted Still by Memories”: John Eppel’s Post-Settler Plant Poetic

Dan Wylie

Summary

Bulawayo-based writer John Eppel is gaining increased prominence and acceptance as Zimbabwe’s premier satirist, in both poetry and prose. Early critics, even fellow-poets, failed to read the coruscating and self-referential nature of that satire, and poems treating the natural world were too easily dismissed as Romantic “white” nostalgia. A closer reading reveals a subtler range of questions, exploring the relations between white or Rhodesian identity and nature (especially flowers), between satire and belonging, between seasonal ephemerality and political uncertainty, between literary allusion and sensual immediacy, poetic form and historical turbulence. Above all, many of Eppel’s plant-focused poems treat the layered and conflicting demands of memory. This article explores these questions over thirty years of Eppel’s production (from *Spoils of War* [1989] to *Together* [2011]) and through three interlocking phases or aspects: childhood, war and political transition, and post-Independence disillusionment.

Opsomming

Die digter en prosaskrywer John Eppel van Bulawayo word toenemend erken as Zimbabwe se voorste satirikus. Vroeë kritici en selfs mededigters kon die aard van sy skitterende en selfverwysende satire nie na waarde skat nie, en sy natuurgedigte is afgemaak as Romantiese “wit” nostalgie. Die noulettende leser word egter gekonfronteer met subtiele vrae oor die verband tussen wit of Rhodesiese identiteit en die natuur (veral blomme); tussen satire en die behoefte om iewers te hoort; tussen seisoenale verganklikheid en politieke onsekerheid; en tussen literêre verwysings en sensuele onmiddellikheid, digvorm en historiese onstuimigheid. Bowenal Eppel se plantgedigte handel oor die gelaagde en teenstrydige eise wat herinneringe stel. In hierdie artikel word hierdie vrae verken. Dit omvat dertig jaar van Eppel se produksie (van *Spoils of War* (1989) tot *Together* (2011)) en drie ineengrypende fases of aspekte, te wete: kinderjare, oorlog en politieke oorgang, en ontgogeling ná onafhanklikheid.

Introduction

To paraphrase Walter Benjamin, every document of remembrance is also a document of forgetting. Selected events and personalities tend to be memorialised to the exclusion of others; continuations of power structures at the communal level, and continuations of identity at the individual level, are purchased in the coinage of memory – memorials, texts, images, sensations, stories passed on orally. Nowhere is this more problematic than in the wake of revolutionary change. In the post-colonial or post-independence situation, such as that experienced in Zimbabwe in 1980, efforts are made by the incoming powers to memorialise their own achievement in overturning colonial or white minority rule, while suppressing memories of the latter. In Zimbabwe, Heroes’ Acres were established in major centres, most notably Harare, to memorialise ZANU-PF’s guerrilla stalwarts, while statues of settler-era luminaries were removed from public spaces. From a vantage-point overlooking my home town, Mutare, for example, a statue of one of the earliest settler poets and autobiographers, Kingsley Fairbridge, was removed to an obscure spot behind a museum building. This kind of response is common, and commonly emotive (witness the recent controversies attendant on removal of statues of Lenin in Ukraine, and of Lee in the American South). It was seen as an act of rather startling generosity when, in the wake of the RhodesMustFall campaigns of 2016, then President Robert Mugabe directed that the burial-monument to Cecil John Rhodes in Zimbabwe’s Matobo Hills should be left alone.

Paradoxically, the memories of the settler minority, from Fairbridge in the 1890s to Alexandra Fuller a century later, have received a level of publication and publicity disproportionate to their numbers: a slew of memoirs, led by Peter Godwin’s *Mukiwa* (1996) and Fuller’s *Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight* (2002), have achieved international fame and multiple re-printings. They range from militaristic hagiographies still extolling the superiority of Rhodesian troops to memories of near-idyllic childhoods, such as Lauren St John’s *Rainbow’s End* (2007), thus catering for a range of settler nostalgias. In the “decolonising” atmosphere of the present, any such nostalgia tends to be roundly denounced. At the same time, the controversial seizure of thousands of white-owned farms after 2000 has concentrated intensive academic attention on identity-creation amongst remaining white farmers (see Pillosof, Rutherford, Wolmer, Hartnack, Hughes), offering a highly specific and interesting focus for the burgeoning area of “whiteness studies”.

This intensity of interest nevertheless leaves some notable gaps: the poetic, as opposed to prose memoirs; the suburban; and the satirical. The work of John Eppel is located in all three of these areas. Eppel was born in Lydenburg, South Africa, in 1947, but moved with his parents to the small mining village of Colleen Bawn when he was four. He has had a long and distinguished career as an English teacher; he has remained to the present in suburban

Bulawayo, and continues to teach informally, as well as to add to probably the most voluminous body of creative work of any white writer in the country after Doris Lessing's several early novels, volumes of short stories, and travelogues. His oeuvre of novellas, short stories and volumes of poetry, a number of them recipients of literary prizes, thus provides a unique depth of perspective on thirty years of Rhodesian-Zimbabwean history. Most of the work is locally set in or near Bulawayo's suburbs or school environs, so familiar to Eppel; and much is acidically satirical in nature, a feature almost designed to marginalise him. Satire generally has not been a prominent or easily assimilable mode in Zimbabwe's literary traditions. Eppel's coruscating portrayal of his "own" white settler society has not always endeared him to his peers; and subsequently ZANU-PF's cultural commissars have narrowly misconstrued as racist his satirical take on all Zimbabwe's groups, from political leaders to suburban madams to NGOs.

His poetry has also incorporated two 'traditional' elements which have not been kindly received by Zimbabwean commentators and the occasional post-colonial scholar. The first is the consistent if varied use of traditional English stanzaic forms, as well as the sonnet, sestina and villanelle; the second is a high degree of concentration on the poet's relation to the natural world. Both of these have laid Eppel open to accusations of an anachronistic adherence to foreign, imported models of poeticisation, especially the English Romantics. While Eppel acknowledges his indebtedness to the Romantics, and insists on the primacy of crafted form as a vital element in good poetry, to confine a reading of him to these elements alone is, I believe, to do the work a considerable disservice. Rather, I suggest, in its complexity Eppel's poetry can be said to embody Felix Guattari's *Three Ecologies*: "a nascent subjectivity" is inseparable from "a constantly mutating socius [and] an environment in the process of being reinvented" (Guattari 45), a nexus "produced by what I call *heterogenesis*, in other words, a process of continuous resingularization" (45).

Beneath the orderly surfaces, the poems are often experimental and thematically probing, and vary widely in tone and subject, from satirical squibs just as biting or raunchy as the prose works, through to the gently appreciative and lovelorn. The plant-centred poems examined here tend towards the latter, but are often self-ironising and subtly attuned to that "constantly mutating socius" and to national politics. Even when modified by "Romantic" elements, I would argue, the poems appreciative of the natural need to be read as indissolubly part of Eppel's broader satirical project, rather than, as often happens, through a putative dichotomy of politics and the natural.

Eppel's poetic treatment of the natural world employs at least three obvious foci. One is more conventional landscape, including that of the Matopos or Matobo Hills, and more specifically the environs of Rhodes's grave. More pervasively, however, the environment is the suburb. Within that ambit,

secondly, Eppel has written frequently about birds. The third focus – plants – I will concentrate on exclusively in this article. Plant-centred poems occur mostly in the earlier collections *Spoils of War* (1989) and *Sonata for Matabeleland* (1995), and rather fewer in the later collections, *Together* (with Julius Chingono, 2011), *Textures* (with Togara Muzanhamo, 2014), and *O Suburbia* (2019). An attentive exploration of this grouping of poems takes us beyond the usual scope of colonial-landscape studies, which have mostly focused on how British painterly aesthetics of the “sublime” and “picturesque” predetermined responses to, and modification of, landscapes in the colony. However, as William Wolmer has shown, landscapes are polysemous, and in places “views of landscape were partially vernacularised” by colonial settlers in ways deliberately distinct from the European conventions. Further, “the Western gaze was never all-encompassing and was often resisted” (Wolmer 12). Wolmer goes on to explore indigenous views of landscape as modes of resistance; Eppel does something a little different. His plant-centred poems explore dimensions largely overlooked by the more common academic focus on the wide-angle or open “landscape” and on the conception of “wilderness”: he as it were miniaturises the gaze on the natural, and locates most treatments in the suburban street and garden, where in fact most whites resided. While obviously closely tied to a “Western gaze”, the poems are far from being an unselfconscious “settler” re-iteration of an artificial or fetishising Romantic nature-worship. Indeed, they echo closely recent post-colonial ecocriticism’s concerns with nature as components of structures of socio-political (in)justice more than, or as well as, “Nature” as worshipful succour and poetic resource. Eppel’s treatment of flowers is highly self-aware, even self-critical, and seldom if ever divisible from his other major themes: personal love and loss of love, the nature of settler belonging, and the entanglements of power-politics through decades of turbulence.

Above all, the poems probe the multidimensional nature of memory, in particular the relationships between post-coloniality and memory. Most studies in this area have focused on the repression of indigenous memory by imperial and colonial epistemologies. Eppel’s work comes from a different angle: how does the post-colonial resident white explore memory? What are his relations between form and freedom, between satire and belonging, between seasonal ephemerality and political uncertainty, and between literary allusion and sensual immediacy? To impose a slightly artificial scheme on this body of work, we might distinguish three obvious phases or aspects: memorialising childhood; enduring the war; and exploring the fragility of post-independence belonging. The very operation of memory, of course, transgresses and interleaves these broad distinctions.

Memorialising Childhood

Childhood may be the area of memory most vulnerable to idealisation. That said, it was possible as a cushioned white (as I can attest) to have had a near-idyllic childhood in then Rhodesia, especially before (but even during) the war years. Eppel grew up in Colleen Bawn during the 1950s – halcyon days in the country’s white-ruled period, with the Second World War receding, the nationalist stirrings of the early- to mid-1960s still ahead. In several poems Eppel alludes to this period. However, never does he retrospectively linger on the perspective of the child, innocent because “deracialized, depoliticized and dehistoricized” (Harris 106). His first collection was published in 1989, well after Independence, and even the poems most fondly reminiscent of childhood are necessarily modified by the later, “post-war” perspective.

In “Remember Granny Trot’s Mulberry Jam?” (*Spoils* 10-11), for example, the poet recalls not so much the mulberry tree itself (common in our colonial gardens) but a product of it, a familial and comforting jam, along with “syringa-berry battles/ and the stink of crushed marigolds”, and a garden replete with “capsicums, horseradish,/ pumpkin ... paw paws sweeter/ than sugar”. The distance between the remembering and the remembered is already implicit in the title and its uncertain interrogative, and the poem is constructed as a complex interleaving of these Edenic fragments with their own desuetude: the decline into old age of the poet’s mother and of Granny Trot herself;¹ the intervention of real, adult war; the death of Joe (a dog) to a puffadder (an ironic reference to the Satanic serpent, perhaps). A withering of flowers closes the poem, symbolic of the passing of an entire era, even though it ends, a touch slyly, on a speculative note:

[...] our St Joseph’s lilies stopped making flowers.
It could have been the granite sand. It could
have been a hot October wind. It could
have been the rattle of choppers. It could
have been a time for lilies to sicken
in the gathering shriek of cicadas.

The drumbeat of the phrase “It could/ have been”, despite its conditionality, strikes a fatalistic note, as does the flat tautology of the final idea: it was simply time.

The tortuous background sound of cicadas – Christmas beetles – recurs in the immediately preceding poem, which reveals more explicitly a tension between the persistence of memory and a desire to move on. “Except in Poems

1. Granny Trot, it is clear from other poems, resided in South Africa, not Rhodesia; some caution is necessary in conflating the two countries’ experiences, though, as Eppel’s regular use of Afrikaans names indicates, ties were intricate.

“HAUNTED STILL BY MEMORIES”: ...

I Won't Look Back” (*Spoils* 8-9) recounts the poet's visit to his erstwhile childhood home, his wife or partner beside him. He evokes multiple intimate details of his remembered life, from railway sleepers to his father's trousers – above all his mother's flowers:

She loved petunias, and they flourished
in that sunny place where the soil was full
of bitter lime. She planted “Rosy Morn”
and “Rose ‘o Day”. She had “multifloras”,
“grandifloras”, and variegated types,
like “Butterscotch” and “Cherry Pie”.

Now, however, that imported, yet beautiful prissiness is gone; the roof of his old home is down, the walls scrawled with lewd graffiti and “Zanu slogans”, and “pioneer bush” is taking over the remnants of that colonial home and life. (*Pioneer* has a particularly ironic ring, given the status of Rhodes's 1890 Pioneer Column in Rhodesian myth-making.) The poet walks away, vowing not to look back “except in poems” – even as the writing of the poem *is* a looking back, as are the involuntary nightmares with which the poem ends. Enacted here, as in many of the poems discussed below, is what Nick Meihuizen has termed “the hurt of incompleteness, the incompleteness of alienation” (“A troubled sense”, 66). This is not – or not only – a nostalgia for a winsome childhood, but something more painful; the poet is, in the words of the collection's opening poem, “Last Night in Colleen Bawn” (*Spoils* 7), “haunted still by memories”, both of tender beauties and of loss that might be better forgotten.

The passing of childhood is repeatedly cross-hatched with another sense of passing: that of the “Rhodesian” as the community frays after 1980. A recurrent motif, a contrast between imported and indigenous species, in some cases explicitly symbolises the alien status of white settlers. In another poem looking back to childhood, “A Flower Poem, No. 2” (*Spoils* 32-33), Eppel focuses on the marigold. The speaker-poet recalls most strongly the flower's smell (the olfactory is a sensual element in many poems):

You give off a pungent
khaki odour of crushed beetles, soil,
old men, hat linings, ointment and dung.
And yet I love your smell – your odour –
better than a million Krugerrands
carpeted around a city hall [...]

This last image is cleverly ambivalent, since the brilliant gold, coin-round marigold was and is frequently used to vividly carpet public garden areas – a gilding of the architectures of power. Simultaneously, Eppel invokes the flower's foreign origins in Mexico (it is a player in what Alfred Crosby

famously called “ecological imperialism”²), its centrality to his mother’s garden, and its botanical cousinhood to the so-called “black jack”, or “khaki weed” (*Bidens pilosa*). Though also originating in Central America, black jack has become so ubiquitous that it is essentially naturalised; like the poet, we locals all recall constantly picking the clingy narrow seeds out of our socks. Despite it being classed a weed, unwanted by definition and described by botanist Clive Bromilow as “unpleasant” and “extremely troublesome” (*Problem Plants* 217), it is the black jack that this speaker “really” loves – precisely because, like Proust’s madeleines, it evokes a sudden rush of childhood memories. Though it is not explicit here, the valorisation of the imported, marginalised weed can scarcely avoid being read as paralleling the foreign-but-naturalised white Zimbabwean. As it is, this poem ends on images of the disintegration not only of more-or-less coherent childhood, but of the white “Rhodesian” community itself; the final section is related from a wistful diasporic perspective:

I believe
 the moon still visits there. But Puza
 the Simpson’s old spaniel is dead now,
 and Fred is in Cape Town, and Gillie
 is married, and Taz was killed by “terrs”,
 and Bob’s gone religious, and the old
 cow down at the dam is Fray Bentos,
 and I am overseas, looking out
 for marigolds to finger and sniff.

Much of this is about normal passages and movements, of pets and of private lives, but as in the poems discussed earlier, the advent of the guerrilla war is pivotal, both as a subject of memory in itself and as a turning-point for the white community’s cohesion and self-definition.

Various alien plants serve as vectors for a specific aesthetic of colour and cultivation that mark the settler identity: marigolds, poinsettias, crocuses, roses and, archetypally, the jacaranda trees which annually cloak so many colonial-planted towns in a riot of violet colour. In the slight poem, “Only jacarandas” (*Textures* 7) the poet seems to revel uncomplicatedly in the aesthetic pleasure of those carpets of fallen mauve; but in “Jacaranda” (*Sonata* 19), Eppel mercilessly mocks that settler aesthetic, from the madam’s patronising use of ‘chilapalapa’ language to the “drum-thighed ... vast-bummed” Rhodesian male “curling the lips at all/ things bright and beautiful”. The poem is related from the frustrated point of view of the “Matabele”

2. Crosby’s study did not extend to suburbanisation and the garden as a vector for biotic invasions; but see Foster, *Washed with sun*. For further discussion of relationships between the garden, poetry and belonging, see Wylie, “Garden of love’s decay”, “Playing God in small spaces”.

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gardener ordered to sweep the fallen flowers, replete with foraging bees, off
“lo driveway checha [quickly]”:

Why must they grow
things you can't eat or smoke or sell? What kind
of Boss – stab, stab – is this who worships trees
with flowers that make work, and sting like bees?

If Eppel courts several “Rhodesian” stereotypes here, he also hints at the violence that lurks beneath the surface of colonial impositions – violence which had erupted in the 1890s (the First Chimurenga, in nationalist terms), and again in the 1970s (the Second).

Enduring War

Eppel has not written voluminously about the 1970s guerrilla war and his own conscription in it, but memories of it shadow much of what transpires later, “slip[ping] like envelopes/under the doors of our mind” (“Rhodesian Lullaby”; *Spoils* 15). One key work is “Spoils of War” (*Spoils* 43-45). The poem is delivered in jaunty language with visually variable line lengths, an apparent informality belied by unobtrusive but consistent rhymes and a rigorously decasyllabic line. It relates how the speaker, entrenched in an infamously remote Rhodesian outpost at Vila Salazar, dares Frelimo troops across the Mozambican border in order to dig up a rare succulent, a Sabi Star or *Adenum obesum* (Eppel regularly inserts scientific botanical names, usually lightly teasing his own teacherly portentousness). It will do well, he hopes, back in Colleen Bawn. The middle of the three-page poem relates a night firefight and the killing of some “gooks”. The speaker’s fellow-soldiers plunder the corpses for a Tokarev pistol, “a portable radio, a fistful/ of rounds, an empty AK magazine,/ five teeth, a penis, a number of ears”, while he settles for the corpulent plant. He cannot explain to his fellows that he is “being purged/ of [his] Rhodesianism” – now an “ugly/ word with its jagged edge”. By comparison, he and the Sabi Star are like “lovers”, its transplantation (though technically illegal) a fruitful, flowering addendum to a terrible war. Still, the final section of the poem, in which he moves deliberately “to the past tense”, evinces that sense of distance and removal from both the childhood locus and the established sense of Rhodesian identity:

The going
was tough but at last I had my frilly-
petalled (highly protected) succulent
shrub buried up to its neck in granite
sub-soil. *Adenum* does not transplant
well, but this one flourished. You can see it

JLS/TLW

there today. It flowers in September.
And if ever you live in our old home –
the one in the village – please remember
not to over-water my cuddlesome
stump. And if you are bothered by the law,
tell them that the plant is a spoil of war.

A persistent note of lament, at times close to self-pity, tests whether Eppel really has purged himself of his “Rhodesianism” – not an easy sort of operation in any circumstances. The erosion of that white community’s sense of itself in the war’s aftermath is the subject of a number of poems utilising plants as vehicles. “Star of Bethlehem” (*Sonata* 12) revisits the motif of picking a plant in wartime, “stuffed ... in my combat/ jacket on top of a phosphorous bomb”. While the first stanza recalls some childhood musical experiences, and introduces the refrain “pretty damned close to epiphanies”, the second stanza both recalls and distances the mother, reiterating that thematic division between imported and indigenous plants:

My mother banned it from the flower beds;
to her it ranked with stinkblaar as a chronic
garden weed: the glossy leaves, the flat heads
in white and purple, smelling of tonic,
she did not hesitate to destroy. She
called them “missionary plants”, the housewives’
bane. Yet these flowers of nativity
which, healers claim, are saving many lives:
curing cancer and Hodgkin’s disease,
are pretty damned close to epiphanies.

The poet seems unwilling or unable to release himself into unqualified epiphanies – a reticence revisited in other poems, too (eg. “Grass in Winter”; *White Man* 2). For all the literary history of Romanticism on which Eppel regularly draws, he in this way distances himself from it. In some respects, Eppel echoes Thoreau, not so much in the orotund provincialism of *Walden* as in the close, even technician, observations of *Wild Fruits*, but Eppel never approaches Thoreau’s exuberant spiritualising reverence. This reticence seems linked also to an inability to fully relinquish the past. The paradox: to remember and to relinquish simultaneously.

Though the elections that brought Mugabe to power in March 1980 rendered the war retrospectively futile in white eyes, and political power was overturned, life moves on in other modes. Importantly, Eppel has children, and a number of poems look to their future, and to them *as* the future. It is natural, so to speak, to compare growing children to emerging flowers, with all their fragility, beauty and hopeful vivacity. In “My Blooming P(1)antisocracy” (*Sonata* 29), Eppel alludes punningly to Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Southey’s dream of setting up an ideal society in North

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America, which they called a Pantisocracy, though the poem’s garden idyll bears only a superficial resemblance to that unfulfilled scheme of grandiose egalitarianism. In the poem’s first stanza, Eppel combines memories of his mother’s garden and of the army – two forms of regimentation. We – his parental family – “grew the neatest May bush in the world”. Its confinement within “herbaceous borders” is paralleled with “lay-byes during the struggle”, “patriotic slogans”, and the vicious, inane drill commands of an “RSM” – all forms of “tunnel-vision” that the poet dismisses: “That was yesterday”. In the second stanza, now both the May bush (*Spirea cantoniensis*) and the poet’s children burst forth in liberated life: “spray after spray” of “scruffy blossom” is matched by the children’s exuberant, unruly leaping through sprays of water from a “riddled hosepipe”. Yet even here, Eppel seems unable to enjoy the moment without alluding to some undertow of threat. The poem closes:

our son and daughter,
bolting into the blue beyond and then
bolting back; scruffy white flowers of glee
and gloom, our blooming p(l)antisocracy.

The very euphony of “glee ... gloom ... bloom” casts ironic and troubling shadows on the bucolic idealism. Not without good reason: despite liberation, violence continued to plague Zimbabwe, notably the attacks on Joshua Nkomo’s ZAPU party in Bulawayo’s Entumbeni townships in 1981, followed by the so-called *Gukurahundi* massacres throughout Matabeleland, news of which escaped despite media blackouts. Also inevitably concerning to a white parent was how the children would find or forge a secure sense of community, with the socially comfortable “Rhodesian” sector dispersing, coming under moral fire, and being obliged to reconsider social relationships with the black majority on every level.

This reconsideration is at several points refracted through the poet’s identification with an indigenous plant – a way of imaginatively rooting oneself afresh in the country. This move is most centrally featured in “Song of the Makiwa Tree” (*Spoils* 46), one of several poems explicitly connected with Rhodes’s grave. The first two sections of the poem take in the great views west of the grave, evoking its palimpsest of indigenous and invasive histories. In sobering rhyming couplets the poet expresses his wish that his ashes be scattered here. In the third section the poet identifies himself bodily with the *makiwa* (“white man”) tree which, like him, sheds pale skin:

Call me *Commiphora*, the Paperbark;
my trunk is green but my ashes are dark
[...]
Smell me smouldering in this chilly night,
watch the gradual dying of my light.

JLS/TLW

Scatter my ashes where makaza³ spills –
among the slopes of five Matopos hills.

A kind of “Under Ben Bulben” for a Zimbabwean, ambivalent to the extent that identification is imagined as occurring fully only in death.

In another set of poems the decline of the Rhodesian is depicted through the withering of vegetation, often – in quasi-traditional Romantic mode – in conjunction with the turning of seasons. English seasons are roughly reversed in this southern hemisphere milieu, and Eppel must take account of the dry winters, the scorching heat of October, the iconic waiting for the summer rains – a conscious “vernacularisation” of the common motifs of English poetry. “October” (*Spoils* 22), “Matabele Dry” (23), and “Our Last Hot Spell” (*Sonata* 15) evoke the hottest months in which “baobabs shrivel and squat” and “a strychnos shrugs/ off dying leaves”. These poems are not overtly symbolic, but “Dispersal” (*Sonata* 11) certainly is. It is a rather odd poem about opening the Bible at random, in a kind of “stichomachy”; the pages smell like an “imagined aroma of seedpods – / *Albizia amara*, I think”. Through the pages – wood turned into paper for the display of words – the speaker senses or recalls “old trees dying back/ a bit every year”, trees that “began dying/ long after we were born, and will be/ dying long after we are dead”. Though he reads on his chance Bible page, “He shall/ return no more to his house”, reflecting that persistent sense of displacement, the speaker also smells “seedpods maturing” – a more positive sense of dispersal and opening into new life. Characteristically, Eppel seems “not quite” sure about this “random” future vision:

No, it’s not quite love,
and it’s not quite long odds. It’s the smell
of words not quite turning into trees.

As in some other poems, Eppel here reveals an uncertainty about the efficacy of poetry itself – a perennial epistemological problem complicated further by the post-colonial setting.

Post-Colonial Belonging

In Eppel’s later poetry, new sub-themes also emerge: marriage, parenthood, and divorce, loneliness and ageing, and an increasingly testy critique of the civic failings and human-rights abuses of the Mugabe regime. Even a genuine commitment to staying on in constructive engagement did not make belonging easier for the “settler”; it became even more fraught in some ways.

3. *Makaza* is misty rain, also locally known as *guti*.

This was especially so after 2000, when the land redistribution process commenced and ZANU-PF propaganda revived an antagonistic racial discourse.

One early poem in which Eppel both probes his sense of societal division, and satirises his own acknowledged obsession with flowers, is “I and the Black Poet” (*Spoils* 23), one of a clutch of poems set in South Africa, where of course white minority rule persisted until 1994. The poem opens with arch self-consciousness:

I have my subject in focus,
now I must focus my poem:
it’s a memory of crocus
bulbs.

But the memory is “dim”; the poet has to look the flower up in a guide-book; and he cannot decide how to describe it. In the end, he recognises that the seasons are wrong for crocuses:

Like silver-striped
leaves my arms follow seasons
never cold enough for a typed
memory of crocuses.

The local irrelevance of this torturous effort is abruptly contrasted with the self-evident importance of the black poet’s subject: the violence of “Sharpeville and Soweto”. A similar contrast, also worked out through an olfactory flower image, governs “The Midnight Blooming” (*Spoils* 27), in which the overheard revolutionary strains of “Amandla” and “Awethu” are redolent with a “thousand / thousand perfumes”, whereas the poet’s stanzas are teasingly reduced to the bathetic, “pale/ as plastic bucket blue”.

Conflating South African and Zimbabwean examples, American anthropologist David McDermott Hughes, in his provocative study *Whiteness in Zimbabwe*, derided “I and the Black Poet” as a “fetish[isation]” of flowers symptomatic of what he perceived as a broad trend amongst white Rhodesian-Zimbabweans: that is, to forge appreciative relationships with an aestheticised Nature rather than with the country’s indigenous people – indeed, as a self-deceiving means of avoiding such cross-racial relations (10).⁴ Whatever the merits of Hughes’s general argument, he signally failed to read the self-ironising voice, or to contextualise the poem within Eppel’s broader satirical project. As Eppel has said: “I’ve always been a bit obsessed with flowers ... and not just because they are pretty things with erotic connotations. I also use flowers to make fun of myself as a colonial, because the idea of planting pretty

4. I have explored Hughes’s arguments more fully elsewhere (Wylie, “Not quite a refutation”).

flowers instead of using the land to feed yourself is a very colonial thing” (*Textures* iv). Still, to a degree, Eppel himself evidences Hughes’s view, in an unabashed short poem, “Seeking Identity”: “I look for my self/in family, friends,/ home and garden,/ grass, flowers, rocks, trees ...// all the while resisting/ my gender,/ my skin colour,/ my nationality” (*O Suburbia* 30). And elsewhere, Hughes has acknowledged that some whites’ re-characterisation of themselves as a kind of “lost tribe”, “[u]ncomfortable and unsafe as it is”, evinces “a certain honesty and humility” (“Whites lost and found”, 173)

In direct response to Hughes’ accusation, Eppel wrote “Yet Another Flower Poem” (*Together* 143), in which he is both defensive and self-mocking.⁵ He begins with a somewhat prosy discussion of the American Dream – doubtless an allusion to Hughes’s outsider status. But the Dream is delusory, Eppel claims, just as the “flowers” of the poinsettia are actually just “scarlet bracts or modified leaves”, and he connects that colour to the superficial glitz of Hollywood. “But what”, the poet asks, has the American Dream and its “manifest destiny” to do with his own Bulawayo suburban garden? He turns on his heel, replying, “Everything”. The white imperialism underpinning the American Dream is, he implies, no different than that underpinning the colonisation of Rhodesia; only the clichés are different (“rod of empire”, “Rule Britannia”). That colonisation also brought the flower he gazes on, poinsettia, “*Euphorbia pulcherrima*”, “as much a settler as I am”. He distances himself both from politicians’ empty words, and from certain academics’ assertion that “a white poet/ should restrict his content to the flora of Bulawayo”. At the same time he vows not to leave before the shrub does: he is, idealistically, as rooted as it is. The poem ends with the speaker caught between uncertainty and a visceral apprehension of immediate beauty:

My settler friends and me, our destiny
is obscure. We measure out our lives in platitudes, clichés,
watching the sun set on Zimbabwe, as it set on empire:
scarlet and gold, heart-breaking, most beautiful – *pulcherrima*.

There are, arguably, troubling equivocations here: is it imperialism itself that is seen as colourfully beautiful, as well as Zimbabwe, both being, historically, as ephemeral as a sunset? Are not the aesthetics of flowers and sunsets themselves culturally specific, one facet of an imperial mental machinery of conquest, which had palpable effects on the geo-practical level – the very layout of the suburban garden itself, for one? Gardens are both enclosed and porous, both havens from social disease and sites of resistance to it, both spaces of individual creativity and palimpsests of historical belonging and disturbance – in short, contradictory and continuously renegotiated heterotopias.

5. According to Drew Shaw (in Eppel, *Textures*, iv), the sonnet sequence “The Hillside Dames in Bulawayo” (8-12) is also an extended riposte to Hughes.

The enclosed suburban garden provides a venue for the inward ruminations on privacy and imagination, echoing certain preoccupations of the Romantics. In a fine sonnet, “Poinsettias on Africa Day” (*Spoils* 35), the political significance of the public holiday⁶ is (after the title) entirely bypassed in favour of another, more private mode of belonging in Africa, one attentive to beauty, complex symbolic and literary histories, medicinal properties, sexuality, and emotional response:

Woke to bracts recalling
Apollo’s lust for Daphne. Lips open,
lips close, and the half-turned palmates falling.
Pulcherrima. Daphne Laureola.
Provoker of homeless poets. Consoler.

That Eppel is fully aware of the problematic here is evident in several other plant-centred poems. In the Petrarchan sonnet, “Hillside Road in Autumn” (*White Man Crawling*, 1), the octave evokes the indigenous, now absent from the city’s modern riotousness:

This avenue should have been lined with trees
large enough to nest hamerkops, shelter
vervets, resolve the discord of a breeze,
shade road-rage, allay the helter-skelter
[...]
trees that could claim the public’s gratitude.

Instead of a healing and natural ecosystem, the sestet contrastively argues, the suburban road boasts a less satisfactory imposition, but one that nevertheless at times offers aesthetic pleasure:

Instead it’s dotted with colonials
too scrawny for children to climb, or snakes
to whisper in. Yet when that blossom spills
its incense on the smouldering grass, takes
to heart a variegated pink, a white
slipper, there comes a moment of delight.

That this “spot of time” has Wordsworthian antecedents does not justify throwing it out with the decolonising bathwater. Moreover, Eppel understands that his poetic aesthetic – his predilection for sonnets and such forms – is indissolubly tied to these other aesthetic tendencies. This is clear from another later poem, “Appropriating the Land” (*Textures* 65), with its clear reference to the terminology of Mugabe’s post-2000 land acquisition process. The first

6. Africa Day, 25 May, was declared in 1963 to mark the founding of the Organisation of African Unity, and was adopted by Zimbabwe after 1980.

of the poem's three tightly-organised stanzas refers to the colonial processes of appropriating land, installing dams, roads, landfills, and "grid after grid" of urban planning – and also plants imported specifically for nostalgic aesthetic reasons: "We introduced fiddle-/ wood for its autumn-stressed/ hues and the way its falling petals/ sounded like rain". In the third stanza Eppel focuses on the arguably equally artificial aesthetic of his poetry itself: "I stick to the rules deliberately", he has said, "and part of this, of course, is a way of self-mockery" (*Textures* iii).

We wrote poems about sunsets,
jacarandas, blue skies,
the dispositions of our pets,
and the fish eagle's cries.
We wrote about bitter longing,
sometimes florid, sometimes terse –
metaphors and symbols thronging,
verse after verse after verse.

The verse, too, is a kind of "grid" upon reality, part of a recognisable, if mutable, cultural nexus, one which the speaker acknowledges as his ("We") even as the critical awareness places him partly outside it. Do those aesthetics then govern, in certain ways, Eppel's most recent griping about the deterioration in Zimbabweans' daily life over the last twenty years? Certainly, some such critiques are couched in botanical terms – a new dimension to this imagistic strand in Eppel's work.

"Practising Scales" (*Sonata* 60-61) roughly conforms to this article's three-part structure. The poem is delivered in ironically jaunty ballad form, and recounts the gradual transformation of Rhodesian institutions of school and sport, with their colonial names (Colenbrander Oval, St Mary's, Victoria Olympic Pool), partly through vegetal signifiers. The first part recalls Rhodesia and youth together; the focus is on "spunk" and girls, and "St Mary's English roses/ are mulched by 'garden boys'". In the next part, set post-Independence, the roses teem with "izintethe" (katydids or grasshoppers), and in the third give way to "barren ground"; mealies grown on the former rugby fields die altogether; "the cricket nets grow prickly pears/ the golf course harvests thorn".

That the swimming-pool in this poem becomes "a giant garbage mound" echoes another poem of suburban complaint, "Soap Rhymes with Hope" (*Together* 101). This poem centres on the olfactory, has a somewhat analogous three-part structure, and is cross-hatched with nostalgic memories:

baubinia
comes to mind, synchronising its perfume with the rotation
of my bicycle wheels, on my way to teach willing children
that nothing in nature dies.

“HAUNTED STILL BY MEMORIES”: ...

The second part recalls a visit to Kew, archetypal collector of imperial species, where “in late spring, the scent of lilacs/ made me weep for home” (ironically, given that lilacs are again alien to Zimbabwe), and also for a highly sexualised youth or manly prime, “syringa blossom” evoking “a drift of skirts eddying, pony tails swishing”.

But winter’s best fragrance was the sage leaf buddleia
that prospered in our neighbour’s garden; and summer’s was plumeria,
its common name suggested by a famous scent invented
centuries ago by perfumer, Muzio Frangipane.

The rather flat, didactic note struck there reinforces the distance from the original experience; and the third section of the poem moves from past tense to present. In the post-2000s economic meltdown, characterised by disorderly land acquisitions, commodity shortages, electoral violence, major population shifts, hyperinflation, and deterioration of municipal services, those fond fragrances have been ousted by a different set of odours:

Now, the mounds of household rubbish dumped along our public ways,
on verges, in storm drains, rivers, ponds, or set alight to stink –
a toxic, nauseating horror that rises not like incense
but settles for the nostrils of the devil. Now our houses
reek of “war vets” armpits and other effects of soaplessness:
poverty, anxiety, trepidation, even terror:
a ferment that manufactures, not bubbles, but hopelessness.

Compared to what I experience as Eppel’s best poems – multilayered, suggestive, intricately crafted – this trenchant gripe is blunt stuff, even slightly hyperbolic. The bathetic note, as often in Eppel’s poems, courts clunkiness while veering towards the grimly funny. Whatever the empirical facts of the post-colonial urban condition, Eppel’s treatment of it here risks being read as merely a retrograde imperial-colonial, even racist, grumble about a linear deterioration from ‘civilised standards’, especially of cleanliness and civic efficiency, under black rule. Both the imperial-aesthetic legacy and present-day degradation exist: how they are seen to relate to one another is the sticky point.

A better poem, again touching on piled-up, foul-smelling garbage, is “Waiting”, the final poem in *Together* (149).⁷ It is a deftly-constructed tripartite poem that includes many of the themes already explored: the post-independence disillusionment experienced by most Zimbabweans; both nostalgic and ugly memories brushed aside by anxiety for the future; the

7. These references to garbage take on an even uglier hue in the wake of ZANU-PF’s universally condemned *Murambatsvina* (Wash away the rubbish) clearances of 2008.

identification with the foreign flower and pleasure in its beauty and scent; symbolic seasonality. The poet “counts falling frangipani leaves” in a countdown to no particular end:

So quickly do they change from fluid green
to yellowish, to desiccated brown [...] In terminal
cymes some flowers remain, as white as wax,
mingling the bitter sweets of paradise
with odours of anxiety.

The poem ends on a flat, dispirited note:

These falling leaves remind me
that the day has come and gone for ballots
to be counted, results announced, and I'm
afraid that change will never come.

As Eppel enters his seventies, it is appropriate to end on a poem less about politics than the personal phenomenon of ageing, “Let’s Drink to Growing Old” (*O Suburbia* 64). Identification with the tree is central (it echoes the makiwa tree discussed earlier, as well as “Spoils of War”), and it is primarily a sharply sensual and gently ironic lament at ageing, though broader politics lurks:

I lean against the monkey thorn
planted years ago,
before our youngest child was born,
before the wilting of the corn,
I watched the sapling grow.

I took the seed from Hillside Dams,
soaked it overnight,
before the slaughter of the lambs,
before those drunken dithyrambs,
its bark turned flaky white.

Its hooks are hard and shiny black,
its catkins yellow-gold;
its roughness presses at my back,
each ridge I feel, each scab, each crack,
so, cheers to growing old!

Conclusion

Alexandra Fuller, in her appositely titled family memoir *Cocktail Hour under the Tree of Forgetfulness* (2011), notes that most Rhodesians, especially in

the Smith era, routinely “denied the country an African history prior to the arrival of Europeans” (158). Invalidating any prior occupancy of land was a cornerstone of Rhodesian Front propaganda – what critics called the Mushroom Club: “Kept in the dark and fed horseshit” (159). As Hartnack and others have observed, on interviewing multiple white farmers, this wilful amnesia has widely persisted into the post-independence period. Eppel transgresses this narrowness in important respects. In his plant-centred, as well as numerous other poems and stories, he demonstrates a high degree of self-consciousness about the political and epistemological traps, employs a range of reference, technique and theme, and demonstrates strong imaginative empathies with groups and individuals other than his ‘own’ historical white milieu. Crucially, he ‘fails’ to arrive at a destination in his search for a post-colonial sense of belonging: he exemplifies, I think, Ashleigh Harris’s observation that “the claiming of white Zimbabwean identity is a complex process in which the tensions between belonging and ownership, between displacement and settling, and between personal and national memories and histories are *negotiated*” (117; my emphasis). Part of that negotiation is forging a response both to people and to natural elements in the world that cannot escape, but do not replicate the oppressive strategies of the imperial and colonial projects. In its self-ironising aspects, especially when contextualised within his work more generally, Eppel’s poetry exemplifies, in my view, a humane working with, and reworking of, a “post-settler” memory. In his interleaving of themes and levels, of the personal and public, of the literary and the scatological, the environmental and the human, of the punchy and the provisional, Eppel embodies, in a unique manner, a continuous rather than conclusive process of heterogenesis.

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Dan Wylie
 Rhodes University
 d.wylie@ru.ac.za