

# Toponyms in Poetry

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### Summary

The authors examine the way a number of poets have used toponyms (place names) in their poems. The many diverse uses of toponyms include using them as vehicles for humour and satire, for their historical connotations, for their political import, to express pride in the motherland, to mark the routes of journeys, to map landscapes, and frequently simply for their musicality and sensuousness. A wide range of poets has been chosen – South African, British, and American – from the famous to the obscure. The toponyms in the poems come from many parts of the world, and also from a variety of languages. Two of the poems are written in Afrikaans and Zulu. The poems selected range from “high-density” poems, with one consisting entirely of place names, to “low-density” poems, one of them featuring a single name and one that does not mention a single one. Most of the poems discussed in this article were written as poems, while two were written originally as songs, and one sequence of place names is taken from the Old Testament.

### Opsomming

Die skrywers ondersoek die manier waarop verskeie digters toponieme (plekname) in hulle gedigte gebruik het. Die verskeie uiteenlopende gebruike van toponieme sluit in: gebruik as middel vir humor en satire, vir hul historiese betekenis, vir hulle politieke belangrikheid, om trots in die moederland te betuig, om die roete van 'n reis uit te merk, om 'n landskap te karteer, en soms net vir hulle welluidendheid en sintuiglikheid.

'n Breë reeks digters is gekies – Suid-Afrikaans, Brits en Amerikaans – van die welbekende tot die onbekende. Die toponieme in die gedigte kom van baie dele van die wêreld, asook uit verskeie tale. Twee van die gedigte is in Afrikaans en in Zoeloe geskryf. Die gedigte wat gekies is, wissel van “hoë-digtheid” gedigte, waarvan een net uit plekname bestaan, tot “lae-digtheid” gedigte, waarvan een net een pleknaam insluit, en nog een geen name noem nie. Die meeste van die gedigte wat in hierdie artikel bespreek word, is oorspronklik as gedigte geskryf, terwyl twee van hulle oorspronklik as liedjies geskryf is, en een reeks name is uit die Ou Testament geneem.

While countless poems have been written about places, and about “sense of place”, in a smaller subset of poems place *names*, or toponyms, play an

important part in their own right. Many poets have written poems that feature toponyms, and from these we have selected a range of poems that illustrate some of the ways poets use place names. Space precludes us from covering a wider body of poetry than that discussed in this article; but the poems we have chosen illustrate the points we wish to make about the use of toponyms.

Toponyms feature in these poems in ways familiar in the study of onomastics: the authors explore their polysemic denotative, connotative and literal values, and their power as repositories of history and culture. At the same time the ways in which toponyms are instrumental in the craft of versification show them in a light not normally noticed in onomastic studies.

The poems we have selected range in toponymic density on a sliding scale or continuum, from one that consists of nothing else but place names, through high density poems, to the other end of the continuum, where there is a poem about one name only, and we end with one that is all about names but does not name any at all. The way the names are treated by the authors can be described in structuralist terms as either marked, where the actual name is the focus of attention, or unmarked, where names are used almost in passing to create certain effects.

Our choice of poems for this article covers both a wide historical and a wide geographical range. The earliest poem comes from the Old Testament of the Bible, while the most modern was written in 2011. The poets discussed come from South Africa, England, Ireland, and America, and while some write about place names in their own country, others write about names in other countries around the world. Among the South African poems, we have included poems written in Zulu and in Afrikaans. Three of the pieces, the extract from the Old Testament and two song lyrics, were not written as formal “poems”.

Our intention is to look at the interface between literary studies and onomastic studies, so there is a strong emphasis on names and naming, and the situating of the poems within a broader landscape of name usage, rather than locating the poems within literary history.

After examining the effects created by the poets through the use of toponyms, we discuss cartography in the poems, the simultaneous use of anthroponyms, and the poets’ exploitation of the poetic and sensual qualities of names.

## **Effects of Name Usage**

In the first part of this article, we look at how we perceive the effect of the name usage of each poet in his or her poem. Such effects include humour and satire, elegy, and expressing love of the motherland and patriotism. Some of the poems can be considered to be examples of “travel writing”, a

genre normally restricted to prose. Poets internalise carefully realised landscapes or turn them into a fantasy world. Individual poets may have used toponyms in more than one way in a single poem.

Mark Twain's poem "A Sweltering Day in Australia" appears in his book *Following the Equator: A Journey Round the World* (1897). While on a train trip in Australia, the American traveller Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens) (1989: 328) jots down a list of 81 Australian place names "with the idea of making a poem out of them". He introduces his poem with the words, "It may be best to build the poem now, and make the weather help." Stanzas 1, 6, and 7 (of a twelve-stanza poem) give an idea of how Twain has used the names he collected, and how the theme of the "sweltering day" has been maintained:

1. The Bombola faints in the hot Bowral tree,  
Where fierce Mullengudgery's smothering fires  
Far from the breezes of Coolgardie  
Burn ghastly and blue as the day expires.
6. The Kooringa buffalo pants in the sun,  
The Kondoparinga lies gasping for breath,  
The Kongorong Camaum to the shadow has won,  
But the Goomeroo sinks in a slumber of death;
7. In the sweltering hell of the Moorooroo plain  
The Yatal Wangary withers and dies,  
And the Worrow Wanilla, demented with pain,  
To the Woolgoolga woodlands despairingly flies;

The extreme heat of Australia is expressed in nearly every line, whether it is caused by lack of wind or the fiery sun. Under these conditions, living things wither: "the Bombola faints", "the Goomeroo sinks in a slumber of death", and the "Yatal Wangary withers and dies". Twain uses some of the toponyms to refer to places, as in "the breezes of Coolgardie" and the "Moorooroo plain", but most of his toponyms have been assigned other grammatical roles. Many names are personified ("the Bombola faints", "the Kondoparinga lies gasping" and "the Goomeroo sinks"). Some are equated with authentic creatures such as the wallaby, wombat and swan, but also with the imaginary buffalo, creating a fantasy world. Others are used as qualificatives ("the Kooringa buffalo", "the Kongorong Camaum", "the Yatal Wangary").

The actual denotative meanings of the toponyms are irrelevant in this poem; Twain has used them almost as if they are invented nonsense words, creating a comic effect similar to the nonsense verse of his nineteenth-century contemporaries, Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll, who made up names which sound similar to the Aboriginal names. Lear (1894) invented creatures called the Pobble, the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo, and the Quangle-

Wangle who sits on the Crumpetty Tree, and Carroll (1871) wrote about the Jabberwocky, the Jujub bird and the “frumious Bandersnatch”. Part of the humour in Twain’s poem is in the “hyperbole of heat”, but part is certainly in the strange, quaint, even bizarre sound of the Aboriginal names.

Another poem written for comic effect is Tony Voss’s “Sixteen Rietfonteins” (1988). Voss, a South African, originally wrote it as a collaboration to be sung by a performing couple, Des and Dawn Lindberg, and it was later published as a poem (Jenkins 2008: 9). In it, Voss exploits the repetition of some common Afrikaans place names in South Africa, and in particular the initial element “riet” (reed). The poem opens:

Sannaspos and Pofadder  
 Pypklip and Pudmoe,  
 Upington and Camperdown  
 Blue Lagoon and Grahamstown,  
 Dankbaar and Dandaloo  
 And Olifantsfontein,  
 Rietbron and Riethuis; Rietkop, Rietkuil, Rietvlak, Rietpan, Rietwater  
 And sixteen Rietfonteins.

This stanza is repeated as a refrain at the end of the poem, and “Rietfontein” appears twice in the body of the poem, each time comically: “And Rietfontein again, Hey!” in stanza 3 and “And here comes Rietfontein, piep-piep!” in stanza 4.

Like Twain’s poem, part of the humour is in the strangeness of the names he selects. Some of the Afrikaans names, in particular, have ridiculous literal meanings (Pypklip is “pipe stone”, Pofadder is “puffadder”, and Voëlgeraas is “bird racket”). He selects South African names from a number of different languages, usually grouping them together, as in the French-origin names Malmaison, Mouille Point, La Rochelle, and Bien Donné (all in the first two lines of stanza 3), and the Zulu-origin names Mgudu, iGeni [*sic*], Mtubatuba, Umbogintwini, Umhlatuzana and Gingindlovu (all in the last two lines of stanza 5).

The poem conveys Voss’s wry fondness for the country that his choice of names evokes. His lines “... it’s a long, long walk/from Putsonderwater to Zooafskolk”, with its picture of weary footslogging from one strangely-named place to another, is reminiscent of the endless trudging of the British Tommy and his Boer foe in Rudyard Kipling’s poem “Piet” (1969), where the outlandish names emphasise the distant places the British Tommy got to in his fighting for the Crown:

From Plewman’s to Marabastad,  
 From Ookiep to De Aar  
 Me an’ my trusty friend ’ave ’ad,  
 As you might say, a war.

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Voss deliberately portrays himself as a country hick in a “villa that overlooks Cannes”. In this sophisticated setting, far from the “dusty dorps in khaki shorts/and roads like patchwork seams” of rural South Africa, when his hostess “murmurs of Memphis”, a name evoking the languid movement of the Mississippi or the Nile, his response is “Hey, do you ous know that road from Dikgat to Skilpadvrekvanderst?” The smooth “m” sounds of “murmur” and “Memphis” are starkly contrasted with the harsh consonants and short syllables of the two Afrikaans toponyms (ludicrous names that he possibly coined), just as the waters of the mighty rivers are contrasted with a clogged borehole and the place where even a tortoise dies from thirst.

Certain poems contain humour with an edge – humour used for social criticism. This is the case with some of the satirical word play in the poems that Rudyard Kipling (1969) set in the Anglo-Boer War in South Africa. This, for example, is from “Chant-pagan”:

With the Vaal and the Orange for cup,  
And the Brandwater Basin for dish.

Although there is some humour here in the name referring to water becoming the cup that holds the water and a toponym incorporating the topographical term “basin” becoming a dish, the picture conjured up here is of soldiers suffering from thirst on the South African veld.

In sympathising with the common British soldier and simultaneously being critical of senior officers and colonial war administrators, Kipling creates fanciful toponyms by marrying English elements with Afrikaans name generics, imitating a common morphological feature of Afrikaans toponyms (Branford 1983). In the following lines from “The Wearing of the Green” (1900), this technique conveys the reach of the Empire – Bobs (Lord Roberts) and the common, foul-mouthed Tommy have imposed themselves on the South African landscape:

From Bobsfontein to Ballyhoek  
'Tis ordered by the queen,  
We've won the right in open fight,  
The Wearing of the Green!

More British soldiers died during the Anglo-Boer War from disease than they did of battle wounds. Kipling (1969) refers to this in

Our blood 'as truly mixed with yours, all down the Red Cross train,  
We've bit the same thermometer in Bloemingtonphoidtein.  
("The Parting of the Columns")

He cuts the pretentious Latin regimental motto *Ubique* (“everywhere”) down to size in

Ubique means “Entrain at once for Grootdefeatfontein”  
Ubique means “Offload your guns”, at midnight in the rain.

(“Ubique”)

In “The Return”, by creating the names “Thamesfontein” and “Ackneystadt” Kipling encapsulates the alienating experience of soldiers returning from war to places where they no longer feel at home.

The poem “Place Names” (1977) by the American poet James Merton is a metanarrative about the naming process itself – the only poem in this selection to do this. Beginning with a reference to Chapter 33: 41-42 of the Book of Numbers in the Bible, he records how two biblical characters seized already named settlements and renamed them after themselves. He then moves his focus to the eastern half of Papua-New Guinea and shows how various colonial explorers did exactly the same thing. Stanzas 1, 2, 3 and 6 illustrate the laconic, almost telegraphic style of his dry wit. (The biblical reference and dates are part of the stanzas.)

Jair the son of Manasseh went and seized the encampments  
And called them the Encampments of Jair  
Nobah went and seized Kenath  
With its outlying villages  
And called it Nobah  
After himself.  
(Numbers 32: 41-42)

1827  
D’Entrecasteaux enters the bay  
Looks it over  
Leaves it with name of his ship:  
“Astrolabe Bay”.

1871-1883  
Baron Nikolai Miklouho-Maclay  
(Tibud Maclay)  
Comes and goes  
Exploring  
Recording the language  
As a reward for hospitality  
Leaves the coast with  
His own name:  
“Maclay Coast”

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1884  
Herr Finsch  
Representing the Neu Guinea Kompagnie  
Hoists the German flag  
Over “Bismarck (naturally)  
Archipelago” “Kaiser  
(of course) Wilhelmsland”  
And last but not least  
“Finschhafen”.

There is both irony and humour in the phrase “as a reward for hospitality” and in “naturally” and “of course”, both inserted in parentheses in the middle of newly-bestowed place names. The poem can be considered to be a clever satire on colonial naming practices.

While Kipling’s Anglo-Boer War poems cover a wide area of ground, in both senses of the phrase, they do not dwell on the horror and destruction of war. On the other hand, Christopher Torr wrote a song to be sung by his wife, the well-known vocalist Laurika Rauch, called “Hot Gates” (1995), which focuses entirely on this aspect (Neethling 1995: 60). The lyrics consist of five four-line stanzas and a refrain comprising names only, and two stanzas that do not include names. For example, this is the second stanza:

Waco Waco Bethlehem  
Srbenica Sebokeng  
Sarajevo O Saigon  
Hiroshima Rubicon

Each toponym refers to a place associated at some point in history with massive death and destruction. The title is a translation of the Greek toponym *Thermopylae*, which is also the last toponym in the poem. This was the site of a battle between the Greek army and Persian invaders in 480 BCE.

The 57 toponyms in “Hot Gates” come from all over the globe, and cover an extensive historical period, from Biblical times (Jericho) to the 21st century. The theme of the poem is “No matter where, and no matter when, man is prepared to go to war and create devastation.” Each toponym has been selected as a place where suffering and destruction took place, whether well-known battles (Gettysburg, Amajuba, Waterloo, Austerlitz, Delville Wood, Alamein, Stalingrad), aerial bombing and air disasters (Frankfurt, New York, Lockerbie, Dresden, Hiroshima, Nagasaki), massacres (Sebokeng, Sharpeville, My Lai, Boipatong) or general suffering and death (notably the concentration camps Belsen, Buchenwald and Auschwitz). Rubicon refers to the consequences not only of Caesar’s crossing into Rome,

but of the speech by P.W. Botha that indicated that he was not going to relent in imposing the policy of apartheid.

There is no humour in this poem, no satire. The third stanza is a lament for the dead and for future generations:

I can see a fiery, fiery glow  
Even as the sun is sinking low  
I can see a horseman on the run  
O my daughter, o my son.

In some poems humour conveys the poet's affection for his or her motherland. This is the case with both Voss's "Sixteen Rietfonteins" and Barbara Tyrrell's "Maps" (1945). Both poets have listed a number of South African place names from various South African languages in a light-hearted celebration of the multilingual and multicultural nature of South Africa (Jenkins 2008: 3, 9). Despite her title, the precise locations of the places in Tyrrell's poem are not important, and in fact her list is geographically jumbled. She is likewise not concerned with any historical or cultural connotations that the names may have. Below are eight lines each from their poems to show the similarity of their approach:

## Tyrrell

Koffee River and Breakfast Vlei  
Karreedouw and Plettenberg Bay!  
Malelane and Mafeteng,  
Montague Pass, Teyateyaneng!  
Qumbu and Ntonjaneni,  
Blanco and Izingolweni!  
Pampoenpoort and Paauwpan,  
Honeynestkloof and Kuruman!

## Voss

Malmaison and Mouille Point,  
La Rochelle and Bien Donné,  
Cabo Tormentosa  
And Rietfontein again, Hey!  
Ramsbottomsport and Ramsgate,  
Twilight and Tweespruit  
Wolwedans and Xanadu,  
Voëlgeraas en [*sic*] Tshingangu.

The high-density clustering of toponyms in these two poems is similar to the toponymic bursts found in the poetry of Walt Whitman, where they have the effect of an upwelling of emotion when writing of his home country, the entire USA. They also have an *instrumental* effect, since Whitman was concerned to promote the integrity of the Union when it was threatened by partition. Where Tyrrell and Voss sustain the density of toponyms throughout their poems, Whitman writes lengthy stretches of poetry where no toponyms are used at all, and then in a particular stanza or line-group cites several. The poem "Our Old Feuillage", published in *Leaves of Grass* in 1860, is a good example: within this single-stanza poem covering five pages, catalogues like the following can be found:

Southward there, I screaming, with slow wings flapping, with  
the myriad of gulls wintering along the coasts of Florida,



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Otherways there atwixt the banks of the Arkansaw, the Rio  
Grande, the Neuces, the Brazos, the Tombighee, the  
Red River, the Saskatchewan or the Osage, I with the  
spring waters laughing and skipping and running,  
Northward, on the sands, on some shallow bay of Paumanok.

Another “high-density” poet is Peter Wyton, an Englishman who expresses pride in a very specific area – the county of Gloucestershire in England – in his poem “The Rhyming Place Names of old Gloucestershire” (2014). It is the only one discussed in this article which consists entirely of place names. The following are the first four of a total of sixteen lines in the poem:

Alstone Bibstone Breadstone Winston Brockworth  
Nailsworth Tortworth Tredworth Chedworth Bencombe Brimscombe  
Sheepscombe Stinchcombe Witcombe Winchcombe Brimpsfield Nympsfield  
Falfield Fylfield Hasfield Haresfield Henfield Whitfield

The success of this poem in evoking a mental image of Gloucestershire will depend on how well the reader knows Gloucestershire and its village names. For those who do, the poem is successful in that each (or most) of the names will call to mind a particular part of this region. For those who do not, the names are as meaningless as the place names in Twain’s poem are to a non-Australian. The only difference between the names in the two poems is that in Wyton’s poem the names are clearly English. Replace “Sheepscombe” and “Chedworth”, say, in the extract above, with “Murrumbidgee” and “Woolloomoolloo”, and the difference is immediately obvious.

John Betjeman, at one time the Poet Laureate of Great Britain, has also selected a single English county – Dorset. This is first stanza of his poem “Dorset” (1958):

Rime Intrinsica, Fontmell Magna, Sturminster Newton and Melbury Bubb,  
Whist upon whist upon whist upon whist drive, in Institute, Legion and Social Club.  
Horny hands that hold the aces which this morning held the plough –  
While Tranter Reuben, T.S. Eliot, H.G. Wells and Edith Sitwell lie in Mellstock  
Churchyard now.

The four place names in the first line are all those of villages in northern Dorset that date back to Saxon times. Betjeman adds to the picture of Dorset by including the name of Tranter Reuben, a character in Thomas Hardy’s novel *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872), set in Wessex, of which modern Dorset is a part. Mellstock Churchyard figures largely in *Under the Greenwood Tree*.

The inspiration for Betjeman’s “Dorset” can be seen in the opening stanza of Thomas Hardy’s poem “Friends Beyond” (1994):

William Dewy, Tranter Reuben, Farmer Ledlow late at plough,  
Robert’s kin, and John’s and Ned’s

And the squire, and Lady Susan, lie in Mellstock churchyard now!  
(Hardy's poem "Friends Beyond", 1994)

Betjeman adds the names of four more ancient Dorset villages in stanza 2 – Bingham's Melcombe, Iwerne Minster, Shroton and Plush – and ends the poem by laying both Tranter Reuben and Thomas Hardy to rest in Mellstock Churchyard.

John Hewitt's poem "Ulster Names" (2014) is, as the title indicates, a poem about the Ulster region of Ireland, of which he is obviously a proud native. As with Voss, Tyrrell, Wyton and Betjeman, a mental picture of place is created by using a number of place names from that region. His first stanza illustrates this:

I take my stand by the Ulster names,  
each clean hard name like a weathered stone;  
Tyrella, Rostrevor, are flickering flames:  
the names I mean are the Moy, Malone,  
Strabane, Slieve Gullion and Portglenone.

Hewitt's Ulster is a post-1921 creation. He takes place names from all six counties of modern Ulster for his poem, and includes significant rivers (Lagan, Ballinamallard) and mountains (Slieve Gullion, Trostan, Slieve-nanee). He contributes to the picture of Ulster by including names with deep historical reference. The county town Armagh, for example, was once the great royal capital of pagan Ireland, and later St Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland, established his principal church here. Derry (or Londonderry) was the site of the first monastery established by St Columba in the 6th century and was in 1689 the site of a major battle between William of Orange ("Good King Billy") and the forces of James II. Of all the poems discussed in this article "Ulster Names" is the most intensely patriotic, and it is clear that Hewitt stands for the Nationalist Protestant cause in Ireland.

Some poets express patriotism and pride in a place by asserting historical rights to that place. This is true of Hewitt's poem and the "rights" of the Irish Nationalists to the Ulster Region (now Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom). It is also the underlying message of Chapter 33 of the Book of Numbers: the journey of the Israelites from Egypt to the "Promised Land" over the Jordan and the granting to them of this land by Yahweh. The right to a land and the freedom to dwell there do not come without a fight.

In Ulster much of the fighting has taken place in the old walled town of Derry. Hewitt puts it like this in stanza 5:

You whisper Derry. Beyond the walls  
and the crashing boom and the coiling smoke  
I follow that freedom which beckons and calls ....

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In Numbers 33: 50-56, Yahweh gives a message to Moses to pass on to the children of Israel. When they pass over the Jordan into the land of Canaan,

... ye shall drive out the inhabitants of the land,  
And dwell therein;  
For unto you have I given the land to possess it.

(Verse 53)

The children of Israel have remained fiercely territorial about the “land of Canaan”, as have the Ulstermen about their corner of Northern Ireland.

While Hewitt expresses his pride through historical argument, other poets lay claim to spaces through intensely personal writing. In “City Johannesburg” (1974), Mongane Wally Serote has a love-hate relationship with Johannesburg. Its name and nickname form a rueful refrain to which he returns, just as he has to return to the city each day. As a black person in an urban area during the days of apartheid he can only be there if he carries his pass book showing that he has government permission to be in the city:

This way I salute you:  
My hand pulses to my back trousers pocket  
Or into my inner jacket pocket  
For my pass, my life,  
Jo’burg City.

And yet “Jo’burg City” has become part of his inner being:

I can feel your roots, anchoring your might, my feebleness  
In my flesh, in my mind, in my blood,  
And everything about you says it,  
That, that is all you need of me.

Jonannesburg might be a place where his “stomach growls a friendly smile to hunger”, it might be a place where you inhale “thick iron breath”, a place which leaves “the women and the men with such frozen expressions”, and it might be the place which is “dry like death”, but it is also the place which has captured Serote’s heart and soul. He speaks of his daytime visits as the trysts of a lover: “That is the time when I come to you, ... / That is the time when I leave you.”

Helen Mort’s private place is everywhere north of her home town, Sheffield in England. Her poem “Hermaness” (2011) uses toponyms to mark a dream journey to the northernmost point of the Shetland Islands:

Past Sheffield’s border lands, the sleeping giant  
Of Manchester, grey towns on route to Aberdeen  
then silently across the waterway to Lerwick  
where my bearings ferried me past Baltasound,  
The sloughed down moors, past Norwick bay

and onwards to Unst, until she reaches the headland of Hermaness, where she finds

the tide, dragged from a North  
I couldn't even dream. I stopped  
and let my heart go on ahead of me.

This is a private journey, and an unending one, for once her physical body reaches the northernmost point of land, she allows her heart to go on ahead. Mort's journey is a puzzling one. Is her quest to go ever further north a desire to get as far away as possible from her birth origins? Is the north symbolic of some quest, some goal? The answers are not clear, but what is clear is that her quest is a very personal one.

The American poet Richard Eberhart also undertakes a journey in his poem "Will" (1970). A sailor (presumably the poet),

whose vessel  
Descends from Eagle Light to shoal Duck Harbour on the Ile au Haut,  
Casting anchor near the weir, and remaining overnight,

sails a small yacht around the archipelago of islands off the coast of Maine in northeast America. The round trip, including at least one overnight stop, follows a route marked continually by place names: Swans Island, Frenchboro, Blue Hill Bay and so on.

Eberhart is as attached to his topography as were his fellow-Americans, Walt Whitman, whose toponyms are pan-American, and William Carlos Williams, poet of the urban landscape. Whether his is a dream journey like that of Mort, or a favourite yachting trip of the poet, it is a personal odyssey, not one to be shared. The first line of the poem – "What is will but the advent of the free?" – suggests that personal will and courage are needed for someone to sail off alone into the unknown, but they will set one free. A later line in the poem suggests that sailing on the ocean is "nearer to reality than a man of land sitting on the shore". This may be true of Mort as well: the further north she can travel (in heart, mind and soul as well as body) the more she will be free of the shackles of her life.

In the first half of his poem "KwaDedangendlale",<sup>1</sup> the poet Benedict Wallet Vilakazi is content to describe and demarcate that region of KwaZulu-Natal known to English speakers as The Valley of a Thousand Hills, lying roughly midway between Durban and Pietermaritzburg. The way in which he uses place names to mark the boundaries of this region is discussed later in this article. In the second half of the poem the poet starts seeing himself in the landscape, as in stanza 9:

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1. English translation by A. Koopman.

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<i>Ngabheka phans' emfuleni</i>	I looked down at the river
<i>Ngabon' amanz' esekhanya,</i>	And saw the water shining,
...	...
<i>Kanjol' isithunzi sami</i>	Likewise my reflection
<i>Naso savela phakathi;</i>	Also appeared therein;
<i>Ngazibuka nganeliswa</i>	I looked at myself and was satisfied.

He goes on to compare himself with the acacia trees, which bear their pods in winter:

<i>Imikhambathi yakhona</i>	The acacia trees of that area
<i>Nasebusik' iyathela,</i>	Are productive even in winter
...	...
<i>Yebo, nami ngiyothela</i>	Yes, I too will bear fruit
<i>Ngigcwal' amajikijolo.</i>	And become full of berries.

Vilakazi left the KwaDedangendlale area of his birth and youth to work in the soulless environment of Johannesburg. Koopman (2000: 41) has suggested that for Vilakazi this was the “winter of his life”. Returning to the Valley of a Thousand Hills, even though only in his mind’s eye, was indeed fruitful for him, the end result being the poem “KwaDedangendlale”. Stanza 9 of the poem invites the reader to share the love the poet has for this place in his heart:

<i>Phansi eMlazi noMkhomazi</i>	Down at the uMlazi and uMkhomazi Rivers
<i>Oyovakashela khona</i>	Should you visit there
<i>Uzibone lezizinto</i>	And see those things
<i>Zizokuvul' inhliziyo</i>	They will open your heart

For some poets, such as Coleridge and his Xanadu, internalised landscapes contain imaginary elements. In W.J. Turner’s “Romance” (1921), an English child’s imagination creates a world made romantic and exotic by the use of exotic toponyms. The poem begins,

When I was but thirteen or so  
I went into a golden land,  
Chimborazo, Cotopaxi  
Took me by the hand.

My father died, my brother too,  
They passed like fleeting dreams,  
I stood where Popocatapetl  
In the sunlight gleams.

I dimly hear the master’s voice  
And boys at far-off play,

Chimborazo, Cotopaxi  
Had stolen me away.

The poet has chosen the names of three snow-covered volcanoes in South America – Chimborazo, Cotopaxi and Popocatépetl – to represent a distant world.<sup>2</sup> The precise denotations of these names are unimportant; they scarcely have existence outside the boy's imagination. They provide short cuts to creating an atmosphere of foreignness and strangeness. Their connotations of Incas and their legendary riches (suggested by "golden land", "gleams", "great golden dream" and a "gold dark boy") are coupled with the musical sound of the names to suggest magic and romance ("entranced", "They had stolen my soul away!").

### Poetry and Cartography

Some of the poems in our selection link place names to maps and routes. Both the South Africans Barbara Tyrrell and Tony Voss talk of maps. Tyrrell starts her poem with the lines,

Oh, has it ever occurred to you  
An ordinary Road Map can come true?

and after listing some twenty South African place names, suggests to the reader that

That gorgeous country, rolling part,  
Was just a road map true at last –

Voss begins his second stanza with "I am marking my map with South African names" and makes mention again of a map in the fourth stanza:

For my map must be true as I travel along  
To where I come from and not where I go:

Despite these references to maps, their poems are more like broad canvases than navigation guides: there is no order to the place names in the sense of marking a direction or a route, or of demarcating space. There are no north and no south, no borders and no boundaries; the names are artlessly and seemingly carelessly strewn across the canvas. In fact, Voss chooses a couple of weird South African names that stretch his lists of picturesque

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2. Chimborazo and Cotopaxi are in Ecuador; Popocatépetl (spelt Popocatapetl in the text) is in Mexico.

#### TOPONYMS IN POETRY

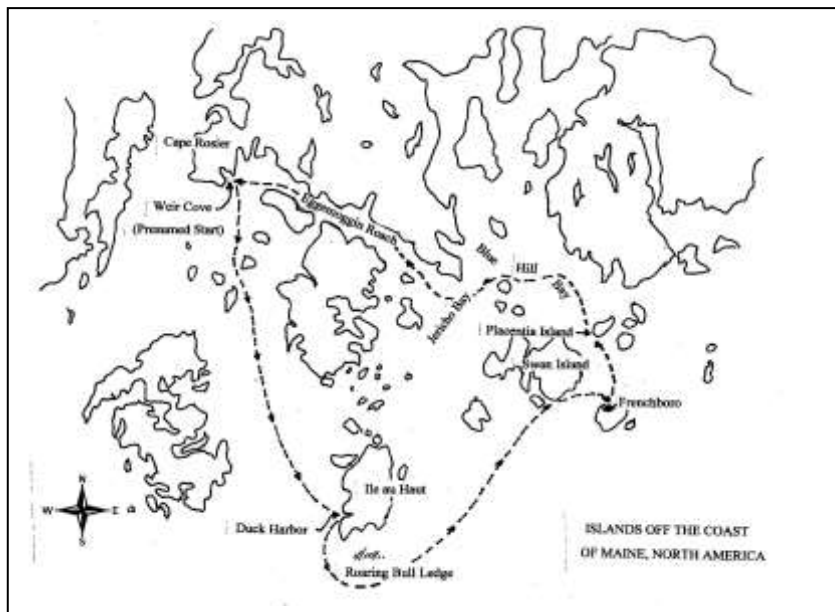
names to the verge of the fantastic – “Wolwedans [hyena dance] and Xanadu”.

In contrast, in the poems by Helen Mort and Richard Eberhart the progression of toponyms marks specific routes, and both make reference to navigation, to compass bearings, to directions. Mort’s place names lead the reader steadily further north from Sheffield in England – until she gets as far north as is physically possible, the headland Hermaness which is the title of her poem. The poem starts with the lines

Last night, my body was a compass needle  
drawing me past every place I’d once called North:

The idea of following a compass bearing is repeated in line 6, “where my bearings ferried me past Baltasound”.

Eberhart goes even further in “Will”, which reads almost like a ship’s log, recording a route (see the map below), compass bearings (“Turning east to ... Roaring Bull Ledge”, “Going thence northeast”, “up the chart [i.e. north]”, “west across Blue Hill Bay”), navigational aids (“descends from Eagle Light”, “the Light of Swans Island”), wind conditions (“a following southwester”) and moorings (“Casting anchor near the weir and remaining overnight,” “Back to mooring near Weir Cove on Cape Rosier”).



Map: The route followed by Eberhart in the poem “Will”

The use of toponyms to delineate a route also appears in Chapter 33 of the Book of Numbers, where they mark the route of the children of Israel from Egypt to the promised land of Canaan across the River Jordan:

And they removed from Elim, and encamped by the Red Sea.  
And they removed from the Red Sea, and encamped in the wilderness of Sin.  
And they took their journey out of the wilderness of Sin, and encamped at Dophkah.  
And they removed from Dophkah, and encamped in Alush. (Verses 10-13)

This journey has a different feel to it: the repetitive verbal pattern that is typical of oral verse in many cultures conveys a sense of weariness, a dull, plodding, daily grind marked by deserts, thirst and lack of food. There is none of the wild, free sensations that we find in Mort and Eberhart.

B.W. Vilakazi uses toponyms in a different way in “KwaDedangendlale”, but in a way which can still be described as falling under the heading “cartography”. They mark the borders of two specific areas (Koopman 2000: 35-36). The wider area, effectively the southern “half” of KwaZulu-Natal, is marked by the following: KwaLulwandle (“the house of Mr Sea” – the eastern boundary), the rivers uThukela and uMkhomazi (the northern and southern boundaries respectively) and uKhahlamba (the Drakensberg Mountains – the western boundary). Within this region lies The Valley of a Thousand Hills (KwaDedangendlale), marked much more specifically by uMgungundlovana (Greytown – the northern boundary), uMgungundlovu (Pietermaritzburg – the western boundary), eNtshangwe (“Inchanga”) and KwaBhota (Botha’s Hill) – both marking the southern boundary, and uMhlali (marking the eastern boundary). Given prominence in the poem is the flat-topped eMkhambathi (Table Mountain) which dominates this region both physically and spiritually. For Vilakazi, then, the different place names in the poem are not used for marking a route, but for mapping the landscape.

As Koopman points out (2000: 42), Vilakazi does not just map a physical space, but a historical and cultural one as well, and the same could be said for Hewitt’s “Ulster Names”. When Hewitt enumerates the six counties of modern Ulster he marks each of them by one or more of the following: the county name, a major river, a major mountain, or some other topographical feature strongly associated with that county. For example, for county Antrim he names all three of the famously picturesque “Glens of Antrim”, Glenballyemon, Glenaar, and Glendun. The renowned fertility of county Down (“let Down be famous for care-tilled earth”) is linked to the River Lagan.

Hewitt’s Ulster is a historical and spiritual place as well as a physical one, and certain place names resonate with the glory of ancient Gaelic Ireland. One needs to be a speaker of Irish to get the full flavour of such names, as their historical and cultural depth is only revealed in their etymology. The County Tyrone town Dungannon, for example, is derived from the Irish *Dún Geannainn* (“Geanann’s stronghold”), and the castle (and surrounding town)



was for centuries the capital of the O'Neill dynasty. The name Tyrone itself refers to this: it is derived from Irish *Tir Eoghain* ("land of Eoghain"), the traditional holdings of the O'Neills. County Down is also etymologically related to the Irish *dún* ("castle", "stronghold").

And again as with Vilakazi, Hewitt's map of Ulster is not a lifeless map, but rather a living landscape, with "apple orchards ... all in flower" and the "white farm fat in the August weeks", while

... the bubbling curlew, the whistling plover  
call over the whips in the chill daybreak  
as the hills and the waters the first light take.

### Toponyms and Their Supporting Anthroponyms

Most of the poems discussed in this article use toponyms only – that is, no other kind of proper name. There are a few poets, however, who use anthroponyms as well in their poems, to support the role played by the toponyms.

Hewitt has only two anthroponyms in his poem: Patrick and Colmcille. Patrick appears in stanza 4:

You say Armagh, and I see the hill  
with the two tall spires or the square low tower;  
the faith of Patrick is with us still.

Once the capital of pagan Gaelic Ireland, Armagh is where St Patrick established his principal church in the 5th century. The names "Armagh" and "Patrick" thus work together to emphasise the glory of Ireland's early Christianity. The name *Colmcille* is used in a similar way in stanza 5:

You whisper Derry. Beyond the walls  
...  
I follow that freedom which beckons and calls  
to Colmcille, tall in his grove of oak.

The name "Derry" is derived from the Irish *Daire* or *Doire* meaning "grove of oak", and Colmcille (the Irish name of St Columba) established his first monastery in the 6th century in the Calgach oak grove where Derry now stands.

The anthroponyms that Vilakazi uses in "KwaDedangendlale" are not as intimately tied to the toponyms as the pairs Armagh/Patrick and Derry/Colmcille, but they do contribute strongly to the historical and spiritual depth of the KwaDedangendlale landscape. Besides mentioning the Qwabe and Qadi clans, both resident in this region, Vilakazi includes the names of

three important historical figures: Zulu (“*Ngigqoq’ umqondo kaZulu*” – “I will gather up the thought of Zulu himself”), Shaka, and Langelibalele. Zulu, son of Malandela, is seen as the eponymous founder of the Zulu clan, later to grow into the mighty Zulu nation under the leadership of Shaka, son of Senzangakhona. Langelibalele was a chief of the large Hlubi clan, but it is likely that Vilakazi also had in mind Dr John Langelibalele Dube, headmaster of Ohlange High School when Vilakazi was a young teacher there and an important mentor to the young poet. Dube was one of the founders of the African National Congress and his name has strong political, cultural and historical resonance even today.

Rather than playing a supporting role, the anthroponyms that Merton uses in his poem “Place Names” are equal partners of the toponyms in his critique of naming practices. In any naming there have to be at least three actors: the name, the entity named, and the person doing the naming. In this poem, a fourth is the person after whom the place is named. Thus “Jair son of Manasseh” is in an onomastic partnership with ‘the encampments of Jair’, and it is the French naval officer Antoine Raymond Joseph DeBruni d’Entrecasteaux who does the naming in “D’Entrecasteaux enters the bay/Looks it over/Leaves it with name of his ship: ‘Astrolabe Bay’”.

It is worthwhile exploring the dynamics in the last stanza in some detail:

Herr Finsch  
Representing the New Guinea Kompagnie  
Hoists the German flag  
Over “Bismarck (naturally)  
Archipelago” “Kaiser  
(of course) Wilhelmsland”  
And last but not least  
“Finschhafen”.

There are three toponyms in this stanza: Bismarck Archipelago, Kaiser Wilhelmsland, and Finschhafen. It is debatable how many anthroponyms are here. “Herr Finsch” is clearly an anthroponym, of the type [honorific + surname]. He is the person who represents the German company, who raises the German flag, and who does all the official naming. But are “Bismarck” and “Kaiser Wilhelm” present in this poem as anthroponyms, or only as part of toponyms? There are some ironic contrasts in this poem: a mere “herr” names an archipelago and a region after the two most powerful persons in Germany at the time. Once his imperial duty is done, however, he finds that there is a single unnamed harbour left over, and “last but not least” names it after himself.

Betjeman’s use of anthroponyms in “Dorset” is puzzling. As mentioned earlier, the names of Tranter Reuben and Thomas Hardy reinforce the picture of Dorset. The poet writes that T.S. Eliot, H.G. Wells, Edith Sitwell, Mary Borden, Brian Howard, Harold Acton, Gordon Selfridge and Edna

Best “lie in Mellstock Churchyard now”, but they do nothing of the kind: Mellstock is fictional. Betjeman (1979: 41) says in a note on this poem, “The names in the last lines of these stanzas are put in not out of malice or satire but merely for their euphony,” but in fact they are not names simply chosen at random. They are almost all the names of writers, painters, actors and cultural dilettantes from Betjeman’s own circle of friends in his younger days. The exception is Gordon Selfridge, the businessman who founded Selfridges Stores, and his inclusion in the poem is even more of a mystery than the others. These anthroponyms do not support the toponyms used in the poem, and their presence is strangely discordant.

### **The Poetic and Sensual Qualities of Toponyms**

While some poets explore the familiar onomastic properties of toponyms – they can bear simultaneously literal, denotative and connotative meanings, and etymological and historical depths – what the poems in this selection add to onomastic studies is their exploitation of the formal properties of the names – their stress patterns and phonology, which lend themselves to poetic metre, internal and end rhymes, alliteration and assonance. The sounds of the names can become evocative and sensual. Some poets seize upon the morphology of names and their potential for puns and word play.

Poems consisting mainly of toponyms are the ones that most obviously exploit their poetic qualities. Wyton, according to Thomas (2014), “stumbled across a column ‘And Another Thing’ on gloucestershire-echo.co.uk extolling what was called the ‘found poetry’ of Gloucestershire places. And it reminded him that he’s written a piece based on towns and villages in the county that rhyme.” Wyton’s poem is more complex than a found poem in that it follows a strict metre and uses alliteration and assonance and internal and end rhymes; but like a found poem, it has no syntax and is devoid of conventional meaning: “Snowshill Whiteshill Lightpill Cromhall Milkwall”.

Twain (1989: 329) was inspired by what to him, as someone who did not speak any Australian Aboriginal language, was the musical effect of the assonance of their names: “These are good words for poetry. Among the best I have ever seen ... . The best word in that list, and the most musical and gurgly, is Woolloomooloo.” He clusters them alliteratively: Yatal Wangary, Worrow Wanilla, Woolgoolga. Tyrrell and Voss make use of alliteration, rhyme and the stress patterns of names, as in these lines by Tyrrell: “Ramsbottomsport and Ramsgate/ Twilight and Tweespruit”; “Malelane and Mafeteng/ Montague Pass, Teyateyaneng!” In Torr’s “Hot Gates”, although the names, unlike those of Wyton, Voss and Tyrrell, are heavily loaded with associations, his apparently random lists are strung

together with artifice for the sake of metre, assonance, alliteration and rhyme:

Waco Waco Bethlehem  
Srbenica Sebokeng  
Sarajevo O Saigon  
Hiroshima Rubicon

Furthermore, Torr creates new meaning through word play. As Neethling (1995: 61) points out, “Waco Waco Bethlehem” becomes “Wake, O wake, O Bethlehem”. Kipling, too, uses word play for his coinages such as “Bloemingtyphoidtein”.

Several of the poems exploit the phonology of names to convey their familiarity and hence the affection in which they are held by the person speaking in the poem; others want to convey their strangeness. When Hewitt writes, “The names I mean are the Moy, Malone,/ Strabane, Slieve Gullion and Portglenone” he wants the reader to hear the euphonious Gaelic vowels and soft consonants. Betjeman chooses names that are so homely they run off the English tongue effortlessly. And yet – what on earth can they mean? Where did they come from? Behind Melbury Bubb, Shroton and Plush lies a mysterious other world, the past, that is almost as alien as Twain’s Kooringa, Kondoparinga and Kongorong Camaun. Turner wants his volcanoes such as Popocatépetl to sound as exotic as possible. Kipling’s Plewman’s, Marabastad, Ookiep and De Aar are also hard for an Englishman to get his tongue around. Though not as marked as the strange names in some of the other poems, Mort’s “past Baltasound” and “the edge of Unst” sound outlandish enough to emphasise that she is reaching the edge of the familiar British Isles.

Whereas the homogenous clustering of names in poems such as those by Twain and Hewitt achieves a deliberately pointed effect, the names that Eberhart juxtaposes along his sailing route (Jericho, Eggernoggin Cove, Cape Rosier) are a piquant miscellany suggesting the varied history of the region, just as Tyrrell and Voss have assembled names from a variety of languages with different phonologies that suggest South Africa’s complicated history. In the last line of Serote’s poem he brings together in a metrical litany the non-poetic, formal name of the vexatious city and its euphonious, half-affectionate nickname:

Jo’burg City, Johannesburg, Jo’Burg City.

He has compressed into one line his ambivalent relationship with the city.

The Afrikaans poet Barend Toerien has written a poem (1973) that takes the physical nature of names to extremes. This is the poem in its entirety, with our own English translation:

### Terugkoms

Om die name te noem het ek gekom  
om die heuning en kruie te eet van die name  
om hul rond te rol tussen my vingers  
en my rug teen hul te skuur  
om my been oor hul te gooi en styfbinneboud te lê  
is ek hier

Die name van plante en grasse  
plaasname, paaie en- en-  
en baaie en-  
en dis waarom  
Dáárom

### Return

To name the names have I come  
to eat the honey and the herbs of the names  
to roll them round between my fingers  
to rub my back against them  
to throw my leg over them and hold them tight between my thighs  
I am here

The names of plants and grasses  
farm names, byways, and- and-  
and bays, and-  
and this is why  
That's why.

Toerien writes as an exile returning to his native South Africa and rediscovering the beauty of all kinds of names – not just the proper names of places, but the names of the native vegetation. The names are more like tactile, sensual objects than items of language. He savours them in his mouth, rolls them between his fingers, rubs against them like a cat, embraces them sexually. Eventually in his ecstasy he becomes wordless, and the names disappear into the realm of the ineffable.

### Conclusion

Through our selection of toponymical poems we have shown a wide range of approaches to place names by poets. The emotions that the names evoke in the poets range from deep love and pride to horror, and they have employed a variety of techniques to elicit a sympathetic response from their readers. At the same time, many of the names carry powerful historical and political messages that the poets convey to the reader both indirectly and

through various more explicit means. While in the ordinary world (outside poetry) toponyms are mainly used for their denotative meaning (“Where do you live?”, “Where should I send this?” – in other words, as answers to practical questions), in the poetry we have discussed this is almost irrelevant.

The toponyms themselves are striking: their source languages, their alien sound to the non-native speaker or their homely, familiar sound to someone in their mother tongue, their potential for verbal effects in verse that extend the range of vocabulary available to the poet, provide poets with exceptional material. The subject matter and the ways in which the poets have handled it are unusual enough to warrant seeing the poems as a subset of verse on their own.

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