

The Works of Wally Mongane Serote: The Quest for a Supreme Literary Form¹

Muxe Nkondo

Summary

Serote's oeuvre – the lyrics, the fiction, and the essays – represent a triumph of a special order. Springing from a dedicated artist's effort to master the techniques of evocation, narration, analysis, and revelation which are so important to the craft of writing, they are also the result of Serote's quest for fresh methods to explore the narrative and dramatic possibilities of the South African experience. What is special about Serote's achievement is the manner the three literary forms serve one another. For in keeping with the multidimensional nature of his quest and by the disciplines of the three literary forms, it was necessary that the techniques arrived at be such as would allow him to explore the complex dynamics of the South African experience without violating his passionate dedication to narrative as a fundamental agency for exploring the human condition as it plays itself out in modern South African history.

Opsomming

Serote se oeuvre – die lirieke, die fiksie en die essays – verteenwoordig 'n triomf van 'n spesiale orde. Hoewel dit voortspruit uit 'n toegewyde kunstenaar se pogings om die tegnieke te bemeester van evokasie, vertelling, ontleding en openbaring wat so belangrik is in die skryfkuns, is dit ook die resultaat van Serote se soeke na vars metodes om die narratiewe en dramatiese moontlikhede van die Suid-Afrikaanse ervaring te ondersoek. Wat besonders is omtrent dit wat Serote bereik het, is die manier waarop die drie literêre vorms mekaar tot diens is. In ooreenstemming met die multidimensionele aard van sy soeke, en weens die dissiplines van die drie literêre vorme, was dit nodig dat die tegnieke waarby hy uitgekome het sodanig moet wees dat dit hom in staat stel om die komplekse dinamiek van die Suid-Afrikaanse ervaring te ondersoek sonder om inbreuk te maak op sy hartstogtelike toewyding aan die narratiewe as die fundamentele medium vir die ondersoek van die menslike toestand soos dit uitgespeel word in die moderne Suid-Afrikaanse geskiedenis.

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1. Keynote address delivered at the Colloquium on the Work of Wally Mongane Serote, organized by the University of South Africa. Dedicated to a dear friend and esteemed colleague, the late Professor Mbulelo Vizikhungo Mzamane, who passed on 16 February 2014.

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Introduction

It is difficult to achieve perspective upon someone whose work you have read and taught for forty two years. Wally Serote, with Kgositsile, is one of the greatest masters of nuance in South African English Literature; but one of the subtlest of all major South African poets is ill served these days by studies that centre upon his social and political contexts, analyses that tell us what his political orientation is, that this Sophiatown-born lad grew to be the Director of the ANC Culture and Arts desk for years in exile. The hard labour of directly confronting the rhetorical wealth of Serote's poetry, fiction, and essays lies ahead of us. In this brief reading of Serote, I am not concerned with individual works, but with his creative imagination, which in his instance merges the power of his lyrical, narrative, and essayistic stance, a power so great that it converted a township boy into an accomplished artist. I am after currents and trends.

This paper started out to be a very straightforward thing. I was curious as many literary scholars have been, to see whether there were some constants in the language and structure of Serote's work, some fundamental forms underlying the figures of imagery and the movement of sound and rhythm which so impressively characterise his art. There were. They did not, however, sit still for patient scrutiny. Those fundamental forms, the roots of his lyrical poems, narratives, and essays were not at all as simple as they first appeared, and when approached closely they began to shift, to turn into other things, to shade into each other, and soon to divert attention from themselves by hinting at deeper aesthetic and philosophical roots (Welsh, 1978). Thus this paper transformed itself from a confident demonstration of recurring images, rhythms, and themes to a far more tentative speculation about the ways in which the creative imagination, in Serote's work, catches, reflects and directs the powers of feeling, thought, vision and action.

Lyric Form and Narrative: A Delicate Balance

The series of works – *Yakhal'inkomo*, *Tsetlo*, *No Baby Must Weep*, *Time Has Run Out*, *Freedom Lament and Song*, *Third World Express*, *Come and Hope With Me* – represents a triumph of a special order. Springing from a dedicated artist's unending efforts to master the techniques of narration and revelation which are so important to the craft of writing, they are also the result of Serote's quest for fresh methods to explore the narrative possibilities of the South African experience. What is special about Serote's achievement is, it seems to me, the manner in which his technique has made his double explorations serve one another and transfigure its object. For in keeping with the special nature of his quest and by the self-imposed rules of the lyrical narrative, it was necessary that the methods arrived at be such as

would allow him to explore the tragic possibilities of his people without violating his passionate dedication to the lyrical narrative as a fundamental and transcendent agency for confronting and revealing our world.

To have done this successfully for forty three years is not only to have added a dimension to the technical resourcefulness of the lyrical narrative as an art-form, but to have enriched our way of experiencing our history (Ellison 1988). It is also to have had a most successful encounter with a troublesome social model. I say social, for although Serote is by self-affirmation no less than by public identification a “black South African”, the quality of his artistic culture can by no means be conveyed by that term. Nor does it help to apply the designation “indigenous African” (even more limited for conveying a sense of cultural complexity), and since such terms tell us little about the unique individuality of the artist or anyone else, it is well to have them out in the open where they can cause the least confusion.

What, then, do I mean by social-model? I refer to that imbalance in South African society which leads to a distorted perception of social reality, to a stubborn blindness to the creative possibilities of cultural diversity, to the prevalence of negative myths, racial and ethnic stereotypes, and dangerous illusions about art, identity, humanity, and society. Arising from an initial failure of social justice, this social model divides social groups along lines that are no longer tenable while fostering hostility, anxiety, homophobia, and fear; and in the area to which we now address ourselves, it has had the damaging effect of alienating many South African artists from the traditions, techniques, and theories central to the arts through which they aspire to express themselves.

Thus, in the field of arts and culture, where the freedom of self-definition is at a maximum and where the techniques of self-definition are mostly abundantly available, they are so fascinated by the power of their colonial social imbalance as to limit their efforts to describing its manifold dimensions and its apparent invincibility against changes. Indeed, they take it as a major theme and focus for their attention, they allow it to dominate their thinking about themselves, their people, and their art. And while many are convinced that simply to recognise social imbalance is enough to put it to rest, few achieve anything like artistic mastery, and most fail miserably through a single-minded aim to “tell it as it is”.

Fortunately, for Serote, the problem of the artist is not one of “telling” at all, but of “revealing” that which has been concealed by time, by hegemony, by habit and by our trained incapacity to perceive complexity. Thus, in Serote’s work, it is a matter of destroying colonial images of reality and creating the new. Further, for him, working out of a conscious concern with the most challenging possibilities of his art-form, the colonial social model – whether in the shape of motif, technique or image- is abhorrent, evidence of conceptual, political and technical failure, of challenges unmet.

For as Serote continues to demonstrate so powerfully, it is of the true artist's nature and mode of action to dominate all his experiences through technique and vision. His mission is to bring a new narrative order into South African history, and through his art he seeks to reset society's clock by imposing upon it his own method of defining the times. The urge to do this determines the form and character of his social responsibility, and accounts, to a large extent, for his creative resourcefulness.

Serote knows that regardless of the individual artist's personal history, he must, nevertheless, pay his material the respect of approaching it through a highly conscious awareness of the resources and limitations of the form to which he has dedicated his creative energies. One suspects also that as an artist possessing a marked gift for political education, he seeks in his work to "reveal" a world long hidden by the clichés of liberalism and rendered cloudy by the distortions of a partisan media and the false disintegration imposed upon our conception of African life by television and liberal scholarship. Therefore, as he delights us with the magic of lyrical narrative design and teaches us the complexity of change, reconciliation and hope, Serote insists that we see and hear, that we see and hear in depth. And by the fresh light of creative vision, Serota knows that the true dignity and complexity of the slum dweller in Alexandra and other townships requires a release from the prison of our colonial perception and a reassembling in artistic forms which would convey something of the depth and range of Africa's resilient humanity (Mphahlele 1964).

Being aware that the true artist destroys the conventional world by the way of "revealing" the unseen and creating that which is new and uniquely his own, Serota has used lyrical narrative techniques to his own ingenious effect. His rugged-faced township dwellers, set in their familiar but emphatically lyrical narrative scenes, are nevertheless resonant of artistic and social history. Without compromising their integrity as elements in lyrical and narrative composition, his characters are expressive of a complex reality lying behind the narrative frames. While functioning as integral elements of narrative design, they seem simultaneously as signs and symbols of a humanity that has struggled to survive the decimating and alienating effects of South African social, economic, and political processes. Here faces which draw upon the stereotypical character of township narratives are made to focus our attention upon the far from stereotypical reality of a people. Here stereotypical features are presented in which concrete life is acted out under repressive conditions. Here, too, the poetry of jazz and the blues is projected through lyrical narrative forms which are in themselves tragic comic and eloquently poetic. A harsh poetry, this, but poetry nevertheless: with the plaintive imagery of "Yakhal 'inkomo" and other blues pieces conceived as pattern, symbol, and image – including the familiar street encounters (evoking intimate encounters and partings) and the shebeen women, who appear in these works with the ubiquity of the wretched of

the earth who haunt these narratives which evoke the abiding mystery of the enigmatic figures who people township blues. And here, too, are renderings of those rituals of birth and dying, of rites of passage which give ceremonial continuity to South African township jazz and communities.

By imposing his vision upon township scenes familiar to us all, Serote reveals much of the internal dynamics of modern South African history which they conceal. Through his creative assemblage, he makes complex comments upon South African history, upon apartheid and post-apartheid society, and upon the nature of narrative. Indeed, his *Alexandra* becomes a place inhabited by people who have in fact been resurrected, re-created by the lyrical narrative, a place where the sublime and the trivial, reality and dream are ambiguously mingled. And resurrected with them in the guise of alienated figures (really masks of their passions, hopes, aspirations and dreams) are those powers that now surge in our land with a potentially revolutionary force which springs from the very fact of their having for so long gone unrecognised, unseen, unheard.

Serote doesn't impose these powers upon us by explicit comment, but his ability to make the unseen and unheard manifest allows us some insight into the forces which now rage and clash as South Africans seek self-definition in the slums of our cities. There is a beauty here, a harsh and terrible beauty that asserts itself out of the horrible alienation which Serote's men and women and their environment have undergone. But there is no preaching; these forces have been brought to eye and ear by well-controlled lyrical and narrative art. These works take us from *Alexandra* through the townships and military camps to the rest of the world; our mode of conveyance consists of every lyrical and narrative device which has claimed Serote's artistic attention, from the images of township urchins to Lusaka, Angola, Botswana, and other sites of struggle. Our mode of conveyance consists of every narrative and lyrical device which has claimed Serote's artistic attention, from the oversimplified and scanty images of township folk that appear in our soaps and tabloids, to the discoveries of urban sociologists. He has used the melodies of Mankuku Ngozi, no less than those of Miriam Makeba and Nina Simone, and has discovered his own uses for the cultural richness of African narrative forms. In brief, Serote has used all of his artistic knowledge and skill to create a curve of narrative vision which reveals to us something of the historical complexity of those who dwell in our townships. But his are the eye and ear of a narrator, not those of a sociologist, and here the raw details which exist in a setting of neglected streets and the buildings in which the urban poor live cheek by jowl, where alienated human wrecks and the confidently expectant cadres of the frontiers of human possibility are crowded together as inevitably as the explosive details in a story of a township canvas – all this comes across in lyrical and narrative form and

with a freshness of impact that is impossible for sociological cliché or raw protest.

Lyric poetry, in Serote's narratives, isolates feeling in small compass and so renders it at its most intense. Its advantage to the reader is its easy access, which permits inspection of its form in a way not often feasible in novels. In itself, it is a distinctive strength in its concentrated and patterned expression of feeling. This particular strength, its advantage over other literary forms, is negatively definable: the lyric form does not make room for explanation; what it does provide is feeling, with very little history or characterisation (Hardy 1977).

To characterise Wally Serote's lyric narrative as expressions of feeling may seem tendentious, when in fact they contain ideas, subjects or themes: time, place, beauty, conflict, revelation or renewal. These themes are admittedly present, but they are deployed in the service of feeling. Pain is dramatised, expressed in a way that informs the poem with qualities that belong to pain: anguish, suffocation, despair, agitation, and then violence. They discover and enact feeling under the guise of affirming it, and do not have to discuss, analyse, explain or imitate it. So the structure of the poems is not merely an adherence to a lyric scheme, but an image of the poet's thought as it moves, grows tense, and gathers into itself the unity and variety directly expressive of pain (Scarry 1958).

The power of Serote's lyric poetry comes from its sustained attention to feeling and feeling mainly, and its articulateness in clarifying that feeling, in attesting conviction or sincerity, and transferring this from the private to the public. What is expressed in the poems is feeling; events and characters, as they are contemplated, only go to enhance that feeling. His lyrics thrive, then, on exclusions. They are at times opaque because they leave out so much of the context and consequences of feeling, but they can speak in a lucid and intense voice. His lyric poems are true instances of Coleridge's definition of poetry as "A more than usual state of emotion, with more than usual order" (Hardy 1977: 2).

Although his lyric poetry is not discursive, it is capable of speaking its feelings intelligently, so as to speak about them. The double voice of feeling can speak in a single lyrical form, as it must, fusing reflection or even analysis and judgment with intense passion (Hardy 1977). Just as we are often aware of feeling while possessed by it so Serote can speak a commentary on his feeling. While one reads his poems as a whole in sequence, there emerges a story, so that the individual poems are both intense expressions of moments of feeling, and also imply a narrative. It is a story, submerged and suggested, whose actions and relationships are often dark. Allusion replaces the detailed specification of drama and fiction whose business is telling as much as possible.

The Advantage of the Novel

When he tried his hand at the novel art-form, he was searching for one with enough scope to tell as much as possible, one which could project the shiftings of society with a facility and an intimacy that had not existed before in his earlier works. This form is much concerned with the emergence of new personality types, with what is happening to the struggle for freedom, as individuals begin to explore the nature of possibility which has been brought about for them through the crack-ups of the old society (Ellison 1986). Moving beyond lyrical poetry, Serote was challenged into taking all the traditional forms – oral storytelling, the lyric, drama – and exploiting them in the medium of the novel. All of this was very necessary because people no longer know exactly who they are. They know that they are doing things; they know that they are tied up with the old values, that they sometimes wear the old clothing. But inside they feel different; they feel the need to test themselves against the new possibilities because it is possible to test themselves.

Since the adoption of the Freedom Charter in 1955, the novel has become, in South Africa, a recognised art form which has absorbed all of the techniques of narrative, whether oral or literary, that preceded it. And in the hands of such novelists as Alex la Guma, Nadine Gordimer, E'skia Mphahlele, Zakes Mda, it has become a literary form which, along with its powers to entertain, is capable of deadly serious psychological, political, and social explorations of the human predicament.

Throughout, the novel in South Africa has always been tied up with the idea of nationhood. What are we? Who are we? What has the experience of particular groups been? How did it become this way? What is it that stopped us from attaining the true meaning of liberation? As we read his novels – *Rumours*, *To Every Birth its Blood*, *Scatter the Ashes and go*, *Gods of our Time*, *Revelations* – we see clearly the emergence of the person of great sensitivity, courage, and great possibilities who is trying to find his or her way in a society that has been unable to break away from the frustration of life inherent to this period of South African history (Danto 1985).

Serote is well aware that the apartheid aftermath is marked by a range of ambivalent cultural moods and formations which have accompanied the period of transition and translation. 1994 was, in the first place, a celebrated moment of arrival – charged with the rhetoric of independence and the creative euphoria of self-government and self-definition. Serote recognises that the apartheid aftermath is also fraught with the anxieties and fears of failure which attend the need to satisfy the historical burden of expectation. His creativity is fuelled by his apprehension that the inheritors of the apartheid aftermath must in a real sense instantiate a totally new society. The democratic government is plagued by the imperative to grow new institutions, to expand our capabilities to some new dimensions. In pursuing

this imperative, the democratic government is painfully compelled to negotiate the contradictions arising from its indisputable historical belatedness, its post-coloniality, or political and chronological derivation from apartheid colonialism, on the one hand, and its political, social, and economic obligation to be meaningfully inaugural and inventive, on the other. Thus, its actual moment of arrival – into independence in 1994 – was predicated upon its ability to successfully imagine and execute a decisive departure from the apartheid past (Ghandhi 1998).

Serote enjoins us to experience all these contradictions. He asks us to interrogate ourselves, to interrogate society and the state by way of realizing ourselves, by way of paying our debt to history. Serote is necessary to point out to us that this is a lyrical as well as intricate and rugged experience. Thematically, Serote knows much more. He recognises that the country has reached a moment of crisis, and, in fact, that he is writing during a new period in the life of the nation, when the lyrical belief in the possibilities of freedom is no longer so persuasive. Mindful that hundreds and thousands of men and women have died in the struggle for liberation that goes back to the 17th century, Serote constantly reminds us that we have to discover the new possibilities of the new democratic society. What Serote realises is that the old enduring evil of oppression and domination continues to raise its face, revealing itself within society in so many ways. This evil can no longer be confronted in the name of “armed struggle” – although Serote has been prominent in that struggle. He recognises that each and every individual who lives within South African society has to possess, and be concerned with, the most subtle type of political and moral consciousness. He is as aware of the labyrinth in which South Africans live with an intensity that recalls Alex La Guma in *A Walk in the Night*.

The novel was not invented by a South African, not even for South Africans; but we are a people who have, perhaps, most need of it – a form which can produce imaginative models of the total society if the individual writer has the imagination, and can endow each character, each scene, each image with his own sense of value.

Essays

Serote’s essays, bound together in *On the Horizon* and *Hyenas*, isolate thought, not feeling, as the lyrics do, in large compass and so render it at its most elaborate. To say more about his use of the form is to raise doubts and exceptions. Their advantage to the reader is their easy access to the logic of ideas which allows analysis of their argument in a way not often feasible in his lyric poems and fiction.

Their advantage is their analytical elaboration of thought. This advantage is positively definable: they provide an explanation, interpretation and

judgment; what they do provide is thought, without much overt feeling and without events or characters. To call his essays elaborations of thought may seem tendentious, when in fact they contain feelings: passion for change, order, and freedom. These feelings are admittedly present, but they are marshalled in the service of thought. They are typical of essays in that they generate thought and trace causal and conceptual links, and hence have to discuss, analyse and explain them. So the structure of the essays is their adherence to the progression and coherence of argument.

The advantage of these essays comes from their attention to thought and thought mainly, and their articulateness in elucidating that thought, in attesting clarity and coherence. They thrive, then, on exclusions. They are more than usually transparent because they leave out so much of event, character, feeling, and context that they can speak in a lucid voice. This voice speaks, not in solitude as the lyric poems do, but in social settings where they rely mainly on the everyday meaning of words.

But although these essays are discursive, they are capable of speaking their feelings intelligently, so as to speak about them. The double voice of the thoughts can speak in a single form, as they do, fusing explanation, interpretation, and judgment with passion. Just as we are often aware of thought while possessed by its feeling so the essayist can trace the logical consequences of a thought without sacrificing feeling. When one reads the essays as a whole in a sequence, there emerges a story and history of thought of the South African condition, with minimal characterisation and narrative events, so that the individual essays are both lucid elaborations of thought, and also contain complex currents of feeling. When one reads the essays as a whole in a sequence, there emerges a story and history of thought, that the individual essays are lucid elaborations of ideas.

Citizenship and Serote's Narrative Imagination

There are many forms of representation within the range of human communication from which the reader can derive the knowledge, intelligence, and sensitivity to human values: the capacity for informed and sound judgment which, so far as possible, a ballot, for instance should express. South Africans need to read the lyric poems, fiction, and essays of Serote because on a daily basis they will be called upon to make decisions. The South African citizen needs to be exposed to Serote's knowledge of South African history as well as political, social, and economic facts. But people who know many facts about the history and current state of our nation are still not fully equipped for citizenship and to make responsible decisions. (Nussbaum 1997). Serote's works make it very clear that to become a responsible citizen we must not only amass knowledge, we must also cultivate in ourselves a capacity for sympathetic imagination that will

enable us to comprehend the motives and choices of people different from ourselves. We must not, for instance, see the slum-dwellers as forbiddingly alien and other, but as sharing many problems and possibilities with us. Differences of race, class, culture, religion, sex, ethnicity, and national origin make the task of mutual understanding harder since these differences shape not only the practical electoral choice people face but also their consciousness, their conscience, feelings, attitudes, and ways of looking at the past, present, and future of our country.

Here Serote's work can play a vital role, cultivating powers of imagination that are central to citizenship (Gardner 1979). South Africans need to know his work, precisely because they are called upon to participate in decision processes. That is not the only reason why Serote's work is so important, but it is one significant reason. His work cultivates capacities for judgment, sensitivity, and compassion that can and should be expressed in the choices South African citizens make. Painting, dance, photography, film, and so on – all have a role for shaping our understanding of the people around us. But in a political education curriculum for citizenship, Serote's work, with its ability to represent the specific circumstances and problems of people of many different identities, makes an especially rich contribution. His knowledge of possibilities is an especially valuable resource in the political life.

The Shift to Film and Television

Serote's lyrics, novels, and essays are born of the passion that has driven his literary career – from Yakhalinkomo to Rumours. Three broadly interconnected questions have propelled his work: What does it mean, or is it possible, to represent human beings? What is the role of the artist in the struggle for justice and freedom? And what is the relative value of different literary forms? It is possible for art to embody and turn the mind? In the interview I had recently with him, he began to argue that the filming of the liberation struggle is crucial to advancing the quest for self-understanding and social cohesion. The source of this quest is a set of challenges of people's image of themselves in a complex and dynamic world – from the experiences of settler occupation in the 17th century to the processes of liberation that followed. It is in this context that the literary tradition has come to compete with and accommodate itself to an increasingly visual culture. The fascination expressed by South Africans with filmed and televised politics, and their obsession with both the dangers and the opportunities posed by what could be called the "society of the visual image and the spectacle," is inextricable from a set of hopes and anxieties of what it means to be South African in a changing, globalizing world. No history of the struggle can be understood without its visual cultural apparatus. Serote

increasingly appreciates the technology of filming and television not simply to educate, inform, and entertain the public, but as a tool in the service of self-understanding, social cohesion and nation building. Neoliberal forces have established a monopoly over the audiovisual field in South Africa, primarily in order to counter the push for fundamental change in power relations. What began as political maneuver has grown into a strategy for controlling national consumption not just of news but also of the cultural legacy of the Liberation Movement and of South African national identity itself. Recently, the filming and televising of Mandela's life demonstrated with particular clarity how the project of visualising "the struggle" graphically dramatised for popular consumption an image of courage, sacrifice, integrity, and national pride. Mandela on film and television shows how Serote's arguments over the constitution of South African identity can be played out over film and the airways.

Serote's intention to shift into film and television traces a literary and political course, with him earnestly moving from narrative and analysis to evocation and visual image in a quest for a supreme literary form.

Conclusion

The fundamental problems of the South African situation will repeat themselves again and again and will be faced more or less by people throughout the world: What should we do to eradicate poverty and socio-economic inequality? What does it mean to think about the future of fundamental change without the support of political, economic, social and cultural certitudes? Which form or combination of literary forms will be adequate to the daunting complexity of the human condition today? Lyric poetry, fiction, essays, film? Is there a supreme form that can adequately represent human beings in our time? Where can such power and wisdom be found? These questions will continue to press on us for years to come, for they are questions built into the core of our democracy.

During a period when the media, TV especially, which base most of its images on the commercial experience, is effecting a questionable revolution of values among South Africans and corrupting our capacity to make responsible choices, perhaps it is time we paid our respects to a writer who has spent his life reducing the violence and the possibilities of our life to artistic order. I have no idea where we shall all be a hundred years from now, but if there is a complex of art-forms in which the South African experience has finally discovered the voice of its own complexity, it will owe part of its direction to the achievements of Wally Mongane Serote. For forty three years, he has been telling us how marvellous, violent, hopeful, courageous, and human we are. We are privileged to be living during his time, and to know such a spirit, so gifted an artist. And as we celebrate

Serote's gift to our history, we should remind ourselves that acquiring artistic technique is a process of modifying one's responses, of learning to see and feel, to hear and observe and evaluate the images of experience and of summoning up and directing the imagination, of learning to conceive of human values in the ways which have been established by Serote and other great writers who have developed and extended the art of writing. And perhaps the writer's greatest freedom and power, lies precisely in his mastery of technique through which he comes to possess and express his vision of life.

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Muxe Nkondo
mnkondo@gmail.com