

Reflection Statement

“The elegy does the work of mourning; it allows us to experience mortality. It turns loss into remembrance, and it delivers an inheritance.”

Edward Hirsch *A Poet's Glossary*

My poetic suite, *From a Grandfather's Heart*, draws on the interplay between the African landscape and individual identity to explore the phenomenon of death and the associative mourning process. My purpose is to elegiacally commemorate the passing of my late grandfather while affording a sense of connection to place and heritage. In my poetic oeuvre which offers an introspective lament, I drew particular influences from various works of South African poetry and fiction, namely Herman C. Bosman's *The Earth is Waiting* (1974), Mongane Serote's *Freedom Lament and Song* (1997), and John Davis's African romance *Hold my Hand I'm Dying* (1967). It is through these texts that I managed to find my own unique voice as a contemporary Australian and South African writer.

On my most recent family trip to South Africa in 2015, I gained a profound impression of the landscapes and the people of the Mpumalanga bushveld region. The farm-trails were just as mystifying as the homes they led to. The dusty spoor of wild native fauna that constituted these subtropical regions of Africa unearthed for me the cyclical nature of life and death, and left behind indelible memories of the natural and sublime beauty that was my ancestral home. It seemed to me that the old people of Africa were not so afraid of dying as they were of being forgotten. To remedy this, many African cultures view the land as subsuming their

ancestral past, calling it their ‘Amatongo’¹. With this sentiment in mind, I set out to write poetry in honour of my late Grandfather; to demonstrate viscerally how one could be memorialised through the land, memory, and myths of South Africa.

Among my poetic influences were the French Symbolists for the way they sought to formulate a “derangement of the senses,”² focalising their work on the spiritual world of dreamscapes and the imagination. I first noticed the qualities of French Symbolist poetry in the study of T.S. Eliot in Module B of the English Advanced Course. Eliot, shaped by the likes of Jules Laforgue, rendered vignettes that “dissolve[ed] the floors of memory” and “whispered lunar incantations.” Moved by the chimerical, dream-like quality of these lines, I similarly tried to formulate a poetic world that captured the personal and metaphysical qualities of South Africa. I sought to create a pattern of emotional distance between my poetic personas and this imagined world of my ancestors, underscoring such imagery with the nebulous and fragmentary memories of my grandfather and the land his home. The suite moves structurally from the impressionistic outlines of the land and people in ‘Figures’, to the seminal moment involving the passing of my grandfather in ‘Tragedy’, and closes with ‘Echoes’, which limns the memories and callings of this lineal world. In constructing this trichotomous suite of poetry, I sought to convey my challenges with forming meaningful and enduring attachments to the African landscape, and by extension my late grandfather, Jan Matthys Le Roux.³ Such became the defining lament of my various poetic personas, serving as extensions of my own feelings of familial and cultural dislocation.

¹ H. Callaway, 1870. *The Religious System Of The Amazulu*

² G. Robb, 2000. *Rimbaud*. Quote by Arthur Rimbaud, in a letter written to a teacher.

³ *From a Grandfather's Heart*

Reading Victor's cathartic journey through the Swiss Alps in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1823) for the English Extension Course, further inspired my poetic journeying through the equally sublime landscapes of Africa, wherein I utilise images from both memory and imagination to convey a similar sense of spiritual malaise. Instead of exploring the African landscape as a space for introspection and convalescence as it is for Victor in Shelley's Romantic novel, I sought to show the land as a space that is imbued with ambivalence and discontent, and where the emotions of grief and longing could be further explored.

I adopted a *vers-libre* or free-verse style to better capture the essence of the African landscape and the memory of my grandfather. Being uninhibited by a formal meter or rhyme scheme, I wanted to focus on the nature of mourning as that which is personal and uniquely expressive. My audience then, extends to all South-Africans who have experienced familial loss including the cultural diaspora of first and second-generation migrants. A suitable place for my work to be published would be in the *African Poetry Magazine*, an anthology dedicated to the fostering of cultural awareness towards Africa by showcasing unique and diverse stories of the land and people.

To enrich my conceptual understanding of the relationship between the individual and the land, I investigated phenomenology and linguistic-anthropology studies. I was especially intrigued by Heidegger's belief that art is a defamiliarisation of the self, noting that "when Van Gogh shows us a pair of peasant shoes he estranges them, allowing their profoundly authentic shoeness to shine forth".⁴ Applied to my work, this notion of

⁴ D. Herman. and T. Eagleton, 1998. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*.

defamiliarisation refers to aspects of culture and place which I have sought to recast as foreign and distant. Cultural symbols and tropes are therefore reimagined as objects that feel familiar, yet simultaneously engender emotions of longing and alienation. Leavis furthermore, reveals the poetic utility of this, suggesting that literature comes to stand in for a mode of being “which modern society has supposedly lost”⁵ or has become disconnected from. It is through my poetry then, as an apt medium for which I can consider such ontological problems, that I may discover and reconcile these disconnected truths about the self.

I examined Burrow’s article on the use of synaesthesia (diversified sensing of feeling), and ideasthesia (diversified sensing of ideas) to further develop the ontological considerations that my poetry draws.⁶ Burrow suggests that these two elements serve to characterise the poet’s internal psyche and being, highlighting the self-reflexive arrangement whereby the ‘poet becomes a part of nature, and nature becomes part of the poet’.⁷ In the poem ‘Inheritance,’ I incorporate this phenomenon through the image of the dusty and quiet farm-road, functioning as a vehicle through which a mood of wistful longing is expressed:

*Watch him drag his feet through the years
And kick at clods of dwindled dreams*⁸

This enmeshment of synesthetic imagery with ideasthetic symbolism has sustained a deepened atmosphere of cultural and spiritual reverence throughout my suite, informing my

⁵ R. Bilan, 1976. F. R. Leavis on the Novel: Problems in Evaluation. *College English*

⁶ F. Burrows, 2006. *Words Of Shape And Shade*

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ *From a Grandfather’s Heart ‘Inheritance’*

understanding of poetry as a delicate balance between what is perceived by the persona and what is understood.

Further experimentation with poetic voice arose from Ezekiel Mphahlele's article *The Voice of Prophecy* (1979), which examines how African poetry has shifted from a lyricism celebrating 'arrival' or independence to a "harder narrative tone that alternates towards agonised incantation."⁹ Mphahlele describes the elegy as still being about loss, but of another kind, one where the individual is memorialised in temporal unity with a practising, communal gathering.¹⁰

My conceptual interest regarding the interplay between the individual and the land arose from Gerald Moore's article *The Imagery of Death in African Poetry* (1968), which examines the phenomenon of death in an African context as a natural progression along the continuum of human existence. Further, he illuminates how the power of lyrical poetry may be harnessed to preserve and rebirth culture through interaction with its readers. The erotetic, rhetorical questions in 'Ancestral Voices' depict the calling of land and heritage which both challenges the persona's awareness of these longstanding African traditions, as well as functioning as a calling for the reader to partake in the ceremonial preparations of death and rebirth:

Do you know the ageless rite; can you tell the season?

Bones are cast, and speak, only of

*Proteas in December.*¹¹

⁹ C. Heywood, and E. Mphahlele, 1975. Mphahlele's New Image of Africa.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ *From a Grandfather's Heart 'Ancestral Voices'*

Baudelmann's essay *The Inbetweenness of Sympotic Elegy* (2013), further clarifies this continuum of existence in poetry as occurring between living and dead; past and future; and between speech and song. Baudelmann presents the notion of loss as uniquely transitional when represented in poetry; the elegy's self-referential ambiguity in constituting elements of both speech and song serves to accentuate the melodious quality of ordinary speech, which "a little stylization is enough to make satisfyingly musical."¹² I sought to meld both speech and song through my use of italicisation, representing different, shifting voices that range from the land (translated here from Afrikaans):

It is enslavement come across the ocean.

*It's a grave in the grass, a falling tear.*¹³

To the longing voice of my wandering persona:

When I hear the waves rising and falling

*I hold my breath, like a prayer.*¹⁴

And lastly, in the remembered voice of my Grandfather:

Waste no tears for what has been broken,

*Only, for what has not been fixed again.*¹⁵

¹² F. Baudelmann, and T. Power, 2013. *The Inbetweenness of Sympotic Elegy*.

¹³ *From a Grandfather's Heart 'Burial Rites'*

¹⁴ *From a Grandfather's Heart 'The Kleinmond Home'*

¹⁵ *From a Grandfather's Heart 'Mistakes'*

I aspire for my Major Work, *From a Grandfather's Heart*, to be remembered as equally a lament as it is a celebration; sensitively rendering the beauty and anguish of loss. The cathartic process and journey of crafting poetry for the English Extension 2 course helped me wade through the tender memories I have for my late grandfather, whilst also allowing me to discover and perhaps even transcribe the ineffable nature of South African myth and tradition.

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