

‘Watson missed the point’

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The review of the anthology *The Heart in Exile* in last month's *Review of Books* attracted much attention. Here we publish some responses

Stephen Watson's pejorative review of the poetry anthology *The Heart in Exile* [edited by Ian Tromp and Leon de Kock, and published by Penguin], misses a basic point. He puts words in the editors' mouths when he claims their working paradigm was "If there is a new democracy in South Africa, surely there should be a new poetry to accompany it?"

The editors would not be silly enough to think that. Their criterion was to put together a collection of English poetry written or published during this country's transitional years. Nor does this necessarily say anything about "how literary history proceeds", which Watson claims the editors are ignorant of. The time-frame used for book's inclusions is far too short, which any fool can see.

The idea of using a time-span is an unusual one for an anthology, but we do live in an unusual country going through the most significant change in its history. The collection's main theme, though it may or may not break Watson's reactionary literary and academic rules, does not break that most important rule of all: keep it interesting.

And the topic, and I speak for many, is damn interesting. Yes, to put words into De Kock's and Tromp's mouths, what were our poets up to, in those years? By missing the editors's departure point, Watson then also makes other errors. The amount of poems included by a poet does not suggest their importance, it only suggests the activity of the poet in the period.

Watson says that most of the poetry is at best mediocre. What criteria is he using? Not even he, a distinguished poet and essayist, can be sure which of these poems are truly excellent or not. Only time will tell which poems are valuable. But right now they do have a value for us, in that it is a fascinating collection of well-written, sensitive poems, some less good than others.

The overwhelming sense that I come away with from the book is the sense of *ubuntu*, camaraderie, poems that do say something about the collective experience of being South African in our times. On the other hand, one cannot miss, I am afraid, the arrogance and aloofness in Watson's review. His sneering will ensure that many people continue to ignore poets and poetry-readers as stuck-up, highbrow snobs. — **Rod Mackenzie, Johannesburg**

Stephen Watson's critical review of *The heart in Exile* reiterates the debates of 1987 and 1989 around *Black Mamba Rising* and the anthology *SA in Poetry/SA in Poesie* respectively. When *Black Mamba* appeared, Jeremy Cronin raved ecstatically. Lionel Abrahams and Farouk Asvat responded in tones of consternation.

"On aesthetic matters, ideology seems to have turned his [Cronin's] thinking inside out," Abrahams wrote in April 1987 and Asvat rejoined: "The examples

Cronin quotes are nothing more than praise poems to selected organizations.”

Asvat and Abrahams, however, were too busy listening to themselves to quote a line from the “slogan poetry which merely stunts the growth of our people” to support their objections.

Why did they not provide quotations? The reason appears simple. The discussion then, as now was not concerned with aesthetics at all. It was about who should and should not be listened to by “our people”. It was about who is included and excluded, who is published and who not. The debate appeared to die down.

In 1989, the aesthetic controversy swung into motion again when Watson locked antlers with Andries Oliphant over *SA in Poetry/SA in Poesie*. While Oliphant criticized the editors’ reduction of poetry to ideology, he generally praised it as a “superb book which signals the opening salvos of many exciting changes in store for South African literature”.

Watson heard salvos which signalled not opening but closure of what he termed “aesthetic literacy”. On this occasion, the reader was treated to some quotations from the offensive material – which, I have to admit, are so exquisitely dreadful as to create laughter in me. Be that as it may, once you have fallen into the sewer where “Aesthetic Illiterates” are gathered, it is, I suppose, relatively easy to be flushed into the “low-grade verbal compost” of *The Heart in Exile*.

Yes, of course it is an arbitrary decision to collect poems published over a five-year span. And yes, the editors do not seem to be able to claim anything other than that they believe the poems express the “so-called New South Africa [...] in a thousand different nuances” – in English, that is. Tromp’s and De Kock’s criteria

are not primarily aesthetic. Therefore, Watson attacks.

The lack of quoted evidence in Watson’s review once again prevents readers from deciding for themselves what they might think of such “mediocre” lines. No – we must take Watson’s guidance. It is, once again, a question of who is and is not important. And yes, I was surprised to find you, Stephen, missing.

Does that mean that those who were excluded are unimportant? No. It’s just ... well, we can’t all fit into the same book at once. Consider what Cronin wrote not too long ago. He said – are you listening, Stephen? – to learn to speak with the voices of the land that “grunt, stammer, cry, call, babble” and say “stompie, stickfast, golovan, songololo, just boom-bang” and “ikwata bust fife”. So some of them just say stompie and some say just boom-bang.

Let there be more books – more *Mambas*, more *SAs in Poetry*, more *Hearts in Exile*, more *Insides*, more *Returns of the Moon* and more *Presences of the Earth*. Surely our s(h)elves are big enough? – **Silke Heiss, Cape Town**

If we are to heed the words of Pastor Watson, the situation appears unpromising for those, “not poets at all”, whose work provides the “low-grade verbal compost” for the work of the “recognized” poets in *The Heart in Exile: South African Poetry in English 1990-1995*. The lost souls might yet find solace in Fuller’s words: “Martyrs ashes are the best compost to manure the church.” – **Paul Mason, Cape Town**

It is with great pride that I wish to announce an important literary discovery. Notwithstanding the chilling static provided by your reviewer (“Sargasso Sea of

SA Poetry”). I have established that there are 21 English-speaking poets alive at any one time in South Africa. The discovery of an additional poet, verified with the aid of scientific research instruments, has important implications for our country. Clearly, we might have to think twice before counting on our sensibilities. – **Ivan Rabinowitz, Pretoria**