

### **South African Poets on Poetry: Interviews from *New Coin* 1992–2001.**

Robert Berold (ed). 2003. Scottsville: Gecko Poetry [an imprint of Natal University Press] 2003. ISBN 1-86914-031-1.

In *South African Poets on Poetry* Robert Berold has compiled twenty-one interviews with South African poets, the first conducted in June 1992 and the most recent in December 2001. All except one were originally published in the poetry journal *New Coin*. The majority of the poets represented in the collection are South African (or, in the case of the Sudanese-born poet Taban lo Liyong, residing in South Africa) but there are three exceptions: Phillip Zhuwao (Zimbabwean), Miroslav Holub (Czech) and Natan Zach (Israeli).

What is most striking about the compilation is that there is very little discussion of the practice or process of poetry: the overwhelming preoccupation of the poets and the interviewers alike is the relationship between poetry and politics, poetry and social change. The interviews with Ingrid de Kok, Robert Berold and Joan Metelkamp are among the few deviations from this tendency. De Kok speaks of exile and return, of poets who influenced her, of the responsibility of the poet and the state of poetry in South Africa – issues which are addressed in many of the other interviews too. But, unlike most of the others, she also focuses very specifically on the process of writing itself. Her deliberation includes a consideration of the intricacies of form and the implications of containing “the furies (...) grief, violence and anger” within “the delicacies and constraints of quite formal work” (112) – something which she discerns in the poetry of Thomas Hardy, Robert Frost and Elizabeth Bishop. She also raises the question of whether or not it is possible to be experimental “within inherited forms” (113) and contemplates the significance of narrative perspective and “positioning”

(115). In short, she elucidates the strategic choices she has been confronted with in her own work. In addition, she demonstrates the complexities of these choices by providing a detailed discussion of the writing of several of her poems, including "Small Passing", "Transfer", "Mending" and "At the Commission".

The balance which is achieved in the de Kok interview between, on the one hand, a consideration of the contexts that give a poem life and, on the other, questions of craft and technique, is noticeably absent in most of the other interviews. This is not to suggest that the poets concerned have not contemplated the practical questions as deeply, but the lack of attention to this aspect brings home the overwhelming, near-deterministic power of the political imperative in the period covered by the collection. This is scarcely surprising, given the developments in South Africa during the 1980s and 1990s. Indeed, the value of the collection lies, in part, in the range of insights it provides into the relationship between art and politics during a period of dramatic social change.

But – perhaps inevitably – there is also, especially if one reads one interview after another, a certain amount of repetition, of mulling over the same questions and coming up with similar answers. Perhaps more would be gained if one read each interview in relation rather than to that poet's work, moving from the poetry itself to the comments about the poetry and back again, so that distinctiveness comes to the fore, rather than the flattening effect which tends to arise from repeated engagement with related preoccupations.

An anthology of this nature would have benefited from a much fuller and more generous introduction. The one provided is only a page long: it was clearly the editor's intention that the interviews should speak for themselves. But I believe that most readers would have welcomed an introduction

which contextualized and highlighted some of the recurring preoccupations, areas of agreement and divergent views as they emerge in the interviews.

Several poets express anxiety about the precarious state of poetry in this country and uncertainty about its future. Denis Hirson sums up the situation as follows: "Poetry in any case, in any part of the world, expresses a very fragile position existentially, and even more so in a country like South Africa where there is not a large place given to literature, and a place no wider than a hair's breadth given to poetry" (79).

Poetry in South Africa may well be as beleaguered as Hirson suggests, but the poets who are interviewed in this anthology tend to provide ardent affirmations of its centrality, however poorly it is being promoted or funded. In their different ways, they attest to the pertinence of Miroslav Holub's large claim that "poetry is embedded in everybody's life and it surfaces in the drastic experiences and during the more dramatic periods of human history" (85).

*David Medalie*

University of Pretoria

Email: dmedalie@postino.up.ac.za

### **it all begins.**

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Robert Berold's collection of poetry entitled *it all begins*, recently published by Gecko Books, is a "must have" for all lovers of poetry and for all serious critics of South African literary outpourings, notwithstanding the fact that its content belies the promise invoked by the title, itself suggestive of a new beginning, a turning of the page. Its subtitle is likewise misleading. Although subtitled "poems from postliberation South Africa", this anthology includes poems from