

Dhlomo comes to Adams not like 'those other brighter stars . . . adorned with tails behind them' (this was how he often referred to graduates who described themselves as So-and-So, B.A.). Instead, he visits his old college like the Biblical repentant son, bare of any distinctions.

But, prodigal, I brought but scars,
Old weapons bent, besmeared with blood!
I cried, 'Forgive me, Mother dear!
All I have done is, I have stood!
No gifts bring I, I bring myself!
Yet I, even I, am of thyself!
Who stands not in the van, but rear!
New signs and faces young, 'Poor one,'
Jeered forth again, 'What have you done?'
Said trees and fields, 'Let him alone!
We know! Like us he stood like stone
When fallen, robbed and crucified,
He might have sunk — Fate he defied!
I wondered who was it replied,
But felt a Presence by my side!

Thus the crucified poet is defended by crucified Christ, the voice in Nature. Dhlomo's view of Adams College Chapel, built in the 1840s, brings back the constancy, the security which Luthuli testified to in his autobiography, and the music and harmony of his youth and what Amanzimtoti meant to him.

Neat, nestled 'neath rich scenes of green,
(Below, sweet Manzimtoti stream
Glides past as lovely as a dream!)
The chapel stands, defying change!
Calm, hallowed, staid! Where all is strange,
Its breath is home! Ah! mark that paean!
O memories the chapel brings!
The choir that sang forever sings
Within my soul! Oft have I heard
Alone, in pain, those strains begird
My soul when all seemed lost and dark!
Imagination's healing spark!
Shall ever in my life again
Come to my ears such magic strains?

Asking the 'deep mystic tree' to help him forget 'the nagging Past', he ends the poem pessimistically — he is married to his Fate

more strongly than to his wife.

No force
Can from his Fate poor man divorce!
(‘O never, never more!’) No power
In heaven and earth can turn one hour!
(‘O never, never more!’) The door
Is shut! now and forever more!

The door to the future is as shut as that to the past. Sadly, the poem, which discusses the role of genius (the idea he had learnt at the college), at last faces up to his own ordinariness, rejects the ideologically-conditioned behavioural path he had taken.

In youth and triumph I bragged, 'I must
Be different!' Now mid storm and dust,
I pray to be like other men . . .

Dhlomo and the Visual Arts

Dhlomo wrote at the end of 1943³⁵ that he knew of no notable contribution made by Africans during the year in the field of culture except for Mqhayi's 'Inzuzo' and the 'American Negro Revue', which was a 'fine play' written by Madie Hall Xuma, the black American wife of the president of the A.N.C. at the time — a play 'portraying the progress of the Negro from the slave days to the present'.³⁶ The third exception to this cultural vacuum was the work of J.K. Mohl who 'brought fame to the painters by his notable studies'. Dhlomo was always interested in music and painting and his own work reflects the same trends as in these arts. It was only in 1944 that Mohl opened his own School of Art in Sophiatown — the first of its kind. Until then, black painters had very little opportunity for formal instruction.

Amongst the earliest painters were those who were self-taught. One was a gardener called Moses Tlali, a 'native genius' as *Umteteli* described him in 1928, who was discovered by Howard Pim.³⁷ Another who was to become well known for many years was Gerard Bhengu. He was born in 1910 at Mundi (Centecow) in the Creighton area of Natal. From his earliest school days at the Roman Catholic Mission school of Esibomvini at Centecow he started sketching. This came to the notice of the Mission doctor who encouraged him and, with the help of Dr D. Malcolm (Chief Inspector of Native Education), he attended Edendale Training College to learn English while continuing to paint. By 1938 he

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prepared poster paint). Paintings by Sekoto were hung in the South African Academy and the Johannesburg Art Gallery⁵³ and in 1947 he achieved his ambition of going to study in Paris; he has never returned. J.K. Mohl claims that he taught Sekoto to use oils. Mohl has said that he discussed Sekoto's departure with him, arguing that he would be cutting himself off from his sources of inspiration: 'South Africa or Africa needs artists badly, you see, to paint our people, our life, our way of living, not speaking in the spirit of apartheid or submission, but there are no artists here and there are no black artists. But he would never listen to that as an argument. "I must get to Paris, I must get to France," he said.'⁵⁴ According to Mohl, Sekoto answered that 'a man's good place is where a man is free, where a man finds freedom'. So he left. Sekoto thus followed Peter Abrahams into voluntary exile, choosing one of the two options which, tragically, were becoming mutually exclusive in post-war South Africa: exile and 'freedom', or staying close to one's inspiration and 'oppression'.

The career of John Koenakeefe Mohl (born 1906) began in a similar fashion to those of Pemba and Bhengu. As a cowherd, near Zeerust, he modelled clay animals using 'two natural colours', a red-amber and a very white wash, as well as 'black ground'. 'All the boys used to do it but I was a genius, I was above them all,' he has said. At Tigerkloof Training School he had the same school experience as Pemba, being punished for spending too much time on art. Eventually the Principal, Father Hale, who encouraged him, persuaded his grandfather to allow him to receive training at the Windhoek School of Art under a French teacher, Miss Collac. He seems to have spent some years in Germany in addition to working on the docks in Cape Town and as a clerk on the coal mines at Witbank. In 1936 he sent twelve pictures to the Empire Exhibition, one of which was entitled 'Chief Tshekedi, Paramount Chief of Bechuanaland' and, in 1942, his picture 'Snow Falling in Sophiatown' was accepted by the South African Academy for its exhibition in the Johannesburg City Hall. In the year in which he was acclaimed by Dhlomo, 1943, he was the sole African artist (among four hundred and twenty other artists) to submit an entry to the Academy's exhibition.⁵⁵ Only one hundred and thirteen entries were chosen, one of which was Mohl's 'Magaliesberg in Midwinter'. An article detailing these achievements made some significant connections.

Mr. Mohl is a Mochuana by birth; a countryman of the great Solomon Plaatje and like him, too, he bears himself with that graceful humility of the conqueror [sic] which was so marked a characteristic of the translator of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* into Sechuana.⁵⁶

After an exhibition which sold out,⁵⁷ Mohl opened the White Studio in Sophiatown so that 'African artists will be among the foremost interpreters of our people to the other races'.⁵⁸ He met Pemba while the latter was on a visit to Doornfontein and admired him (the admiration seems to have been mutual since Pemba painted Mohl's portrait) and of Bhengu he said, 'He was a very good somebody. He was a genius. I don't think Bhengu was artistically educated. But he knew how to paint.'⁵⁹ With the fifties came a new crop of artists: there was K. Kubheka, the painter, G. Thabang, a sculptor,⁶⁰ and John Mphithing, who seems to have worked in porcelain.⁶¹ The Polly Street Arts Centre, under Cecil Skotnes and others, was to produce a whole new generation. But Bhengu, Pemba, Mohl and Sekoto (with Tlali and Ntuli) were the true pioneers.

In this discussion of art and art interpretation of the forties a number of features in common with the contemporary literature can be perceived. There was the idea of 'genius'. There was also the idea that black artists can prove to the world in general or white South Africans in particular that black artists are capable of anything other artists can do, at the same time as having a didactic role as regards blacks themselves. Says Mohl:

I wanted the world to realise that black people are human beings and that among them good workers can be found, good artists, and in addition to that I wanted to lecture indirectly or directly to my people of the importance of this type of thing, which of course to them is just a thing. You see there is no difference to them, I mean the ordinary African, between a photograph and a picture. It shouldn't be terribly expensive and if you say a painting is about one hundred rand they get shocked and say, 'What do you mean? What are you selling? Are you selling ten oxen or ten cows?' You see now, I wanted to teach them that this thing is of great importance. It is a different culture from photography, from camera work, and at the same time I wanted to satisfy my desire. Nature is beauty, you see. Near sunset you find that the beauty cannot be exhausted. Sunrise, moonlight, at night you find that you don't know where you are. You see, I think one should exploit that. That's what I used to look at Nature like.⁶²

Thus Mohl's view of Nature was also similar to Dhlomo's. In his own art criticism, too, Dhlomo was particularly concerned about the 'insidious doctrine' that African artists must remain 'natural' and that education and training would spoil them. 'The protagonists of this pernicious doctrine,' he wrote, 'are the so-called friends of the African.'⁶³ He frequently lamented the fact that artists like Bhengu and Ntuli were not trained to allow their

'genius' to develop,⁶⁴ and he would no doubt have welcomed Mohl's school. Indeed, when students of the Natal University College began to organise a Bantu Art Centre Dhlomo, as organiser of the Society of African Authors, Artists and Musicians, seems to have been a link man.⁶⁵

It should also be clear from the above that artists and writers were beginning to constitute a critical and self-critical group with a clear and mutual ideology. Already a tradition was being defined, exemplified in the anonymous reviewer's equation of Plaatje and Mohl. Painters and other artists and writers were by no means inarticulate about their own work and nor were they tied to a simple phenomenological stance concerning it. An anonymous article in 1943 attributed to Mohl a statement pregnant with meaning for that time:

Mohl was once approached by a white admirer and advised not to concentrate on landscape painting but to paint figures of his people in poverty and misery. Landscape, he was advised, had become a field where Europeans had specialized and they had advanced very far in perfecting its painting. In a humble voice and manner humbler still, he smilingly replied: 'But I am an African and when God made Africa, He also created beautiful landscapes for Africans to admire and paint'.⁶⁶

Even if most of the real land had been taken from Africans it did not have to be removed from their pictures as well.

The Rise of the Youth League

The poetry that followed 'Sweet Mango Tree', such as 'Underdog's Poet's Prayer' ('The poet of these Masses mute/O make me!') and 'Ricksha' ('Mageba, Phunga, Jama, Shaka, how/Your Seed lies crushed, reduced to slavery!'), reflects Dhlomo's turning towards 'the people'.⁶⁷ This continued to the end of the following year, 1943, and beyond.

Why do I waste my time thinking of my
Ambitions when my People bleed and die?
... From now till death I give
And dedicate my entire life to these
Mass struggles of the oppressed.⁶⁸

In the depths of war he reached the depths of bitterness.

Everywhere I turn I'm haunted
By the wailings of the wounded,
By the groans of the frustrated,
By the people daily hounded
By fear and hunger;
By man-made danger
Of lack of house and peace and pasture;
Of their poor children's life and future;
Whose very laughter
Tells of their slaughter
By Vested Interests of the Powerful Class
Whose Greed has landed us to this morass,
And closed the eyes and ears of countless hosts
To Beauty and the Truth.⁶⁹

The period was one of some militancy for Dhlomo. In April, 1943, he wrote an article entitled 'Masses and the Artist' which ended with the passage he had written into his copy of *Valley*, concerning the seed of Shaka and the bards of old who 'cannot forever live oppressed'.

We'll strike and take! If others will not give!⁷⁰

In the article, Dhlomo claimed that not only must the 'masses' share in 'the God-given things' and have 'a partnership in the ownership of production' but also that 'there must be a revolution not only in our social, economic, and political life but in our norms and niche of behaviour, our theories and conceptions of art and religion'. Although he upheld 'artistic objectivity and detachment', that did not mean the artist must live for himself only: 'Art for art's sake does not mean a cowardly and blind shirking of the burning questions of today, of the Mass struggle.' Significantly, too, he said that black artists should not 'discard the great virgin fertile fields of our Tribal Heroes, Kings and gods, our rich mythology, our great and glorious scenery'. On the contrary, he said, and this must surely be seen as a comment on his own plays, particularly *Cetschwayo* and *Dingana*, 'it would be a mis-interpretation and insult to our very Heroes and gods, our Soul and Soil, our times and selves, if in documenting and singing these things, we end in mid-air, as it were, and not use these very subjects to comment on our times and aspirations' [my italics]. The seed of Shaka and the old bards are, like the ancestors, made present.

This article was written in April, 1943. In March of that year the editor of *Ilanga* for the previous twenty-seven years, Ngazana Luthuli, finally retired. Rolfes Dhlomo became editor of the

written much earlier. It was undoubtedly inspired by Appendix X in Krige, *The Social System of the Zulus*, pp. 409-411; the appendix was entitled 'Conceptions of the Universe'. Evidence that he might have meant this poem's inclusion in *Valley* comes on page 3 of Dhlomo's own edition of *Valley* where the scribbled note 'The Universe — Sun, moon and stars, rainbow' seems to indicate his interest in this subject already. The date of publication of 'Zulu (Traditional) Conceptions of Universe' probably indicates the latest possible date for the new additions to *Valley* but my own feeling is to go along with footnote 9 above for an earlier date.

23. The 'Mendi' was the ship which sank in a collision with the 'Darrow' in the English Channel in 1917. On board were hundreds of men of the Native Labour Contingent which did duty in France. Mendi Day (21 February) was held every year into the fifties to remember those blacks who died for the Allied cause during the First World War. It was written up in songs and music by Moses Mphahlele and J. Jonas (referred to in 'The Mendi Day', *B.W.*, 18 February, 1939). Poems on the 'Mendi' were also written by D.J. Darlow and Walter Nhlapo (for the latter, see *B.W.*, 26 June, 1937). The sacrifice of the lives of blacks not only on the ship but also in France, South West Africa and German East Africa was seen as one 'to save civilization from destruction and to make the world safe for democracy' (R.V. Selope Thema, 'Lest We forget', *U.W.B.*, 20 February, 1932). Since blacks surrendered their lives for these ideals, the argument ran, it was not unreasonable for them to claim equal rights. By 1941, an editorial could claim the annual commemoration was becoming 'a national movement' ('They Died as Soldiers', *B.W.*, 1 March, 1941). Dhlomo no doubt wrote his play to contrast the First and Second World Wars and to emphasise the allegiance of blacks in both and the fact that by fighting for democracy they were also fighting for their own freedom. The anonymous poem 'Salang ka Khotsa' (*B.W.*, 6 November, 1943), on the occasion of the death of 624 Basuto in a torpedoed transport, has the same aim.

On Bosiu's crown

Will burn the beacon of your high renown.

24. Presumably about the black equivalent of the Girl Guides.
25. For a possible source, see R.R.R. Dhlomo's short story, 'Murder on the Mine Dumps', *Twenty Short Stories*, pp. 33-35.
26. For Dhlomo on passes, see, amongst numerous others, 'Through Um-teteli's Pages', *U.W.B.*, 3 January, 1931; '... But They Still Carry Passes', *U.W.B.*, 22 August, 1931; 'Busy-Bee', *I.L.N.*, 5 February, 1944; 'Busy-Bee', *I.L.N.*, 30 June, 1945; 'Crime', *I.L.N.*, 9 August, 1947; 'Pass-Book Entrenches Pass System', *I.L.N.*, 11 June, 1953. In 1927 Rolfes Dhlomo was stopped for his pass and complained of rough treatment ('Protection for the Law-Abiding', *I.L.N.*, 19 August, 1927). The near-short-story by Selope Thema ('The Victim of the Pass Laws',

- U.W.B.*, 28 April, 1928) is a kind of predecessor of Dhlomo's play.
27. In his handwritten list of plays Dhlomo seems to have written this title in, then scratched it out.
28. Next to all the plays in the printed list, except *Shaka* and *Mfolozi*, Dhlomo has put a tick. In a note below he talks of '20 plays' which is the number of ticks added to the number of handwritten titles. This seems to imply that when he made this list *Shaka* and *Mfolozi* were already not in his possession, or missing — perhaps not returned by a publisher to whom he sent them. It is possible that Dhlomo wrote another play called *The Dome of Many Sentiments*. Professor T.J. Haarhoff mentioned this as 'having recently been produced' ('Pathos of the Bantu', *B.W.*, 15 June, 1940), but I have found no other reference to this play.
29. 'Casualty List in Rand Railway Disaster', *B.W.*, 3 January, 1942; 'Christmas Eve Train Crash: Bantu World Relief Fund', *B.W.*, 17 January, 1942; and 'Compensation to Victims', *B.W.*, 11 April, 1942.
30. *B.W.*, 3 January, 1942.
31. 'Ndongeni Bantu Branch Library: Annual Report', *I.L.N.*, 19 June, 1943. A report on the Library in *I.L.N.*, 22 May, 1943, said that 'At almost all hours of the day the Librarian (Mr H.I.E. Dhlomo) is seen engaged in talks on books with many inquirers. During the afternoon teachers and school children come in to change books received or to get advice on suitable books to read. This sign is welcome for it shows the desire for learning among our people.'
32. 'Durban News Items: Lecture to Literary Society', *I.L.N.*, 31 July, 1943.
33. *I.L.N.*, 30 May, 1942.
34. *I.L.N.*, 22 August, 1942.
35. 'Busy-Bee', *I.L.N.*, 8 January, 1944.
36. Walter Nhlapo, 'Spotlight on Social Events: Mrs Xuma Stages Successful Show', *B.W.*, 28 June, 1943.
37. 'A Native Artist', *U.W.B.*, 18 February, 1928; and 'Town and Country News', *U.W.B.*, 27 October, 1934.
38. Since Herbert used the same Gray metaphor to describe the sculptor Ezekiel Ntule ('Busy-Bee', *I.L.N.*, 27 November, 1943) and Bhengu himself ('Busy-Bee', *I.L.N.*, 9 August, 1947).
39. *B.W.*, 9 March, 1935.
40. For a short biography and for reproductions of a number of Bhengu's works, see Phyllis Savory, *Gerard Bhengu: Zulu Artist*, Howard Timmins, Cape Town, 1965.
41. Interview with Gerard Bhengu, Umlazi, Natal. See also 'On Durban' by 'X', *I.L.N.*, 22 February, 1947; 'Busy-Bee', *I.L.N.*, 9 August, 1947; 'Busy-Bee', *I.L.N.*, 4 October, 1947; *I.L.N.*, 13 September, 1952. In 'African Artist', *I.L.N.*, 7 February, 1948, Johannesburg artist and sculptor Herman Wald wrote of Bhengu: 'With the exception of Gerard

Sekoto, this man is certainly the most talented Native artist I have come across.'

42. 'Busy-Bee', *I.L.N.*, 7 April, 1945.
43. Personal communication with G.M.M. Pemba, 23 July, 1979.
44. 'Busy-Bee', *I.L.N.*, 11 November, 1944. See also 'Busy-Bee', *I.L.N.*, 4 October, 1947; *I.L.N.*, 13 September, 1952.
45. 'Busy-Bee', *I.L.N.*, 27 November, 1943.
46. Walter Nhlapo, 'Bantu Carver', *B.W.*, 2 March, 1940.
47. 'Arthur Butelezi', *Daily News*, 20 December, 1937.
48. *Umlindi*, June, 1949.
49. 'Zulu Artist Wins Praise', *Umlindi*, May, 1948.
50. 'Gerard Sekoto', *Inkundla ya Bantu*, 10 September, 1949.
51. 'African Artist', *I.L.N.*, 3 May, 1947.
52. 'Bantu Artist in Paris', *Cape Times*, 27 August, 1949.
53. *Ibid.* See also 'African Painter for Paris', *I.L.N.*, 14 June, 1947.
54. Interview with J.K. Mohl, Johannesburg, 2 November, 1975.
55. Information from interview with J.K. Mohl, Johannesburg, 2 November, 1975, and from Anon., 'J.K. Mohl: Outstanding African Landscape Painter', *B.W.*, 9 October, 1943.
56. Anon., 'J.K. Mohl: Outstanding African Landscape Painter', *B.W.*, 9 October, 1943.
57. 'Who's Who In The News This Week', *B.W.*, 13 November, 1943; and interview.
58. Anon., 'Africans Taught the Art of Painting', *B.W.*, 20 May, 1944.
59. Interview with J.K. Mohl, 2 November, 1975.
60. Kubheka and Thabang had an exhibition, 'a great success', at the Gainsborough Galleries in Johannesburg (*I.L.N.*, 16 August, 1952, and 13 September, 1952).
61. *I.L.N.*, 13 September, 1952.
62. Interview with J.K. Mohl, 2 November, 1975.
63. 'Busy-Bee', *I.L.N.*, 9 August, 1947.
64. See, particularly, his 'Drama and Art', *I.L.N.*, 13 September, 1952: 'Ntuli is one of the pioneer African sculptors. His story is a tragic one in that his work and progress were sacrificed on the altar of the theory that training — especially overseas training — 'spoils' African artists and musicians. Fortunately Ntuli's genius and devotion to his work have seen him through. It is an open secret that some of his work graces many South African public places. However, most of the time Ntuli has to depend on tourists' support and collectors for his living.'
65. 'Bantu Art Centre', *I.L.N.*, 4 September, 1948.
66. 'J.K. Mohl: Outstanding African Landscape Painter', *B.W.*, 9 October, 1943. In a letter to *B.W.*, 2 October, 1943, S.L. Job praised Mohl, particularly his 'Magaliesberg in Midwinter': 'This work is a wonderful

picture of natural scenery. In the foreground there is a road cutting through the hills, immediately disappearing into a downslope; straight across at a distance one sees another table-like hill, a homestead with smoking chimneys on top of a hill, and a small footpath leading to the homestead. Beyond that the misty Magaliesberg mountains come prominently to view in their majestic grandeur. To prove the real beauty of the picture, although it was marked £26 5s. Od., it was sold within 10 minutes after the opening of the Academy Exhibition.' Fortunately I have managed to find what I am fairly certain is this picture and it is presently in my possession, as is Sekoto's 'Girl with Orange' (1945) and an untitled portrait by K. Kubheka (1954); the signature on the last-mentioned picture took a considerable time to decipher.

For Dhlomo's ideas on art after the creation of the Youth League, see 'Non-European Art Exhibition', *I.L.N.*, 6 October, 1945, where he said that Africans 'are of the soil' and are 'the Soul of Africa' so that 'art that is original and great must spring from the soil and the people'. He continued: 'It is the African who by paint and pen must tell the Great Tradition and Spirit of the land — the pain and toil of the common man, the mute music and hidden beauty of the mountains, rivers and creatures of the land, the mythology and customs of the patriarch.'

67. *I.L.N.*, 5 December, 1942.
68. 'Renunciation', *I.L.N.*, 13 November, 1943.
69. *Ibid.*
70. *I.L.N.*, 10 April, 1943.
71. 'Faithful Service: Mr. N. Luthuli to Retire', *I.L.N.*, 6 March, 1943; 'R. Roamer on His Farewell', *B.W.*, 13 March, 1943; 'Tributes', *B.W.*, 20 March, 1943; E. Gumbi, 'Fare Thee Well, Mr. R.R.R. Dhlomo', *B.W.*, 27 March, 1943; 'Scribo of the Narrow Pants: Introducing Our Self', *B.W.*, 27 March, 1943.
72. Selby Msimang, 'The Crisis', 1936, reproduced in Karis and Carter, *From Protest to Challenge*, Volume 2, p. 57.
73. 'The African Liberator, Our Message', *The African Liberator*, October, 1935.
74. For a full discussion of this, see P. Walshe, *The Rise of African Nationalism*, and Karis and Carter, *From Protest to Challenge*, Volume 2.
75. Karis and Carter, *From Protest to Challenge*, Volume 2, p. 80.
76. 'The Bantu World Offices Bombed Again', *B.W.*, 7 February, 1942.
77. For literary response to this, see M. Dikobe, 'We Shall Walk', *Labour, Townships and Protest*, ed. B. Bozzoli, pp. 104-108. There were also threats that Alexandra would be 'removed' ('Removal of Alexandra', Editorial, *B.W.*, 6 February, 1943).
78. Editorial, 'Congress Youth League', *Inkundla ya Bantu*, 17 May, 1944.
79. This quotation and much of the information for this and the preceding