

ITALY, WORLD WAR II AND SOUTH AFRICAN POETRY

by Marco Fazzini

It would be impossible for me to describe all the possible routes and secondary paths this topic can lead to, because I would be forced to discuss at least four or five or, possibly, six different South African poets who have had diverse links and influences through and from Italy. I could, for instance, easily refer to F.T. Prince, Guy Butler, Patrick Cullinan, Stephen Watson, Douglas Livingstone and Chris Mann. For example: I recently read the private diary Douglas Livingstone, which he kept during his 1992 trip to Italy to launch a book of his poems translated into Italian, *Il sonno dei miei leoni*. The diary is full of dates, impressions, drafts, poems, descriptions of places and people, and would be a rich source of discussion. But I am not going to talk about it, though I'm sure it would be as interesting as, say, Richard Rive's trip to Italy or Guy Butler's autobiographies. There might be similar pages in the diary and notebooks that Stephen Watson produced during his stay in Bellagio. Equally, I shall ignore all the work of that the eminent poet and translator, Patrick Cullinan, did on Montale – the essay on him and the translations of his work. Then, there are F.T. Prince's writings, amongst which you will find more than one page or thought on places in Italy, especially Venice, Florence and Vicenza; but they, too, must remain beyond the scope of my talk today.

Italian literature and culture has had a notable presence in South African contemporary poetry in the last seventy years but I must limit myself here to one or two cases that can illustrate the topic; if you are interested in a longer treatment of the subject, you will be able to read my final contribution on the topic in a future publication, one which will sum up all the results of the PRIN research project.

The focus of today's talk will be Guy Butler, Chris Mann and Memory. I will use not only details and texts of poetry, but also fragments of letters, drawings, notebooks, images, photos and a more general visual iconography that I have collected during my research in private houses and libraries such as the National English Literary Museum (NELM) in Grahamstown. I will present images for you to see of some of the key books and documents that I refer to in my talk, so enabling you to imagine the larger contexts and bibliographies such a topic might lead to in the future.

The reason why I have chosen the above-mentioned poets is simple: in South Africa Guy Butler has been one of the most famous and most influential poets since the 1930s. Chris Mann, thirty years younger than his master, started publishing in the 1970s and is now Professor of Poetry in the same university where Guy Butler was active as writer and professor. Apart from sharing some personal and professional interests, Butler and Mann also had something else in common: war. Obviously, since their lives are a part of different generations, when I say they shared the experience of war it does not mean that they both

fought in our country. Guy Butler was a part of WW2 in Italy, whereas Chris Mann indirectly experienced the conflict in our country.

When the Second World War broke out, South African politicians were divided over what decisions to take. “Six ministers, including the Prime Minister J.B.M. Hertzog, argued for remaining neutral and for upholding National sovereignty, apart from discharging the legal requirement to protect Britain’s Simonstown facility.” (Nasson: 55)

(FOTO PDF: Neutrality)

Seven other Cabinet members, with Jan Christaan Smuts, the Deputy Prime Minister, prominent among them, pushed for joining the war against Germany as a matter of duty, national interest and security. On the one hand, Hertzog thought that only through neutrality could South Africa preserve its full national independence and the freedom to chart its own destiny; on the other, Smuts was afraid that Germany would demand the return of what was then known as South West Africa (the actual Namibia), so as to open a kind of door into the Union. “By cutting loose from its British Commonwealth friends and allies”, Bill Nasson writes, “it would find itself adrift and alone in an increasingly perilous world.” (Nasson 2012: 56)

Let’s have a look at one of Bob Connolly’s cartoons of the period.

(IMAGE Cartoon)

Here he celebrates the liberation of Italy as a joint South African-United States enterprise. The Italian Campaign, where South Africans fought as part of the American Fifth Army, cost something like 9,000 casualties out of the more than 200,000 troops involved. Most of these troops were white, but black and coloured soldiers fought (and died) in auxiliary war service. (Vale 2011: 20) The image can be comic, and it is certainly an ironic one; yet, as Desmond Tutu observes in his introduction to Peter Vale’s book, you can laugh at the cartoons, but “...remember, please, that international relations are no laughing matters.” (Tutu, in Vale 2011: ix) Both the horrors of war and the pleasures of peace are the main topic here, one which allows us not only to re-live the tragedy of violence but also the ever-present opportunity to show that a longing for life, generosity and humanity can emerge even in difficult times. And this is particularly moving when history, memory and personal experiences are being transformed into literary texts, poems in this case. Let’s read what Sampie De Wet (1906-1984) writes about our country. She lived in Pretoria, writing stories and children’s books. In 1956 she published *Nine Stories*, which deals with the themes of death, pain, fear and madness. She served with the South African Women’s Auxiliary Services in the Second World War, and wrote a book about her stay in Italy. This is just one of the many examples we could supply in order to give a stranger’s view on Italy during the war:

When new acquaintances used to ask me how I liked Italy, I always answered that what I was seeing was not Italy, but a country in the grip of war, and that is a vastly different matter. I should imagine that Italy, at present, is more like England than either is like its peace-time self. Italy is dirty, walls unwhitewashed and shutters unpainted, the roads bad, and everywhere debris which has not been removed, and damage which has not yet been repaired... It has been a dreadful winter, both for our troops and for civilians, but fortunately the winter is over. When I left at the end of March it was already much warmer, and light till after seven in the evenings, and food was becoming less scarce. Many traces of the war had been removed... (De Wet 1945: 27)

Guy Butler attended Rhodes University during the 1930s, graduating MA in 1938, and left South Africa to fight in the Second World War. After the war, he read English Literature at Oxford University, graduating in 1947. He returned to South Africa, where he took up a post lecturing in English at the University of Witwatersrand. In 1951, he left Wits to take up a post as Senior Lecturer at Rhodes University in Grahamstown. A year later, he was made Professor and Head of English at Rhodes, where he remained until his retirement in 1987. Throughout his career, Butler promoted the culture of English-speaking South Africans, which led to the charge of separatism from some critics, although he argued for integration rather than exclusivity. He was influential in achieving the recognition of South African English Literature as a distinct body of work. In his poetry, he strove for the synthesis of European and African elements into a single voice. In his late *Collected Poems* volume, published in 1999, he dedicates a full section to our country calling it 'Italy 1944-1945'. It contains famous poems such as 'Pietà', 'Giotto's Campanile', 'December 1944', 'Letter from Monte Stanco', 'Before a Dawn Attack', 'From a War Diary: Beyond Verona', etc. Let's read how De Wet's prose description of a destroyed country resonates in Butler's first stanza of 'Pietà':

Tremendous, marching through smashed buildings, trees,
a stream of bawdy bubbles from our lips.
Dog-eyed he stares from the ruin's lower steps,
then frightened fingers flutter out to seize
his mother's dusty skirts. She lifts her eyes,
straightens, flashes back at bay, and almost trips;
then turns, goes out to him, him only, grips
his fear-blind head against her bending knees...
(Butler 1999: 37)

But it is in 'Giotto's Campanile' and 'December 1944' that Butler anticipates what will later become his 'Italian' voice, that particular way of experimenting with the terza rima in which he would produce, in a few years, two of his major long poems: 'On First Seeing Florence' and 'Elegy for a South African Tank Commander killed in action in Italy, October 1944'.

The first one, as Butler himself says, was "...an attempt to do justice to one such renovating spot of time." It grew from an early-morning view of Florence when units of the 6th South African Armoured Division had advanced to the southern bank of the Arno, on 4th August, 1944. The poem went through a series of visions and revisions, until it was finally published in 1968, after the Arno floods of November 1966 and a chance reading of Iris Origo's *War in the Val d'Orcia*.

In the other long poem, called 'Elegy', Butler had to go through an even more complicated period of writing and revision. Of the many war casualties that made an impact on him, there were three that, more than others, impressed him: David Pitman, Willoughby Jackson and (Janson) Breda van Breda, a young relative of his wife. The tank commander killed in his long poem "...is an embodiment of many idealistic young South Africans at that time, whose awareness of their African origins and complex heritage were awakened first by the strange world of Egypt and then by Italy."

(IMAGE: DRAWING by Butler)

I won't go through the long line of drafts and revisions he described in his article on 'Elegy'; suffice it to say that there are now four versions of the poem:

1. The so-called Third Draft, which is for record purposes only
2. The version published in the journal *Standpunte* in 1955 (vol. 10, no. 1, August/September 1955)
3. The 'Elegy' (reconstructed and shortened in *Stranger to Europe with Additional Poems*) which dates back to 1959
4. the so-called post-Peter Sacks Version, which Butler wrote in March/April 1986 after reading Peter Sacks' book, *The English Elegy*. (Butler 1945-1985)

Here's the beginning of the long poem:

Part One

I

Briefly released from autumn's battle line,
relaxed as antique shepherds on the sward,
or lounging like young lords, we'd savour wine,

we'd say the pen is mightier than the sword;
we'd nag at ironies: of how we'd come –
white Africans who artlessly abhorred

raw voices screaming from Berlin to Rome –
only to learn the bitter paradox
of trouble brewing, terribly, back home:

to help bring Freedom through the storms and shocks
to harbour in calm waters, victory won –
and then to run upon the selfsame rocks...

(Butler 1999: 76)

It is worth noting here that, despite his refusal to take part in any operational and fighting actions in war – by which reason he was appointed as a teacher to the troops – Butler was strongly convinced that he, like many South Africans, “...did not go off to fight *for* an Empire, but against Nazism – *against* a political creed based on a biological belief in a master race.” “We believed”, he writes, “in democracy, and we thought the Commonwealth a good thing.” (Butler 1994: 164) Yet, soon after the war, as he tells us in the final volume of his autobiography, *Local Habitation* (1991), apart from the death-camp tragedies and the use of the atomic bombs, he would suffer further difficulties: in 1947, after his graduation in Oxford, he was back in a country where, in 1948, the National Party won at the polls and began the period of apartheid. In his words, we can perceive the final disillusion with humankind and his particular sense of private and public disintegration:

It is very difficult to communicate, at this distance in time, the body blows, and the protracted nausea of disillusionment in the years that followed the 1948 election: the ineluctable implementation of apartheid; the removal of the ‘Coloured’ voters from the common roll; the banning of virtually all black writers; the withdrawal from the Commonwealth; the desperate, sometimes pathetic, sometimes dangerous reactions and conspiracies; Sharpeville, the station bomb...

The result was that, within a decade, we felt like exiles in our own country. Many of us still do. (Butler 1999: 165)

In 1986, when Butler decided to publish the latest and revised version of ‘Elegy’, the State of Emergency had just been lifted, but it was re-imposed in June of the same year and continued to be enforced until 2nd February, 1990. The unstable political situation had led to a deep economic crisis in the country. The banning and detention of political leaders left a vacuum in black public life, only filled by church leaders such as Desmond Tutu, Frank Chikane, and others. Nearly 35,000 people were detained during 1986-87. Reports published in the *Weekly Mail* during the period June 1985 to December 1986 reveal that 813 books, objects, and publications were banned, 371 for political reasons. Butler’s lines seem to have been particularly suitable for the war years in Italy, but also for other possible violent contexts and situations, such as South Africa under the State of Emergency in the 1980s. The following lines were ignored by the state police when they were revised and published in South Africa in 1986:

...how can we love
when every outward gesture, thought or word
must see itself distorted, relative

and mirrored in the infinite absurd?
If speech is but a subtle sort of bark,
and song the pretty twitter of a bird,

why should it hurt to hear a falling lark
stutter so sweetly? Why do I choke and turn
to mutter half-meant longings to the dark?
(Butler 1999: 94)

Yet, as Stephen Watson has clearly observed, Guy Butler's life, which had its beginnings in what is to us an "...almost unprecedented degree of rootedness in landscapes natural, cultural, spiritual, was precipitated into that condition of uprootedness which has grown to the dimensions of a universal condition in the twentieth century..." (Watson in 'Introduction' to Guy Butler's *Essays & Lectures* 1994: 4) In more than one critical essay, Butler stressed that traditions must be adapted to new environments, revealing him to be an innovator as well as a conservative, "...both radical and traditionalist." (Watson in 'Introduction' to Guy Butler's *Essays & Lectures* 1994: 4)

While Guy Butler was teaching South African officers in Italy during the war, and also travelling to Rome, Cassino, Florence and other cities, another South African was in our country, following a different route, mainly made up of prison camps and physical difficulties. Cricketer Norman Tufty Mann joined the 2nd Anti-Tank Regiment during the war, passed through Cairo, Alexandria, and El Alamein, and was captured at the battle of Tobruk. He was deported to a prisoner-of-war camp near Chiavari, having passed through Benghazi, Tharuna, Sicily, and Naples. Finally, he was driven to Padua, soon after the Italian Armistice at Cassibile, passing through Genoa and La Spezia on the way. Here, rumours of an invasion of Italy were in the air, but Tufty Mann, together with other prisoners of war, was still in the middle of German soldiers and officers in a camp near Chioggia. Escaping all the checks, one day he visited Venice because, as he says in his diary, "Rumours were falling thick and fast about our ears – that the British Navy was expected in Venice that morning! (Just to show how rumours became distorted!)." On the way back to Chioggia, he saw a violent raid against the town, so his plan to try to escape by boat to Ancona failed, and he had to go back to the port and the mainland, asking for help in a farm. In his diary Tufty Mann says: "We knocked up the family who had given us food previously when we worked on the farm. Having no male in the household it took them over ten minutes to pluck up courage to open the door. When they did so, this was the beginning of incredible kindness from people so poor, peasants who had so little but gave all. We were taken inside and within ten minutes were drinking very acceptable hot coffee and having a lightly boiled egg which had been cooked by being placed on the ashes of the fire. After a long complicated explanation of what had happened we were glad to doss down in the stable after such an exhausting day. This was Saturday, three days after the Armistice."

(PHOTO OF CAVARZERE1)

So, this is the beginning of the story of Tufty Mann who, together with a Durban railwayman, spent 20 months evading the Germans in the northeast of Italy.

(PHOTO OF MAP)

By day they lived in a pigsty, hiding behind a false wall; sometimes they hid in reeds, freezing. By night, he was taught Italian, living on polenta and beans. He wrote his diary in those slim notebooks used by Elementary School kids under the Mussolini regime.

(see NOTEBOOKS: 3 photos + Photo of Tufty Mann)

Tufty Mann smoked homemade cigarettes, made of whatever he could scrounge from the countryside, and caught malaria near the Po River. He was eventually rescued by Popski's Army, an international band of Allied adventurers. After the war, he played 19 cricket tests for South Africa, touring England in 1947 and 1951. He could have played many more, but died in 1952, aged 32. In his will, Mann bequeathed £200 each to Angelina Armoroli and Cesare Zagato, the Italians who took him in when he was in the run.

(see PHOTO of ARTICLE of bequest)

Angelina named her daughter Normanna, after Norman. Normanna's son, Alberto, is a friend of Chris and Julia's son, Luke. Both Alberto and Luke live in London and are college friends.

(PHOTO OF FRONTISPICE of manuscript)

Mann's story is interesting from a number different angles, with various layers of possible literary text involved: a diary, an unpublished autobiographical novel and, finally, there is a published poem written by his son, Chris Mann, after his visit to the actual spot of his father's hiding place. The poem, published in his book *Heartlands* (2002), is called 'A Field in Italy' and concerns both Mann's actual visit, with the whole family, to Cavarzere and a particular interpretation of memory through the invocation of shadows (or shades) in a landscape. I would like to remember here, as a kind of final observation, the thoughts of Walter Benjamin when he talks about digging and remembering. He says that whoever tries to get closer to his or her hidden past must dig according to a plan. And, in digging, he or she must not be mistaken in thinking that the most important thing is to produce a precise list of found objects. He or she must also remember the exact place where antiquities were lodged. So, memories do not have to be founded on references but they have

to point exactly in the place where the researcher has found them. (Memories and shades will probably be the very topic of Chris Mann's paper on Saturday morning, so I won't reveal the content of his train of thoughts and quotations.) Borrowing some details from his research, it will be enough here to say that the shades, to apply a neuro-cognitive model of understanding, need not be restricted to the biological lineage of an individual nor are they ghostly phantoms that have a separate, perceivable existence independent of an individual's mind-brain. The shades, by this definition, are "...episodic memories of other people which, inhabiting the interior life of an individual, contribute to that individual's personal and socio-cultural identity." Recent discoveries show that our personal identity is closely linked with recurrent significant memories of other people. In short, we define who we are by our relationship to our shades. They are the kind of shades that you might find in the poetry of well-known poets such as Homer, Virgil and Dante. Possibly, they include a literary guide in the form of Virgil, or a spiritual guide in the shape of Beatrice, and all the possible presences coming both from the African concept of ancestral shades and the original Catholic doctrine when it brings together the whole company of believers, the living and the dead. This particular form of syncretism reconciles all the imagined, dreamed of presences Mann talks about in his poem and helps him (and us) to fill the gaps of history and the pain of individual and emotional lacunae for the re-construction of a distracted subconscious:

I'm standing in a field in Italy.
A hot summer's day.
Crows. Tractors.
Poplars lining in a river.
Clods and stubble at my feet.

The trees are as in his diary.
The gravel farm road.
The narrow canals.
The soft quick plop of frogs
arrowing into a ditch.

I'm standing near Venice
with people in a field.
The sky is cloudless
as blue as Giotto's
frescoed inside a dome...

Ma tanti anni fa, sai'.
Signora Ferro's beside me.
'The barn was here,' she says.
'Or maybe closer to the trees.
It's all so long ago.'

My Italian is rough and slow.
Her dialect's rapid.
Our talk leads to guesses.
Confusion. Laughter.
Scraps of knowing. Then gaps...

The memory shallows. Fades.
I hear *Signora* Ferro talking,
far off, in swirls of words.
Stocky. Black-haired. Resolute.
A handbag over one arm...

People keep leaving each other,
the words in Zulu put it.
Humans keep missing others.
Dangling raw ends.
Loneliness. Suspicion. Gaps.

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this article is Guy Butler, Chris Mann and Memory. Details and texts of poetry, but also fragments of letters, drawings, notebooks, images, photos and a more general visual iconography will be used to show the way in which Butler and Mann had something important in common: War and Italy. Guy Butler was a part of WW2 in Italy, whereas Chris Mann indirectly experienced the WW2 conflict in our country. Their experience has been indelibly recorded both in their personal memories and in their writings: poems, diaries and prose pieces.

KEY WORDS: South African Poetry – Guy Butler – Chris Mann – World War II – Italy

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His major poetry collections are: *Nel vortice* (1999); *XX poesie* (2007); *Driftings and Wrecks* (2010); *24 Selected Poems* (2014), and *Riding the Storm* (2016).

FOTO da allegare:

1. Neutrality
2. Cartoon
3. Drawing by Butler
4. Photo of Cavarzere1
5. Photo of Map
6. Photos of Notebooks: 3 foto
7. Photo of article in Sud Africa del lascito Mann
8. Photo of Frontispice of manuscript of Tufty Mann