

# The Poetry of Guy Butler

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. . . give us what we need:  
No, not Time at all  
Nor all Eternity,  
But simply one split-second  
Outside, beyond the Fall.

(“To a Statue of the Virgin” 1947)

## I

Guy Butler, born in Cradock on 21 January 1918, was a serious poet. Nearly a third of his poems are about death or loss, and many of the rest about parting failure, or difficult self-denial. His poetry is generally thoughtful and responsible to a deep religious vision. Of the ninety poems published between 1939 and 1979 the finest are those written between 1943 and 1963, from “Syrian Spring” to “Sweetwater.” The best poems cluster like moons round “On First Seeing Florence,” which is a major poem seldom given its rightful attention.

Not all of Butler’s poems have the same power or success. His best work, however, tells a story of human difficulty finding strength in elusive certainties. In 1968, in what was to be a radio broadcast, but which was subsequently scrapped or mislaid,<sup>1</sup> Butler, Clouts and I were each to read a poem we thought was characteristic of our work and then have a general discussion of poetry. What emerged from this was the strong impression of Clouts as a poet given over to process, or becoming, where “everything is first” (Clouts 1966, 18) and subject to Heraclitean change. Butler emerged as a poet of essence or being. It shows how careful one has to be with terminology because Butler is far from being a rigid essentialist. The story

his poetry tells is that if there are certainties, their credibility depends in large measure on personal belief, since nothing is fixed or certain in this world ridden by time, change and death.

Poetry is a sort of autobiography: its driving force lies in the Protean masking and unmasking of the self. Butler's early poetry is strong, intellectual and romantic, showing a self with an edge of youthful arrogance. Later poems are neither so sure of themselves nor so neat. But nothing is quite as clear as it is when you are young:

If you have a feeling for the past, you have the assurance that the chaos or excitements that occur in the present will be integrated, composed and ultimately reconciled in that inevitable landscape. But if you are future-orientated, the beautiful composition breaks up as it reaches you, or you break it; and you never get into it; it is always fragmenting and falling apart.

(Butler 1977, 59)

In the first poems you see a healthy young barbarian who has come into a rich inheritance of culture and language, yet who is not over-awed by it nor averse to exploiting its conceits:

Live through the body. Let the sense  
Receive uncensored the naked second.

("Poem," 1939)

In the later poems you find less of that certainty and arrogance. The poems often centre on isolated figures like Wordsworth's solitaries – Livingstone, Uncle Danby, the couple on Swaershoek Pass. Sometimes they are about older people who sense that silence or stillness may be the only appropriate response to existence, as in "Near Hout Bay" (1970). On the whole, these solitaries sharpen the problem of belonging: ". . . the difficulty of *being there* – in full human substance – in a place, in a moment . . . a fundamental theme for the white South African poet" (Strauss 1978, 31).

## II

"Poem" (1939) is a Lawrentian injunction to enjoy love and "Live through the body." Love is the primal experience, albeit one which teaches us how little we know about the flesh. The fire and ice of passion are sufficient to demonstrate the futility of reason unless it is in the service of passion:

For what is the use of will and brain  
 But to serve the red, red heart?

Yet the paradox of the poem is that will and brain are much in evidence and necessary for the shaping of the poem, for its orderliness and formality.

At twenty-one anything can lead to a love poem, even coal. "Coal" (1939) compares favourably with Wilfred Owen's similar poem, though Owen's poem is ironic and bitter, while Butler's is not because as yet he had not been sucked into the fighting. His poem uses coal as a symbol of passion, the burning fire of love. Evolution and geology conspire together to allow the "Sun's warmth stored a million years ago" to burn now sacramentally for "us," the lovers. That "she" is drying her hair in front of the fire is a fine erotic detail: there is something of ancient female casualness about her passion, a sense of ease in the presence of passion. The point is that these lovers, who are at the top of the evolutionary scale, nevertheless have passion or sexuality in common with the lower orders and seem to have abandoned language for silence and gesture, as though reverting down the scale again.

Like the previous two poems, "Servant Girl" (1939) is sensually rich. It invites comparison with "The Solitary Reaper," though Butler's poem is imagist and impressionist in its brevity and brilliance. The problem in the poem is not why a Fingo girl should be washing a white girl's cretonne frock in a river, but how the Fingo girl's untaught singing comes to be more significant than any mere song the poet can make about her. The servant girl is more in tune with sky, water, rock and swallows than the observing poet ever could be. The poem is the more brilliant for its tautness, and for the irony that spills over from his "taut tongue."

Up to this point Europe had made its presence felt in Butler's Africa mostly through Romantic poetry, through the lenses it offered to would-be local "makers" (to use Butler's term). But in "Karoo Town 1939" (1939) Europe makes a demand of a different kind, no longer cultural or civilizing, but primitive and dangerous. The subject of the poem is a Second World War recruiting drive in Cradock. It takes the ritual form of a parade, as though Dionysus himself had suddenly reappeared as the six-foot tall drummer appropriately wearing "a leopard skin." The situation is Conradian and worthy of Costaguana. Why call for volunteers in a place where

the market price of wool  
 Comes second only to the acts of God?

Why intrude at all on a

region of thunderstorms and drought,  
Under an agate sky?

But Europe, now at war,

asserts  
Her infallible remote control,  
Demands decisions

These decisions will break human lives, divide, bring death. In a sense it signals the end of paradise, the end of unitary consciousness. Which is perhaps why the poem needs to predict the ultimate unassailability of Africa, that in the end control will return to the uncontrollable. For nature itself is indestructible, and no matter what Europe asserts it cannot

shake the rockstill shadows of the hills  
Obeying remote instructions from the sun alone.

The poem is what Van der Mescht calls “a celebration of permanence” (1981). The working out is a little laconic, perhaps not taking us further than a presentation of incongruities. But the drama is as vivid as, say, that of Plomer’s “The Devil Dancers.” What we have here in the poem is essentially what Butler formulated in 1962 as the European–African encounter:

We cannot predict what the European–African encounter will produce; but we are in the extraordinarily exciting position of being agents in that encounter; and we can consciously make the best of it. The conditions for the emergence of a new art – really new – seem to me to be right.

First, in Africa, a vast world of new shapes and sense data, for the most part unhackneyed, presents itself to the European sensibility; and the awakened African, already familiar with them, sees them as if for the first time. Europe presents to Africa, and Africa to Europe, the materials and sensibilities of each continent.

(Butler 1964, 7–8)

What we catch in these early poems is a glimpse into the alchemy of Butler’s poetry. There is, first of all, the enduring influence of Nature, which etched its forms into the young boy’s soul, as it did for the young Wordsworth.<sup>2</sup> Then there is the strong yet absurd quality of European adaptation to Africa, the incongruity of European sensibility finding a home and accommodation

for language in a place of extremes like the Karoo. This leads into the common theme of many white South African poets – the problem of how to belong, how to be in Africa. Twenty years later the challenge of belonging becomes the problem of how to relinquish that tenuous hold with faith and dignity.

### III

During the war Butler produced a group of fine poems with a strong sense of craftsmanship and a care for language. “Common Dawn” (1940) is a lonely sentry’s perception of the deep stupidity of war when both sides in the fight are united by the dawn, a “sweet and subtle commonplace.” The poem is as quiet and gently persistent as the dawn itself. “Bomb Casualty” (1942) presents its violence with the compression or an Elizabethan conceit of death and ravishment. This neatness is a kind of protection against feeling, but it also shows the young poet satisfied that the conceit has exhausted, with twelve sharply cut lines, an attitude to violent death. However, the compression makes it more difficult to feel the poet’s attitude to the experience. This is only to observe that finding form to match feeling is difficult and part of a poet’s growth.

“Mirage” (1944) is a poem peculiarly laconic about its intentions, and its working out obscures its meaning. “Air Raid Before Dawn” (1944), in contrast, releases meaning more directly through the framing device of the narrative situation. A frightening air raid is followed by inertia in the poet and his fellow soldiers: instead of moving on they stare at the timeless scene of Italian peasants reaping corn, at poppies and girls growing as though war has not happened or was an irrelevance. The effect is one of disembodiment or alienation, because the watching soldiers feel

like ghosts at a window pane  
Who watch the hearth, but remain unknown.

The real drama underlying the casual scene is in the paradox of purpose: Europe’s remote political control loses out to Italy’s ancient peasant rhythms and rituals. The ancient wisdom of the peasants puts war into perspective, for nature persists and it is with nature, after all, that man must make his true accommodation. “Syrian Spring” (1934) makes just such an equation: the singing peasants who come to do their spring ploughing “change my heart,” and thaw the “winter grip of my possessive love” – though in this poem, “heart” and “love” are not really defined or clarified. One of the most

moving and beautifully constructed of these war lyrics is “The Parting” (1944). A young man is going off to war and may well not return. The excited, unsure son and the stoical father are trying to stave off the pain of parting, trying not to talk about the real issue, which is their mutual feelings of love. So the poem presents a drama of their arrival at night at the railway station, past

Black-gloved bluegums mourning under the moon.  
A mongrel yowling in the cinder-yard.

The train itself with its “couplings,” and the telephone wires with their unheard messages, all help define the sense of helplessness with which human beings choose their unlikely theatres for personal drama, in this case a

White, concrete platform.

What is going on is a psychic exchange: at the start of the poem two nightjars are singing when the father and son leave the farm. By the end of the poem, the two nightjars are caged in the young man’s heart. The alchemy of this poem is very fine: it suggests, in a general way, that Butler’s best poems derive their strength from his sure instinct for the dramatic. Butler’s lyric poetry attained celebrity in “Cape Coloured Batman” (1945), a poem energized by the comic-pathetic diversity of the batman’s origins, by his being both everything and ridiculously nothing. The poem is something of an anthology piece, more important for its brilliant and casual evocation of the batman’s extraordinary history than for its penetration of the man himself. Nelson cannot live up to the poet’s perception of him: apart from being drunk, he is congenitally and thus ironically unconscious of his own complexity. But the gifts of clarity, compression and brilliant imagery manifested in “Cape Coloured Batman” were waiting for a major formulation which came with “On First Seeing Florence” (begun 1945, finished 1968). This poem, and “Giotto’s Campanile” (1945) are part of a longer poem “of some three thousand lines,”<sup>3</sup> which was unfinished. “On First Seeing Florence” formalized and finalized a vision that up to now had only been hinted at, and of which only fragments had been caught.

## IV

“On First Seeing Florence” is a major symphonic poem. It stands at the watershed between naïve discovery and the collected mapping and ordering

of experience. As Butler acknowledges in his introductory note to the *New Coin* edition (1968), he had become a Wordsworthian in his need for both lyric and philosophic statement. The main thrust of the poem is the search for Being, for a sense of permanence or absolute value. It comes in such a flash that even the physical permanence of Florence itself seems illusory. The working out of how or why this should be so takes, of course, more than a flash, for Butler is up against the key question for all poetry – how to sustain freshness of vision through an extended structure. That the poem is structured round antinomies is perhaps obvious; nevertheless they are the effective agents in the intellectual and moral vision of the poem: simplicity, complexity; Cradock, Florence; material, spiritual; Catholicism, Communism; modernity, antiquity; death and disorder; spiritual reawakening. The accumulative effect of the poem depends on the fact that the enabling spot of time reveals the sudden presence of a recollected archetype, like finding the Beatrice of your dreams standing before you in the flesh, or like Yeats in “Among School Children,” who sees Helen stand before him “as a living child.” Like “The Waste Land,” this poem suggests there are two kinds of death, and the poem lifts itself towards a new sense of life by juxtaposing the flow of personal and national history with an older cultural and spiritual history.

However, the poem gets its strength not from ideas but from dramatic autobiography, the lyric ‘I’ telling its story. In the heat-stricken Karoo the young myth-loving boy had heard

those great geese clamour over Rome

The geese, like swallows and like human beings, are citizens of two worlds. The poem finally asserts that Europe and Africa are really one because the whole world is really one. But how is this achieved?

It is dawn. After a bloody advance on Florence, the guns still raging, the young soldier is about to get his first glimpse of one of the most integrated cities of Europe, its Renaissance sculpture, painting and architecture still intact, and he recalls that Florence is also the city of the arch-visionary and exile, Dante. If we were simply asked to accept as fact the wonder of Florence the poem would not work. It does work because the “spot of time,” Florence itself, is projected forward from past memory with Platonic certainty. Section II of the poem describes these forms which are remembered in the heightened moment of tranquility when the mists clear to reveal the actual city lying at the poet’s feet. A continent’s length away, in the Karoo, the young boy had caught glimpses of a transcendent reality by looking at reproductions in books of the artifacts of Michelangelo, and had

seen a romantic “watercolour landscape / by old great-uncle John” of Florence itself. He recalls that as a boy he did not understand how to resolve the conflict between “art” and “the Bible,” between romantic self-gratification and selfless service to God, for the Butler family had intimidating Quaker convictions. Art gave him visions of a richly sensuous world, and these, though appealing, made the boy uneasy and prompted him to ask

Was a hunger to see the world  
one of the deadly sins?

The poem resolves this youthful antinomy, for poetry is not opposed to morality. Poetry itself has the dimensions of religious experience and justifies the ways of a sensual son to a stern, moral father. After all, the Renaissance, which combined the sacred and the profane, managed to transcend just such antinomies.

But now it is dawn. The young soldier is about to confront the reality where the art–morality dispute rages in an equally complex form. Art and God were indeed reconciled in the work of Dante: he did not “live through the body,” but through an “old heroic credo of restraint.” This is the same sense of restraint that is found emerging from the temptations presented in the poem “Keeping a Distance” (1957). Restraint is necessary if art is to transcend yet incorporate the human life.

But now the poem takes a subtle turn, for the poet sees that what he has learned of war and suffering was prefigured in his boyhood:

seeing a cobra squirm, crushed by a boulder;  
watching a black face wince – the knowledge came  
of stark exposure and raggedness of heart  
which neither nature, God nor art,  
could hide or warm.

The child is “father of the Man” and so a recollection of the radical innocence of childhood coincides with the emergence of Florence through the smoke and mist of dawn. The poet knows that something was lost with growing up:

Child, unaware your universe was ending,  
you still could be the thing you saw or heard

Yet this spot of time is re-integrative. For a moment, the poet can become what he sees and hears. The gift of being which was lost is restored. He



forces open his eyelids and sees, instead of the Karoo's "long dirt roads naked of legend," the city itself

float flaming in this legendary light  
that inundates the valley and the mind.

The city seems to rise

ringing and singing through space and time, through eyes  
and skies, till in the first sun's level light  
man, stone and tree stand stripped of all disguise  
and seer and seen fuse in the arc of sight.

The experience is complex, but its meaning is clear: no matter how nugatory the role of the young actor, he must move

with joy through every scene and act  
as heir to that compassion and control

He will then "find dimensions" which he thought he lacked.

The poet is vividly aware that he is near Dante's Heaven where "what is willed is possible,"<sup>4</sup> where unity of being is a possibility. In this state of grace you do not act but consent to be acted upon; you do not will epiphanies or poems, you submit to them. If a swallow never stops to question "what directs its ways," man too can accept "his determined end," and feel with Hamlet that "the readiness is all."

The experience has been strong and quick and it is clear we cannot live in or with this kind of heightened consciousness for long. So the poet slips again into "the normal / sense of time and being":

lost and gone  
is joy's pure decantation  
into personal song,  
and the cry of the tongue as the heart  
is frozen into stone.

Recalling the recent funeral of a partisan, he rehearses a debate about the meaning of human life in terms of the relative merits of Christianity and Dialectical Materialism. The poem comes unstuck here because it descends into clichés, but it pulls itself together again in Section XVIII expressing a sense of wonder at the intensity of human vision, and amazement that a poem, mere words, can contain or even hint at such experience. If you are

open, meaning descends, appears, manifests itself from God-knows-where, and it is redemptive and recreative, for it shows how the life of man could be lived and how poetry could be written. The task of poetry, as of life itself, remains:

to shatter the nervous light of thought,  
to challenge its origin, to change its end.

(XVI)

Forever this wonder will inhabit me:  
That mortal eyesight can embrace, transmute  
Landscape and city, sky, tower, tree

To something so absolved, so absolute.

(XVIII)

## V

Poetry is a high calling and we have in “On First Seeing Florence” the real measure of what Butler is after in poetry: presenting discovery as discovery. However, it was such a powerful discovery that much of the subsequent poetry appears to be an echo of the original. After this the poems begin to take on a false certainty, the taken-for-granted quality of ideology. Yet the poems close to this one still have much of its power and energy: “Elegy” (1944), “Stranger to Europe” (1945), “To a Statue of the Virgin” (1947), “Livingstone Crosses Africa” (1953), “Home Thoughts” (1953), and “Myths” (1953). In its way “Myths” is a reversal of the process that was taking place in “On First Seeing Florence,” for this poem is centred on the notion that myths may take on an African incarnation. “Myths” finishes on the Swaershoek Pass with a sad and intensely beautiful realization of everything the “Cape Coloured Batsman” said with its more conscious and less successful irony. Of the two wretched of the earth, huddled around their fire on a winter dusk, Butler says:

It seemed that in an empty hell  
Of darkness, cold and hunger,  
I had stumbled on Eurydice, ragged, deaf forever,  
Orpheus playing to beasts that would or could not hear,  
Both eternally lost to news or rumours of spring.

“Livingstone Crosses Africa” raises a difficult problem, for while Butler discovered with some excitement that he could make poetry by juxtaposing

two different frames of reference<sup>5</sup> like Greek myth and Karoo reality, the problem consequent on this discovery of the “African encounter” was to maintain it with significance.

A powerful trend in modern poetry has been the conscious making of myth or mythology.<sup>6</sup> Myth is a way of locating meaning in a world constantly robbed of its securities and authenticity. Butler, like Yeats, strove at this time to sustain a mythology, for “Deeds of the great possess the power of myth.” But our own history in Africa has been too brief and perhaps not all that great. Similarly, in his plays Butler found equivalents in local history to Yeats’s Aengus, Fergus, and Cuchulain. Here his figures are more truly rooted in history, which is not the same thing as myth. His great man may be great, but he is not strictly a myth, and thus lacks the energizing power of myth. However, the admiration of Livingstone reveals an insistent base line that says we are somehow stranded, alienated in Africa, that there is a gap “that separates us all.” This is the uncomfortable realization corroding heroism. Ascribing significance to Livingstone – dramatic, courageous, resourceful, stoical explorer that he was – fails in its essential bid. Livingstone is tainted with history and politics, too well documented to be an example of how to cope with the inner journeys of the Africa of the mind.

## VI

Like Yeats, Butler was a better poet than dramatist, though he remained a superb raconteur. For both writers, the engagement with drama had a loosening-up effect on poetic discourse by moving it towards the rhythms and diction of living speech. The long-term effect of this encounter is to be seen in a poem like “Sweetwater” (1963), where Uncle Danby, stranded in the flux of history, carries more poignancy and truthfulness than Livingstone ever could. It is a fine poem about Holy Communion at the Angry River. The final lines convey the sense of irredeemable loss:

He’s dead now, and I am left  
bereft, wondering  
to what stream I could take whom  
and kneel like that, and say:  
Taste how sweet it is.

The poem expresses complex regret that such gestures of being part of Africa, such forgiveness, and such feeling of belonging should now be lost. And this palpable loss speaks to our time, for the gesture of belonging has

been corroded by guilt and the indefensibles of South African politics. What Butler seemed to be insisting on is that there is a sacramental bond between word and flesh. In the most recent poems this bond was re-examined in moments of personal history recollected in what was left to South Africans of tranquillity.

The most recent poems, “Near Houtbay” (1970), “The Divine Underground” (1972) and “Epitaph for a Poet” (1977) show Butler moving towards silence and the bitter irony of Yeats’s “desolation of reality.” The discursive and lyrical styles finally drifted apart and left an emptiness which implicates his work into a larger field of consciousness. For Butler knew clearly that if art is only for itself then it is for nothing. Sometimes he hints at the fundamental absurdity of poetry and the tortured gestures of the poet’s attempts to find and fix meaning. In “Epitaph for a Poet” he tells of how the poet strove far into the night, searching for

Rhymes of the desperate word,  
Absurd  
As the flounderings of a beheaded bird.

## VII

To say that these last poems veer towards silence is to say that as a poet he did not relish entering the public debate, adding noise to noise, rhetoric to rhetoric. His old uncles (like Uncle Danby) who lived up in the Karoo were silent men, who listened more than they talked. There is thus another positive meaning to silence, stillness: “Be still, and know that I am God.” Butler says that when you listen to the silence of a Quaker meeting, you hear. At the sea, if you sit still, you hear “the presence.” Through stillness you hear and know – that is the real meaning of stillness.<sup>7</sup>

It is possible to hear the creative African silence. In “Elegy II” (1960) two young boys ride out: the sound is of the leather saddles creaking, hooves on the ground or splashing in the water. Then they stop and listen, and hear a clapper lark:

wave on wave  
Of air she swam oblivious of the men,  
The listening and the deaf, earth-bound below,  
Till with a long sad whistle for amen  
She dropped to the stone-still scrub.  
With a vengeance now  
On every sense the stinging stillness tingled,  
Cast bronze, cut stone, we stood.

Years later in Italy, at the funeral of this same friend, the poet hears a European lark sing. It takes him back to the pain of the original moment when they were alive together:

Why does it hurt to hear a darkling lark  
Carol as she climbs?

The answer to the question is, perhaps, that this wordless song is more articulate than any words can be because it is stamped with the meaning of stillness, the wholeness of things beyond words that is forever intruding and forever slipping out of our grasp.

Butler was a prodigious inventor and user of verse forms, perhaps not as much as Sydney Clouts, whose every poem seems to engender a new form: nevertheless there is a great range of verse forms in his poetry: free and stanzaic and conversational. The poems themselves range from light verse to metaphysical meditation. But the best poems are those with a deeply meditative force. Perhaps this is so because poetry is a serious and central human undertaking. Poets are not found in the Pentagon, nor are they asked to speak in parliament. Yet somehow poets do remain hidden legislators, because they listen in the stillness beyond words to the deepest source of all:

Perhaps that moment which refused so firmly  
to be a turning point  
should be the only point  
round which my life should turn;  
perhaps God is neither old nor young;  
in depth or in height. He simply is,  
and we,  
when we accept Him simply, are.

(“Mountain,” 1962)

Butler died in Grahamstown on 26 April, 2001.

#### NOTES

1. This was arranged by Richard Buncher in the Grahamstown studio of the SABC, but the tape was probably scrapped from the archives, according to Audrey Ryan.
2. See Guy Butler, *Karoo Morning*.
3. Information supplied by Butler, November 1983.
4. Dante, *Hell*, Canto 5, ll. 22–24.
5. See Koestler (1970).
6. See Brooks (1939).
7. From a conversation with Butler, February 1984.

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