

Book review

David Kerr, *Tangled Tongues*. Hexham: Flambard Press, 2003. 64pp, price £7.

The alliterative title of David Kerr's recent collection of poems could be regarded as the first indication of a poet who pays a great deal of attention to the arresting power of carefully chosen imagery and symbols. Kerr has ransacked the inner resources of poetic diction and forms across cultures and climes to register, at times comical, and at several instances sobering impressions of a whole range of encounters, cultural, social, and political which have shaped his prodigious imagination. The verses in this collection bear eloquent testimonies to the nomadic life that Kerr has led 'teaching and running theatre companies in the UK, Malawi, Zambia and Botswana'.

The starting point of that voyage across cultures and climes begins with the first poem in the collection entitled "Memory on Request" (p.9). In his characteristically lucid introduction to the volume, leading Malawian poet and Kerr's former student and colleague in the English Department at Chancellor College, University of Malawi, Jack Mapanje observes about Carlisle – 'this border town' where Kerr was born:

I wanted to see this border town not only because David was my university teacher and close friend but also because he is a human rights activist who contributed to my release from political detention in Malawi. I have always loved borders and peripheries because they so often produce generous hearts. As I drove to Carlisle, childhood memory animated my friend; he pointed out the mountains he climbed, lakes rowed across, streets walked along, on the various return journeys he made to Cumbria during his many years of wandering.

"Memory on Request" replicates, in creative terms, Mapanje's critical encapsulation of Kerr's birthplace

...and how
that haven's loss hurled
me careening from fried-
bacon landlady or seedy joint
to rented bungalows around
the world... (p.9)

In his introduction, Mapanje confesses to being 'impressed by the sharp memory of the

poet in the academic', and the rest of the 64page collection remains a vivid confirmation of that impression.

In "Return of the Linguist" (p.30), Kerr in turn pays homage to "Malawi's only semanticist", Jack Mapanje, during his years of incarceration in Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda's gulag. Besides permitting minimal speculation, the Haiku-like form of "Return of the Linguist" – like "Tongues" (p.30) and "Tangles" (p.29) (and indeed a few other poems in the collection: "Baobabs" (p.12), "Cracked" (p.13), "Elemental" (p.22), etc.) – is written with an economy that is designed to expose the sudden visual impact which is the hallmark of the successful poetic image. Thus:

'Malawi's only semanticist' your letter self-scoffed.
Jokes aside, this place, with lost seams of gossip
And taboo-coated rhetoric lodged deep in fissures,
Needs your skills – wild pickaxing or delicate
Chiselling for fossilised signs.

It needs

The deftest rinsing in gallons of sweat to sieve
A single gem of meaning.

Written within the same framework of verbal economy and visual impact are "Tongues" and "Tangles". The two poems combine to give Kerr's collection its alliterative title and perhaps hold the key to the poet's ultimate concern in these verses. "Tangles", according to Kerr, is triggered/composed around '...a Sculpture Exhibition by Berlings Kaunda' – Malawi's famous sculptor and academic, and another former colleague of Kerr's in the Department of Fine and Performing Arts at Chancellor College, University of Malawi. It is the visual image of another (same?) piece of sculpture by Kaunda that provides the front-cover design of *Tangled Tongues*. In three cryptic stanzas "Tangles" describes a range of "tangles" – two to be precise – "their tangles" and "your tangles," and it is probably not an accident that their and your are placed strategically in the poem and italicised for maximum impact. Thus, while "their tangles" consists of, among other things, "the vine convolutions dangling poisoned fruits" leading through "lacerating threats" to "fangled despair" – "your tangles", on the other hand,

Glisten with the sanity of sunbeams,
they luxuriate, probe memories, sanctify,
quiver with carnal winds, shoot sap into roots,
entwine and germinate our dreams.

Ultimately, when allowed to “fructify”, “*your tangles help us evade theirs.*” (original italics).

The same image of ‘fructification’ is carried into “Tongues”, as we are told:

The old Xhosa woman’s bliss is
To allow her mouth *free play* (p.30, my emphasis)

Sandwiched between “Tangles” and “Tongues” is the equally Haiku-like “Return of the Linguist” (pp.30-31). That Kerr has chosen the Haiku – a form that has traditionally dealt with images of the natural world and one which was admired by modernists – particularly imagist poets as a model of clarity and precision of expression, is, as I have reiterated above, probably not an accident. By placing emphasis on free play in “Tongues” – the “free play” through which the Xhosa woman allows her mouth
to bunch its stops, trills
and a delicately pursed, labial
click....

Kerr is reiterating a pertinent issue in our contemporary existence. In his paradigmatic *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms* (1993), the Kenyan writer and activist, Ngugi wa Thiong’o describes the major dilemma that Kerr’s versification upholds:

... How can we kill
a tongue in which, all day,
the mouth blows kisses?

Finally, as Mapanje observes further in his introduction to the volume, ‘the poems in this selection reflect a rich variety of themes and forms, ranging from the conventional sonnet, ballad and haiku to experimental poems, which derive to some extent from African traditions of orality’.

This review has emphasised just one vital aspect of that rich variety.

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