by Colin Gardner

A CONVERSATION WITH A PILGRIM

PILGRIMAGE TO DIAS CROSS:
a Narrative Poem
by Guy Butler
David Philip 1987

Guy Butler is an important South African poet. His importance lies partly in the fact that he has seldom been content with merely personal themes (not that the personal is necessarily of minor significance in poetry); he has constantly tried to explore the implications — the significance, the tensions, the agony but also the occasional partial joy — of being a particular type of South African, living and writing at a peculiarly problematic period in this country's complex history.

As the years have passed and the situation in the country has evolved, Butler's poetry has changed. It has lost none of its seriousness, vividness and fluency, but it has become, some of it, more urgent and more political. **Pilgrimage to Dias Cross** is a longish poem (in sixteen sections) set in motion by anxious meditation on some aspects of that event which was last year the subject of a rather half-hearted celebration. The poet is distressed that certain people and certain attitudes of mind are driving towards even greater turmoil the land that (for better or worse) was first officially touched by European people when Dias planted his stone cross at Kwaai Hoek in 1488.

The first brief section of the poem is worth quoting in full:

Lightning flickers in sheets across our frontiers;
raucous atmospherics laugh at the lies in our news.

I switch off, angry, ashamed. I think it better to roam
where breakers totter and crumble late in the afternoon.

There I can howl like a dog, or falling to my knees
invoke the wrath of God on racial idolatries.

How many must die each day, choked like Laocoön,
lassooed by this devious dream, whose coils roll on,
and on?

Cry! What shall I cry? Shall I call up the restless dead
to purge our days of the nightmare these politicos
have made?

How can an ageing man with glimmerings of belief
get rid of his futile fury, his embitterment of grief?

Hoping against all hope, raging against my rage,
I take a deep breath, and laugh. I shall go on pilgrimage.
(p. 11)

One is struck by the authenticity of the emotion and by the characteristic white South African's feeling of impotence; these impressions are reinforced by the echoes of Isaiah's tragic prophecy. Who are the politicos? Are they simply the representatives of the ruling power, or are they all those who have taken a political lead? The suggestion of a pilgrimage is deliberately surprising and perhaps even shocking. The thought is rich with literary and historical associations, however: Chaucer introduced the word and the idea, also with a partly disturbing and partly humorous effect, early on in his Prologue to the **Canterbury Tales.** But the notion of a pilgrimage doesn't really need either history or literature to justify it: it is a journey which is physical but also mental and spiritual, a collecting together and development of thoughts and intuitions, a directed voyage which will give an impetus to living and to action.

The "ageing speaker" (whom it is difficult not to associate with the poet himself) brings together not only thoughts but

people, or rather the ghosts of people — certain significant South Africans who have lived or died within a few kilometres of the Dias cross (Butler has always been concerned about history, particularly the history of the eastern Cape); Boesak the Khoikhoi chief, Jeremiah Goldswain the 1820 settler, Karel Landman the Trek leader, Nongqause the Xhosa woman prophet, and James Butler the poet's grandfather. The narrator summons these figures or shades, representative and symbolic of some of the country's unhappy and warring groups, in a painful attempt to open up the possibility of discussion, analysis, reconciliation. The issues of the past — for example,

In jerky shade they ease
(using white mimosa thorns for spikes)
the fluid from each other's blistered feet.
Two hundred miles. A trial. Prison.
A year before some beggarly redress. (p. 22) —

are interwoven with the issues of the present —

In hiding from the Special Branch
a great-grandson prophesies
a new Makandla, Nelson Mandela.

After ninety days' detention
a girl in faded denims shouts again,
"Bread and justice for the blacks!" (p. 23)

The ghosts, having briefly told their stories and meditated on the past and the present, move on with the narrator towards a midnight encounter. It is a dark and testing scene, one which challenges individuals and seems to drain them of their distinctive (and often alienating) histories:

On the highest coastal hill
in a gap in the shaken trees, we pause.
There is no moon. Still as the dead we stare.

Then we plunge through slipping sands,
passing between dim gleaming dunes,
under a sky thick with the noise of the sea.

In no-man's-land
no man is himself,
histories are lost.

Voices — whose voices? —
heard, guessed at,
anonymous. (p. 37)

This is near the heart of the dream-like pilgrimage. As the climactic moment approaches, divisive pasts are burned and purged away:

In the moment of spiritual need,
in the elemental cold,
feed the flame with the flotsam of history.
Splintered oarblade; rotten quiver;
Smashed musket-stock; wormy wagon-spoke;
leg of a spindleback chair —
all serve as fuel as well
as driftwood brought down from inland
in summer's turmoil of waters. (p. 41)

The high point of the experience is evoked powerfully:

Midnight.
The blanket of silent air and stars
cannot console or still the restless surfaces.
On the eastern horizon
a paling of some stars, and then,
bit by bit, the moon: a white half-wafer,
mysterious in its incompleteness
mysteriously suspended over
the simmering chalice of the sea.

And there, beside his pillar of stone
the swarthy discoverer stands. (p. 42)

At this moment suggestive of holy communion, it is Dias whom they meet. He speaks, telling his story, of hope, of frustration, of doubt. Then — encompassing the reader in their musings — they all consider the present and the future. What can individuals do (the narrator asks), those who want a humane and harmonious society, on a shore where human sounds are silenced by the sea, in a situation where human wills seem silenced by history? Section 13, which I quote in full, represents in several ways the core of the poem's human and social exploration:

We know the sounds of the air
and the roar of the sea
obliterate instinctive cries,
reasoning voices, prayers, curses, songs.
Over sea, sky, land,
the elements raise their arcane cries
which none can understand.
Among such acts and cries
we speak and act.
Sometimes a word outwits the cosmic noise,
sometimes by cunning or love
an action will flash into freedom,
feeling find form in song.

In the service of gods or systems
we forge our chains of command,
we submit and are bound by them.

They turn into scaling ladders:
we climb them, victors,
and fall through the rotten rungs.

All bloods and tongues
have rules for promotion, demotion,
elevations and losses of status.

Systems decay and die.
Where the Medes and the Persians?
Where the house of Aviz?

New patterns emerge.
In anger, duty, need,
we give ourselves to the weaving

and are woven into the web.
There is no escaping this.
Is this all there is for us?

What single uniform
is fit enough for a man?
Can one garment gown a girl?

How long can we rest happy
in society's reach-me-downs,
a party's off-the-pegs?

No culture is large enough to contain
the fullness of being of those who comprise it.
History's noise seems endless, like the sea's.

We are the traffic on its surface,
the life that sweats and labours,
the singing voices on the shore.

The writing is alert and challenging. It also questions, and considers problems, that are familiar to many people. The

poet's sense that individuality should somehow seek scope, that people should not be content to be subsumed entirely in a particular party or cause, is reasonable, urgent, humane. His anxiety is the valid anxiety of the liberal.

And yet I think the poetry is circumscribed in its awareness — in a way that "liberalism" in some of its manifestations perhaps often is. The poet seems to see the individual's place in the universe in intensely pessimistic terms. One can sympathise with his sense that the sea is a hostile force; but is that the whole truth of the sea? The sea's roar may "obliterate instinctive cries/reasoning voices, prayers, curses, songs," but it has its own music too (as indeed certain passages in this poem, suggest); and it's worth remembering that T. S. Eliot, in **The Dry Salvages,** having acknowledged the timeless slow ferocity of the sea, was yet able to feel its rhythms as consonant with prayer, and to speak of

the sound of the sea bell's
Perpetual angelus.

And then history, and causes: is the poet, who would probably have no metaphysical problem about submission to God, right to assume that submission to a cause, or to some powerful historical force, is partly or largely a defeat, a degradation? Why should God and political or other causes be thought of as necessarily opposed to one another?

In anger, duty, need,
we give ourselves to the weaving

and are woven into the web.
There is no escaping this.
Is this all there is for us?

No, certainly it should not be *all* that there is for us. But why is there an assumption that being "woven into the web" is inevitably to be entrapped? After all, people who pursue causes, especially when they are noble causes, work closely and vitally with their fellows. In this respect religious and socio-political causes have a great deal in common and indeed often overlap. And why should one assume — as the poetry seems to — that a person is only authentically himself or herself when the self functions largely in isolation from others? Why shouldn't one be able at times to move with history — to become, then, a part of its "noise"?

The poem, facing what are felt to be the dilemmas and the constraints summed up in section 13, moves on (not inappropriately for a pilgrimage — narrative) into prayer — into a variety of prayers and hymns derived from several different South African traditions. There is then a last brief glimpse of the Dias figure, who throws out a challenge to the narrator and his ghosts (and to us):

You!
You are nowhere near your farthest east,
still have to double your Cape of Storms.
Speak! Hope for hearers!
Act! And pray for friends. (p. 51)

The poem concludes tentatively but partly joyfully:

I raise my voice and sing with them
rejoicing, for once at one with all
in the fragile constitution of a verse. (p. 53)

There is much in all this that is moving. But I find that I have to extend my criticism a little. The poet is unable to get beyond the notion that the individual, for all his or her imaginative grasp of historical conflicts and personalities, can only act as an individual; and so the poem ends rather thinly. "Pray": yes, certainly. But "Act!": how act? No coherent mode of acting is recommended. Little more than compassionate and prayerful spectatorship seems to be suggested. History, like the sea, is a noise; so there is no historical current upon which one can wholly or even partly ride. But human society is constantly being transformed by historical currents — though obviously some currents are far more creative than others, and all currents have to be ridden warily. These currents are of course made and moulded and sustained by human beings, but they also have inevitabilities of their own. If one spurns them, one is in danger of cutting oneself off from the very dynamics of human and social development.

It might perhaps be asked: am I rejecting prayer (in all the various meanings that that word may have)? No: I am saying that prayer needs to try to create a context in which positive and hopeful action is possible.

I offer my criticisms of this striking poem firmly but not (I hope) without humility. A poet who boldly confronts socio-political issues must expect to be taken up in partly socio-political terms. No doubt some readers of **Reality** will prefer Guy Butler's conclusion to my own. □

The text of the poem is accompanied by fine, memorable woodcuts and engravings by Cecil Skotnes.

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