

LIBERATING CRITICISM: LIBERATING FORM AND THOUGHT. A PRELIMINARY COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SHONA AND SWAHILI POETRY

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This article is a comparative study of the critiques of developments in Shona and Swahili poetry that began in 1970s Tanzania and 1980s Zimbabwe, after the introduction of regular patterns in Shona poetry (late 1950s) and of free verse in Swahili literature (late 1960s). These verse forms became the object of heated debate about the nature of ‘tradition’ and of ‘colonial’ innovation among scholars, intellectuals and poets. These debates went beyond notions of stylistic canons; rather, they focused on identity, as closely connected with tradition and the need for decolonization. The problem recognized in this paper is that this criticism became prescriptive, implying the risk of limiting verbal-artistic expression in terms of style and content. This article shows a continuity between these different contexts in relation to critical opposition to stylistic innovation and freedom of (expressing) thought. By comparing the poetry and philosophy of the Tanzanian poet Euphrase Kezilahabi and Zimbabwean poet Chirikure Chirikure, this paper problematizes the terms of these debates and proposes an inductive and aesthetic approach to texts that avoids prescriptivism.

Keywords: Swahili poetry, Shona poetry, comparative literature, criticism, African poetry

Introduction

According to Aiello, Gaudio, & Minerba (2020:313), the traditional form of Swahili poetry still prevails in literary competitions and newspapers to the present day. In realizing how this prevailing tendency has played an important role as a form of prescriptive criticism of Swahili poets, intellectuals, and sometimes even Swahilists, I decided to compare this situation with that of the Shona textual tradition, as prescriptive criticism, by definition, can limit the freedom of artists and poets and obstruct poetic experimentation or innovation. This article represents my first written engagement with Shona literature, a field that I have been exploring especially by comparing two poets, the Swahili Euphrase Kezilahabi and the Shona Chirikure Chirikure, about whom I am planning to write in the near future.

In this paper, I discuss and compare critical approaches to Shona and Swahili poems of the 1950s in relation to the issue of freedom in writing. In both literary contexts, literary criticism has contributed to prescriptivism in the sense that it has indiscriminately validated or, on the contrary, denied the status of poetic works. The aim of this paper is to problematize approaches to literature based on the concept of authenticity and point to the potential risks such approaches pose in limiting the pursuit of an author’s own style and possibilities of expression. Even if approaches that prioritize authenticity claim to preserve the richness of African heritages, in their attempt to prevent changes, they end up being, as Kezilahabi (1981:37, 1985:3573–58) argues, an assurance of the death of traditions. Debates on poetic form among Shona and

LIBERATING CRITICISM: LIBERATING FORM AND THOUGHT

Swahili intellectuals, poets, and scholars started in the 1970s and 1980s and are still ongoing.¹ Such debates arose especially in Kenya, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe, but also involved scholars based in Europe or in the United States. After fifty years, it is time to reconsider these debates about poetic form and their effects on poetry in each context. In Swahili literature, critics of free verse claimed that authentic Swahili poetry deployed regular, traditional patterns. Without this feature, poems were deemed imperfect and under the influence of colonial exposure to Western literature under the colonial regimes (see Kandoro 1978:42–43). The poets who wrote in free verse reacted to such accusations by claiming that free verse already existed in Bantu oral literature. By contrast, it is interesting to see how, in other Bantu literatures, debates over poetic form follow the opposite paradigm. In the case of Shona literature, criticism is directed against poetry in regular patterns, which was considered the influence of colonial cultures.

This article begins by drawing from issues raised by Barber (1995, 1999, 2007), Kezilahabi (1976), and Khamis (1994), who signal the weakness of African criticism and studies on African literature. Their work forms the basis of my own. In recent decades, studies of African literature have been dominated by extratextual approaches (postcolonial and cultural) that look at the text with all its elements as a direct reflection of its context, thus overlooking the aesthetics of literary works, which is the constitutive element of an artistic text. I think that we need a return to prioritizing the text and its aesthetics in literary studies, in agreement with the Swahilist Clarissa Vierke (2017), and also to highlight the aesthetic connection between different arts and genres, in agreement with the Swahilist Aaron Rosenberg (2011). This necessity has long been a priority in my scholarly research (Gaudioso 2010, 2013, 2014); in fact, I have proposed (Gaudioso 2017, 2019b, 2020b, 2021) a methodology of textual analysis based on aesthetics, and have applied this to poems and songs by focusing on the texts themselves, with the goal of going beyond certain categories (especially those pertaining to historical and cultural analysis). While, in this paper, I focus on the debate about and critical approaches to Shona and Swahili poems, the textual dimension and level of literary-aesthetic discourse play a relevant role in the analysis.² In the second and third sections, I describe the

¹ The debate on free verse in Swahili literature has been well described (see, for instance, Gaudioso 2019b:19–76, 2020b:1–8; Kezilahabi 1983; Mazrui 1992; Mulokozi 1975a; Mulokozi & Kahigi 1979). For this reason, in the second section of this paper, I will only summarize its main features. It is important to emphasize that there have been similar debates for other Bantu literatures, for example, in Zulu, between the two poets Vilakazi and Dhlomo (see Attwell 2002).

² Some interesting aspects that I could not discuss in the space of this article are the development of Shona and Swahili poetry in relation to the concept of modernity, a concept that would require a different theoretical discussion. Elsewhere (Gaudioso 2014, 2019b), I have compared Kezilahabi with Western authors (especially Ingeborg Bachmann and Pier Paolo Pasolini), and have highlighted how they solved the crisis of literary language – ideally sparked by Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s *Ein Brief* (1902) (see Gaudioso 2014:77, 99) – by developing an aesthetics of orality. Kezilahabi, in fact, drew on the verbal arts of Ukerewe (the island in Lake Victoria where he was born) (Gaudioso 2019b:44–51, 187–193, 253 & 2022).

Swahili and Shona debates on poetry, pointing to their respective obstruction and misrecognition of the nature and potential of poetic practice.³ In these sections and in the fourth one, I show that, for both Swahili and Shona poetry, there are similar approaches to literary criticism among literary scholars, poets, and intellectuals based on the defense of identity and rejection of new styles or ideas. In the fourth section, I show that this criticism is directed especially against poets who try to criticize their own society and the leaders of their countries. In the conclusion, I propose an inductive and aesthetic textual approach, based on Kezilahabi's philosophy, to avoid prescriptivism.

The problem of the aesthetics of the text

As a literary scholar, I maintain that texts themselves and the modalities in which they are crafted as artworks (in this case, verbal art) should be the keystones of literary analysis.⁴ This need was first expressed in the field of Swahili by Tanzanian scholar and poet Kezilahabi in 1976 (121):

It is a sad fact that, up to now, no one has analyzed Swahili poems from a literary standpoint and, up to now, there is no book that covers the criticism of Swahili poems, although it is evident that poetry forms a huge part of Swahili literature compared to other genres.⁵

With his statement, Kezilahabi was affirming that literary criticism⁶ was not “literary” enough, not sufficiently focused on the text as an artwork, and, on several occasions, condemned literary criticism as being mostly concerned with aspects external to literature, like moral (1976: 129), spiritual (1985:357), cultural (1981:37), and also linguistic concerns (1976:121). This problem

³ These two sections do not claim to settle the discourse about regular and free verse. Furthermore, it is important to consider that the positions at stake in both cases are not simply the result of polarization; rather, these oppositions are evidence of the intellectual vibrancy of Shona and Swahili literature (see Njogu 1995, Gaudioso 2020a, 2020b). However, the effects of these oppositions are real, as they have not only disallowed nonaligned writers, but also inhibited the entry of new writers to the literary sphere.

⁴ Elsewhere (2019b:78–84), I have argued that I do not agree with the idea of literature as a closed system, as this suggests something that it is finished and perfect; this cannot be applied to literature or to art, for otherwise they could not speak to us beyond time and space, as art does. However, this does not mean that we cannot analyze the question of the freedom of writers within the texts: there is a context for this, in this case literary criticism, but the construction of a poet's own aesthetic or stylistic solutions are analyzable within the texts themselves. In some cases, negative criticism can act as a spur for poets to explain their poetics or stylistic means, as I have shown in my monograph on Kezilahabi's poetics.

⁵ All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated. The Swahili original is: *Ni jambo la kusikitisha kuona kwamba mpaka sasa hajatokea mtu wa kuyachambua mashairi ya Kiswahili kifasihi, na mpaka sasa hakijatoka kitabu chochote cha uhakiki wa mashairi ya Kiswahili, ingawa ni dhahiri kwamba ushairi umechukuwa sehemu kubwa sana katika Fasihi ya Kiswahili ukilinganisha na maandishi ya kawaida au michezo.*

⁶ When I speak about criticism, I am referring to both academic literary studies and the literary-intellectual context. For example, the debate on free-verse poetry in Swahili literature is a fervent argument among poets and intellectuals also outside of any academic context.

LIBERATING CRITICISM: LIBERATING FORM AND THOUGHT

was not limited to Swahili literary studies and criticism. Africanist anthropologist Karin Barber argues that the weakness of African literary studies is reflected in at least two complementary tendencies: the first is the insufficient attention paid to the texts as such (Barber 1999, 2007), and the second concerns its views on the media of oral and written literature, the difference between which is understood as ontological; our field, Barber continues, is characterized by terminological disagreement and overall vagueness (“extremely vague”; 1995:8), rather than specific analytical studies (1999:18):

Hostility to “reified,” “object-centered” notions of performance, text and context is almost universal among present-day scholars of oral verbal art, and it is easy to see why. But the argument has often taken on the appearance of a war of vocabulary—elegantly summarized by Dwight Conquergood—in which “objectification” and “reification” automatically appear among the enemy lexicon, along with “fixity,” “structure,” “system,” “distance,” and “detachment,” in opposition to “improvisation,” “flow,” “process,” “participation,” “embodiment,” and “dialogue.”

What is described by Barber is not divergence in analytical results, but an ideological fight in which the terms “are often left unanalyzed: their function is simply to evoke alterity” (Barber 1995:8). Barber (2007:5–13) also argues that there is a need to focus on the text as such as the object of analysis, and warns against the distorted use of texts to serve discussions of sociocultural factors: “If a verbal text is to ‘tell us’ anything about a society, social experience, or cultural values, this can only be through its specific textuality, its specific way of being a text—not by by-passing it” (Barber 2007:13). Pointing out that modern African poetry is strictly connected with oral tradition, the Nigerian writer Isidore Okpewho (1988:8) calls for studies that can “liberate our understanding of the term poetry,” because the essence of poetry lies in “its power to appeal strongly to our appreciation and, as it were, lift us up in the sense of forcing us to recognize its effect.” Okpewho is in favor of liberating the term “poetry” from the past criticism, and against creating a special class of literature for African poetry (Okpewho 1988:8, Gaudioso 2021:645–649), in order to allow African literary studies contribute to literary studies in general. The Swahili scholar and writer Said Khamis (1994:701) clearly points this out:

[...] as far as studies of African traditional literatures are concerned, the interest was not as such in them as an art form, but in their functional criteria as a body of knowledge and information which was indispensable in anthropological studies.

However, forty years after the publication of the Kezilahabi article quoted above (1976), and more than twenty years after Khamis’s statement, not much has changed. Khamis, indeed, felt obliged to repeat his arguments in a brief talk given at the 2017 Swahili Colloquium in

Bayreuth, where he criticized the tendency of Swahili literary studies to privilege the analysis of circumscribed literary elements rather than analyzing the text as a whole, as an “art form.” For this reason, I argue (2017) that we need specific approaches to verbal art and, over the course of my scholarly research, I have proposed translation and comparison as tools for an aesthetic⁷ approach to literature.

In the next two sections, I discuss the criticism of stylistic innovations in Shona and Swahili poetry and show the continuity of criticism as regards content. The debates started after the publication of poems introducing such innovations; in the case of Shona, these poems were published between the 1950s and 1960s, while the debate started after Tanzania’s independence in the 1980s. In Swahili, the first experiments in free verse were conducted by Shaaban Robert in the 1950s (Mulokozi 2006:199–200), but the debate gained strength only after the publication of the first collection of poems in free verse: Kezilahabi’s *Kichomi* (1974).

The Swahili debate

The debate on free verse in Swahili, extraordinary in terms of its duration, began in the late 1960s and is still alive and fervent. It started after the first publications of free-verse poems by young students at the University of Dar es Salaam at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s. The fact that Swahili free verse emerged among students at the university, the center of formal higher education and research in newborn Tanzania, contributed intrinsically to making free verse unpopular among conservative Swahili intellectuals and poets, who considered such poetry elitist. It was foreseeable that the dispute would be played out in terms of formal oppositions: popular/elitist, Swahili authenticity/colonial influence, ethically acceptable/unacceptable. Critics of free verse defended traditional poetry on the grounds that it was essentially popular and authentic. For them, free verse represented a colonial, Western violation of traditional poetic norms, and thus, proponents of free verse were viewed as hostile to tradition. The debate became polarized between people “for” tradition (in the form of traditional Swahili verse) and people who were “against” tradition (i.e. for free verse). What the terms of the debate concealed was that, in fact, no poet was truly “against” tradition; instead, free verse poets were creating a new form of Swahili poetry by drawing on other, preexisting Bantu-language oral aesthetic forms.⁸ Many Swahili free-verse poets were university students; therefore, in a sense, they were members of an elite, but not all of these students came from economically privileged backgrounds in socialist Tanzania. It should be noted that the Swahili

⁷ According to the father of the discipline of aesthetics, Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1999/1735:71), the original meaning of the term is sensuous knowledge (see the conclusion of this paper).

⁸ Sometimes they were also influenced by foreign literature, but this was not the prerogative of poets who wrote in free verse. It should be pointed out that neither the reformists nor the traditionalists were a homogeneous group; within these two groups, there were many differences.

LIBERATING CRITICISM: LIBERATING FORM AND THOUGHT

textual tradition was not the only textual tradition present in Tanzania. Writers of Swahili free verse could evoke or take inspiration from oral textual traditions (and their praxis) that were not in Swahili and did not use Swahili prosody. In fact, according to Alamin Mazrui (2007:54), the emergence of free verse in Swahili poetry and the debate over it have put the focus of literary studies on oral literature:

Perhaps as a result of the debate between conservationists and liberalists, Swahili free verse poets have also been under pressure to pay greater attention to the indigenous and oral poetic heritage of Bantu-speaking communities in East Africa.

Crucially, this dispute coincided with questions of identity and the constitution of the newborn nation; it took its impetus from the intellectual, socialist, and secular debate promoted by the hero of Tanganyika's independence, the founding father of Tanzania: its first president, Julius Kambarage Nyerere, teacher, translator, and poet. The intensive intellectual activity of those years must likewise be read in this context: the "new" poetry in free verse expressed the fervor of the ideas of the young generation (see Farouk Topan in Kezilahabi 1974:x–xi).⁹ It was these ideas, especially those connected with secularism (see Gaudioso & Minerba 2020), that led to the criticism that free-verse poetry was immoral poetry (see Zinduko 1974). While the traditionalists (Kandoro 1978, Makala za Semina 2003[1983], Zinduko 1974), rejected innovations in both style and content, identifying free verse as the enemy of tradition and Swahili identity, the reformists appealed to creative freedom and to Bantu verbal arts that were transmitted orally and did not follow the Swahili metrical tradition. Most of the reformists came from mainland Tanzania, so their mother tongue and textual traditions did not use strict Swahili metrics; they were familiar with orally transmitted verbal arts in other local languages.¹⁰ Only a few scholars, comparing poetry and songs, pointed out that in pre-Islamic Swahili literature (Khamis 1994:709–713) and in many Swahili songs, the texts are not subject to such a fixed metrical system as in classical poetry. For this reason, Mazrui's use of the expression "organic intellectual" (1992:70) to refer to traditional Swahili poets in contemporary times does not convince me:

⁹ Kezilahabi can be considered the father of free verse in Swahili literature, not only because he (and Ebrahim Hussein) started to write free verse in the late 1960s, but especially because he is indeed the poet who constantly and consistently used it.

¹⁰ In an undergraduate essay, Mulokozi (1975b) states that oral poetry in Bantu languages is in free verse. This essay has never been published; I found a copy at the University of Dar es Salaam Library during my fieldwork in 2015.

ROBERTO GAUDIOSO

Unlike their liberalist counterparts, conservationist poets are like Gramsci's "organic intellectuals," in the sense that they emerged from the ranks of the people and not in isolation from them. Insofar as the Swahili community is concerned, they and not the liberalists are "people's poets," no matter how inaccessible their compositions might at times appear to be. They are genuine products of the Swahili intellectual environment and not the offshoots of northern cultural hegemony in East Africa.

In my view, the idea of opposing "organic intellectuals" to other intellectuals at Dar es Salaam University is an oversimplification. First of all, "people's poets" seems to me a vague label, expressing a simplistic view of the social complexity of coastal Swahili, because, even among traditional poets, there are social differences; some of them are part of the Tanzanian social elite. Moreover, it may be recalled that Shaaban Robert (1909–1962), who is considered a classical Swahili poet, wrote a small number of poems in free verse (see Mulokozi 2006:199–200); some of his poems thus diverged extensively from traditional prosody. For example, in the collection *Mwafrika Aimba* (1969), there are some poems that feature the metrical patterns of *shairi* (8+8), but without rhyme. Furthermore, the Kenyan poet Abdilatif Abdalla was also working at the University of Dar es Salaam in the 1970s. He published his unique collection of traditional poems, *Sauti ya Dhiki* (1973), thanks in part to Kezilahabi, who helped him liaison with the publisher.¹¹ Another important protagonist of free-verse poetry, the poet and scholar Mogyabuso Mlinzi Mulokozi, cannot be accused of being against the tradition; he—perhaps more than any poet who writes in free verse or hybridizes free verse with traditional patterns—uses traditional prosody, in a very conservative way in some works; see Njogu (1995) or Mulokozi's *Utenzi wa Nyakiiru Kibi* (1997), the *utenzi* being the traditional form of epic poetry. This is evidence that poets who wrote in free verse had nothing against traditional poetry. Swahili free-verse poetry was often produced by people who came to Swahili with a deep knowledge of other languages and other, equally "traditional" aesthetic forms. Restricting the term "organic intellectuals" to those who wrote traditional Swahili verse, thus linking traditional Swahili verse with the ability to contribute "organically" and "intellectually"—from within—to Swahili society, erases the intellectual and also traditional (though not Swahili-language-based) contributions of free-verse poets. In Mazrui's formulation, it is not clear whether the term "Swahili community" refers to all Kenyan and Tanzanian peoples, or only to the people of the coast. If Mazrui takes into account the possibility that all Kenyan and Tanzanian people can be organic intellectuals of their nations, we need to include other African

¹¹ I first heard Abdalla tell this anecdote at the second Ngoma na Vailini conference, entitled "The Worlds of Swahili Poetry," held at the University of Naples "L'Orientale" in 2017.

LIBERATING CRITICISM: LIBERATING FORM AND THOUGHT

societies in the definition of Swahili people, as Nyerere did for his political project of detribalization and unification of Tanzania under a Swahili identity. Thus, in this case, we must also refer to other textual traditions in Kenya and Tanzania. If the “Swahili community” refers only to coastal Swahili speakers, the issue does not exist, because the writers that Mazrui excludes as organic intellectuals do not belong to the coastal Swahili. Another contradiction emerges if we consider the consequences of focusing on the pure characteristic (essentialism) of a certain group. Kezilahabi (1983:146–147) describes the contradiction between taking pride in Swahili as the national language (related to the project of detribalizing Tanzania) or even as a lingua franca for Africa (pan-African project), and simultaneously defending its purity:

The third matter which has emerged [from the debate around Swahili poetry] is that our colleagues have an insider’s point of view, and within that insider perspective there is still the insider perspective of the Coast, and within the insider perspective of the Coast there is the even more internal perspective of Shungwaya. All their views end up at the edge of the “authentic Swahili,” they have failed to move beyond that. I do not see why a Zimbabwean freedom fighter who knows Kiswahili should not be given the chance to write his own poetry without rhymes and without being threatened by statements such as “The Swahili language has its own [people],” “the true Swahili people,” sometimes “the actual Swahili people.” These ideas are half a century old. Currently Kiswahili has moved beyond these borders and has reached the literary level, “the authentic Swahili people” do not have power over its direction.¹²

From this quotation, reality and identity emerge as ever-changing. In fact, Kezilahabi (1985:5) argues for the need to overcome “that static outlook of truth inherent in African metaphysics of traditional man.” In this way, he reveals the potentialities of the phenomenon under analysis as a constitutive element of an identity (in this case Swahili) both *in nuce* and in their past. It is curious that he cites Zimbabwe in the above quotation. During my interview with him (Gaborone 2015), he told me that he was an activist and that, during the independence struggles of Mozambique and Zimbabwe, he helped to collect resources (such as economic ones) in order to help the partisan movements. At this point, it is important to note that the relationship

¹² The Swahili original is: *Jambo la tatu lililobainika ni kuwa wenzetu wana mtazamo wa ndani, na katika undani huo bado kuna undani wa Kipwani, na katika undani wa Kipwani bado zaidi kuna undani wa Shungwaya. Mawazo yao yote yanaishia kwenye ukingo wa “Waswahili wenyewe”; wameshindwa kutoka nje zaidi ya hapo. Sioni kwa nini mpigania uhuru wa Zimbabwe na ajuaye Kiswahili asipewe fursa ya kuandika ushairi wake bila vina kwa kuogopeshwa na maneno kama: “Kiswahili kina wenyewe”, “Waswahili hasa”, wakati mwingine “Waswahili haswa haswa”. Haya ni mawazo ya nusu karne iliyopita. Hivi sasa Kiswahili kimevuka mipaka yao na kimefikia kiwango cha kifasihi “Waswahili wenyewe” hawana madaraka makubwa juu ya mwelekeo wake.*

between Tanzania and Zimbabwe dates from at least the thirteenth century, with the trade route between Zimbabwe and the Tanzanian city of Kilwa. Most probably, Kezilahabi is also referring here to Nyerere's political support for the Zimbabwean people's fight for independence (*Chimurenga*).¹³ Furthermore, there are some examples of Zimbabweans who compose in Swahili.¹⁴

The Shona debate

While Swahili free verse and the debate it triggered emerged only after Tanzanian independence, the "new Shona poetry" had already cropped up toward the end of the colonial period, though the debates it provoked arose only after Zimbabwe achieved independence on April 18, 1980. This new, regular style concerned Shona poems that for the first time were published in anthologies during the 1950s and 1960s and was influenced by English poetry. In these two Bantu textual traditions, "transgression" of the canon took on opposite forms: in Swahili, the divergence was represented by free verse, and in Shona, by regular construction of the lines. This latter, "new" form also represents the first written publications in Shona poetry (together with Herbert Chitepo's epic poem 1956); before this point, Shona poetry was mostly oral and in free verse. Most of the poems published during this period exhibit aesthetic research between traditional oral forms and foreign prosody. Shona scholars Mudhliwa Chiwome (1996) and Herbert Chimhundu (1989) considered this poetry to be too close to English literature and to express a Eurocentric vision; above all, they did not consider the new forms to have any connection with earlier Shona poetry. Chimhundu (1989:19) claims that this poetry "was generally elitist and foreign in inspiration."

It must be remembered that Zimbabwe (which, until 1979, had been Rhodesia) was among the last African states to obtain independence; this was achieved by a partisan struggle (*Chimurenga*) fought from 1964 to 1979. My aim as a literary scholar is to study texts, and to study them *as* texts, as Karin Barber (2007:5–18) argues; for this reason, my argument here will be exclusively literary. If Chimhundu's and Chiwome's criticism is taken as a political act, it can be understood as a reaction to cultural colonialism; thus, the identity of Shona poetry was

¹³ This relationship is important in order to provide a historical background for my comparison, which I will develop more deeply in a future article. However, my inductive comparative approach, focused on the aesthetics of the text, leads me to start from textual elements and from literary questions. A comparative approach is useful not only in cases of similar historical backgrounds or in similar contexts, but to show continuities and differences in texts that may come from very distant contexts.

¹⁴ For example, the Kasongo Band wrote the song "Asante sana" ("Thank You Very Much") in Swahili <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=onvyKxkzYGo>. This band was composed of Chimurenga partisans who had undertaken their military training in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania (during Kezilahabi's university studies). In those years, music worked as a unifying factor among several African countries. An example is the (direct and indirect) impact of Congolese music (DRC) on other African musical scenes; see Satler (2007) for a historical overview and Rosenberg (2019) for a study on the aesthetics of Congolese music in East Africa.

LIBERATING CRITICISM: LIBERATING FORM AND THOUGHT

constructed in contrast to the identity of the colonizers. Nevertheless, the freedom and responsibility of artists were undermined by these limitations (in the next section, I show how this limitation affected the content as well). The development of Shona poetry can be compared and contrasted with the development of Swahili poetry. The enduring debate on style in Swahili poetry has no equivalent in the field of Shona poetry, nor were there any major defenders of this “Eurocentric” poetry in Shona. It should be recalled that the poet who was most criticized for his writing in a regular pattern was Wilson Chivaura (1927–68) who, however, had died before the debate took off. While the debate on Shona poetry took place on a smaller scale than the Swahili one, its impact on poetic practice was prominent. In fact, as Chirikure Chirikure, a Shona poet of the next generation, argues in an interview (in Netsayi Chigwendere 2019):

The poetry published before was pretty much Victorian in structure and yet it was in Shona. But I had been exposed to literature in English from West Africa, and even by Zimbabwean writers, and I fell back to free verse.

When there is censorship of or hostility toward a genre or style, it is important to find the textual basis for this criticism and to understand how, or how much, such criticism has affected the literature concerned. Thus, while such criticism may be legitimate, it becomes problematic when it limits the freedom of writers—that is, when criticism becomes prescriptive.¹⁵ Critics uphold Chivaura as the major exponent of this poetry in regular patterns, but, of course, all the Shona poetry in regular/hybrid patterns was criticized. Chivaura worked for the Rhodesian Broadcasting Corporation (RBC) radio as a presenter and producer. He published his poems mostly in newspapers and anthologies. Many of his poems were collected in the anthology *Mutinhimira weDetembo* (“The Sound of Poetry,” 1965). Below, I quote the sonnet *Hwenda nemweni* (“The Visitor Will Pass,” 1965, translated in Chimhundu 1989:22), which is considered “inauthentic” Shona poetry:

Usadihe hwenda, hama, nemweni,
Nokuti ishiri yemhindirira;
Kusvikira kwake anoita hwemheni.
Kupenyu hutsinhira nokutinhira

Kunopfumba njere dzavanhu

Do not begrudge, my friend, the
visitor who will pass,
Because he is a bird of passage;
His arrival is like that of lightning.
The flash is emphasis and so is the
thunder

¹⁵ I would like to thank Serena Talento for helping me to find the Shona anthologies, as I have not been affiliated with any university for about three years. Without her help and support, these years would have been much harder.

ROBERTO GAUDIOSO

<i>Vasati vabwaira rwashanhu</i>	Which confuse the senses of the
<i>Unoinzwazve yodziparura hana</i>	people
<i>Dzevari kure seri, kwamakomo</i>	Before they blink the fifth time
<i>Isati yabangopararira 'mo mapomho</i>	You hear it again tearing the hearts
<i>Unozoitei hama, naye mweni</i>	Of those who are beyond the
<i>mangwana,</i>	mountains
<i>Sehuku waparira kune shiri</i>	Before it then spreads across the
<i>dzebindirira:</i>	plains
<i>Hama! Usasukire hari shiri</i>	What will you do my friend, with
<i>dzebindirira</i>	him the visitor tomorrow,
<i>Mweni mum'sha irimbirimbi,</i>	When like the chicken you stray
<i>Usamuitire chimbichimbi.</i>	into another homestead?
	Friend! Do not wash your pots
	because you see a bird of
	passage:
	A visitor in the home comes and
	goes,
	Do not dismiss him
	unceremoniously.

This poem was analyzed and translated by Chimhundu (1989), who used it as an example in articulating his criticism of poems that have an unnatural regularity and language. However, Chimhundu does not deal with aesthetic issues; instead, he looks at the language and some stylistic features of the composition.¹⁶ He compares Shona and English linguistic structures, arguing that the two languages exhibit different rhythmic structures, and that it is impossible for Shona to follow the rhythm of a metrical structure created for another language:

Therefore, any attempt in Shona poetry to group syllables in “feet” or to create regularity based on metricality is bound to fail because it becomes impossible to create phonetic empathy by applying stress-timed rhythm on a tone language where rhythm is syllable-timed. (Chimhundu 1989: 2)

Whereas the Swahili traditionalists evoke the literary tradition in order to oppose free verse, the Shona traditionalists propose a linguistic and stylistic analysis to oppose the hybrid form of poems like those of Chivaura, but this is not convincing for several reasons. First of all, based on an initial textual comparison, the boundaries between traditional Shona poetry, or later developments accepted as contiguous with tradition, and early written forms such as Chivaura’s poetry are less clear-cut than Chimhundu and Chiwome claim. For example, if we take the

¹⁶ Aesthetics and poetics are not limited by style and linguistic-poetic function.

LIBERATING CRITICISM: LIBERATING FORM AND THOUGHT

neotraditional poem *Mwedzi wagara* (“New Moon,” in Musiwa 1965; translated in Fortune 1971:43–44) by the priest and poet Joseph Kumbirai (1922–1986), which was appreciated by Chimhundu and Chiwome, we can observe the regularity of the rhythm.

<i>Gwe-e kwe-e, mwedzi wagara</i>	Gather round, there’s a new moon tonight
<i>Wagara kuna Dondore</i>	New moon where Mr. Fruit- toffee is
<i>Dondore ane mavara</i>	Fruit-toffee covered with stripes
<i>Mavara anenge edzetse.</i>	Stripes like those of the bullfrog.
<i>Gunyana nhasi wachena</i>	September today is bright
<i>Wachena kuti ngwengwengwe</i>	Bright with shining lightning
<i>Ngwengwengwe chando chatiza</i>	Shining the cold has fled
<i>Chatiza kutya madziya.</i>	Fled out of fear of the summer.
<i>Madziya mafadza vana</i>	Summer that pleases the children
<i>Vana nesu tofara</i>	The children and we are glad
<i>Tofara chando chapera</i>	Glad that the winter is over
<i>Chapera, mbare dzaenda.</i>	Over and scorch marks are gone.
<i>Dzaenda, dzasiya vanga</i>	Gone but leaving their scars
<i>Mavanga pane chembere</i>	Scars on all the old women
<i>Chembere dzobuda panze</i>	Old women who creep out now
<i>Nokuti ave madziya.</i>	Because the summer has come.
<i>Madziya tinokwazisa</i>	The summer we welcome gladly
<i>Gunyana mwedzi wavana</i>	September the month of the children
<i>Wavana neshiri dzose</i>	Of children and all the birds
<i>Dzorira rungwanangwana.</i>	Which sing in the early morning.

This poem has the characteristic parallelism of traditional Shona poetry, as described by Fortune (1971) and Chiwome (1996:10). Another thing we notice from a syllable count of the original version is that this poem has a more regular structure than that of Chivaura’s poem. This poem respects the syllabic meter and has a regular rhyme due to the repetition of whole words. Evidently, this regularity is accepted in Shona poetry, although it is also evident that this language is unnatural, just as the language of Chivaura’s poem; no one speaks in this way. It is clear that poetic language is also to some extent “natural.” So for Chimhundu and Chiwome, the problem is not regularity—which likewise characterizes traditional Shona poetry—but that this new regularity is of English origin. But is this criticism not limiting the creative power of an artist to introduce new forms?

Chimhundu (1989) believes that Chivaura, writing a sonnet in the Shona language, has created something unnatural. However, the sonnet form is not specifically English, as Chimhundu seems to assume. And even if one were to consider “English” to be European,

Chimhundu's linguistic discourse would not apply, because European languages belong to different language families: Germanic languages are different from the Romance languages from which this stanzaic form originated. If Chimhundu's linguistic discourse were valid, then sonnets could not have been written, or would have been particularly artificial, in the Germanic languages, because, as Chimhundu points out, these are stress-timed, while Shona—like Italian, French, and Spanish—is syllable-timed. This difference has not prevented the sonnet from being written in various languages, from the time of its Italian formalization by Giacomo da Lentini of the Sicilian School around 1200, to the English sonnets of Shakespeare (1591–1604) and Rainer Maria Rilke's German sonnets, *Die Sonette an Orpheus* ("Sonnets to Orpheus," 1977/1923). The sonnet has various, heterogeneous forms of realization, from classical to more modern ones. For example, Rilke's modern German forms are very far from the archaic or classical forms of the Italian sonnet, such as Francesco Petrarca composed. In some cases, they appear to be a rewriting of the sonnet form, but nevertheless manage to maintain the metrical effect and recognizability of that form. Therefore, the stylistic differences of the Shona sonnet do not prove the impossibility of importing a metrical form from another textual tradition—African poetry has no such restrictions—but, on the contrary, demonstrates the inventiveness of the author, Chivaura, who manages to mediate between different forms and languages. Similar to the opposition to Swahili free verse, the hostility toward Chivaura's poetry betrays a culturalist and identitarian position toward poetic praxis that limits artistic freedom. However, this preliminary analysis does not mean that Chimhundu's and Chiwome's positions concerning the Shona poems of transition are wrong. My analysis here shows only that, beyond individual and legitimate appreciation, we need more literary evidence to claim that a foreign metrical pattern cannot be rewritten in Shona. Thus, my analysis shows the need to recognize poetry as art made by language (verbal art)—which is not natural, contrary to Chimhundu's claim—and, consequently, the need for an aesthetic analysis of poetry.

Stylistically speaking, it should be pointed out that the criticism levied against Shona poetry, namely that it should not adhere to the rules of Western prosody, seems less restrictive than that against Swahili free verse. Chirikure Chirikure, a renowned poet in his context (Makaudze 2020, Muponde 2008, Wasosa 2012), has experimented with different forms of poetry, and even visual poetry—as Kithaka wa Mberia did in the Swahili context—without being criticized for his experimentations. Chirikure's aesthetic experiments have focused mostly on orality, giving ample space to performance in his poetry, and he has also written poems to be set to music (he collaborated with the great Shona songwriter Oliver Mtukudzi, who passed away in 2019). Content-wise, Chiwome (1996:47) condemns the following contemplative verses of Chivaura as exhibiting a tempered resignation, a celebration of the isolation caused by "capitalist

LIBERATING CRITICISM: LIBERATING FORM AND THOUGHT

individualism”: *Unomuwana pazasi pegute guru akati zerere,/Mukatimo mouswa hwakasvibira sezerere,/Achiyeva nokutunha mukuimba kwatwo tushiri.*¹⁷ Chivaura has been accused of being the bearer of a Eurocentric—and, at the same time, individualistic—vision in a capitalistic sense. However, such a polarizing position reduces human action to two “political” behaviors, which significantly affects the arts (and thus literature) because, according to Barber (1987:4), verbal arts generate a surplus of meaning:

Texts generate “surplus”: meanings that go beyond, and may subvert, the purported intentions of the work. Thus, never wholly under the artist’s control, they have the capacity to pick up subterranean currents of thought that society itself may be unaware of.

Therefore, approaches that limit style also limit ideas, and contribute to a static vision of art, philosophy, culture, and society. In the next section, we will see how the similar discourse of authenticity vs. inauthenticity was used in Shona and Swahili literatures in order to limit ideas and, especially, the possibilities for expressing criticism of their own society and leaders.

The forbidden criticism

The Shona criticism of poetic content shows some similarities with its criticism of form, as described in the previous section. Chirikure has been attacked for his “pessimism” by Charles Tembo and Tevedzerai Gijimah (2013), which strikes me as a criticism that should be more closely investigated. Here, I take the example of the verses cited in their article on Chirikure Chirikure (in Tembo and Gijimah 2013: 8; translation mine):

Pasi rufuse
Denga ibaravara
Nzizi majecha

The earth is a scorching bed
The sky is bald
Rivers are sand

Hupenyu refuse
Mutsago makuwa
Makuwa mitsago

Life is a scorching bed
Pillows are graves
Graves are pillows.

Hameno tikaona ramangwana

We are not sure if we will see
tomorrow’s sun rise.

¹⁷ Chiwome’s translation: “Quietly you find him beneath a big tree,/In the grass that is as green as algae,/admiring and marveling at the singing birds” (1996:47).

ROBERTO GAUDIOSO

What emerges here is the image of death looming over the earth and Africa; it is clear that this is a poem composed of almost hermetic¹⁸ images, one in which the lyrical I identifies with the earth. These metaphors tell us something about the feeling and perception of the lyrical I, and are not, in my view, a direct description of a landscape. They are not a view of Africa as such. Rather, they push the reader/listener to discover a truth. The following lines of Chirikure's poem are less enigmatic (in Tembo and Gijimah 2013:10; their translation):

Tsoro yekwedu inofa ichiri kugadzirwa kurongwa: Africa!
Uriri hwekwedu hunodzurwa nemazvizvi avanhu Africa!
Setswa nehope zvinosvadzwa, misodzi ichiponewa Africa!

In Africa, programmes are abandoned before implementation
In Africa, our floors are made of human waste
In Africa, joy and peace are unheard of and it is a land of angst.

Here, the poem has clearer images, less metaphorical and hermetic; the verse is long, with an exclamation mark at the end, certainly inspired by its cry—in this case, of denunciation. Despite the fact that, in these verses, we encounter a collective “we” rather than an individual lyrical I, Tembo and Gijimah (2013:10–11) accuse the author, Chivaura, several times of being a bearer of Eurocentric visions:

What is not clear in this poem is who poisons African lives. It is critical to note that the poet is expected to help his society understand whether it is Africans poisoning themselves, foreigners poisoning Africans or both. He offers a surface interpretation of the African condition. The poet exposes the horrifying phenomenon in Africa where life is defined by despondency and impotence. [...] On the contrary, Africa is the cradle of civilization and to suggest that it is a threat to humanity is to belong to the Eurocentric school of thought which denies Africa history, culture as well the potential to sustain humanity.

Tembo and Gijimah charge Chirikure with expressing a form of “existentialist nihilism.” Such a denunciation as Chirikure conveys through his poem can have very strong connotations—as we will see in other poems of his—but also expresses the hope of finding a solution or means of improvement, not nihilism. However, it is important to point out that the judgments of Tembo & Gijimah (2013) and Tembo (2012) are not accepted by all Shona critics. For example,

¹⁸ By Hermeticism I mean here the hermetic poetry of the first half of the 20th century developed in Italy. This (often short) poetry was characterised by a closed (hermetic) and deliberately complex character, usually achieved through a succession of analogies that were difficult to interpret.

LIBERATING CRITICISM: LIBERATING FORM AND THOUGHT

Chiwome (1996:106–115) recognizes the significant role of Chirikure in Shona poetry. What is important here is that criticism of form (Chivaura) and of content (Chirikure) have similar grounds (authenticity), which could be the basis of future criticism rooted in the logic of exclusion, by which the artist criticized is tantamount to a traitor.

Similar to Chirikure’s poems quoted above, the Swahili writer Kezilahabi has also used the imagery of illness as a metaphor for Africa; in *Afrika na Watu wake* (“Africa and Its People,” 1974:19), the continent is depicted as a sick man:

<i>Mimi ninaona mgonjwa</i> <i>Bado amelala kitandani.</i> <i>Kama hatutamtoa miiba iliyobaki</i> <i>Mgonjwa hataweka miguu yake chini</i>	I see a sick human Still lying in bed. If we don’t remove the thorns left in him The patient won’t put his legs down
<i>Ili kutembea bila kujiegemeza.</i>	In order to walk without supporting himself.
<i>Miiba iliyomo ndani mwetu lazima</i> <i>Pia iondolewe upesi kabla haijaingia</i>	The thorns inside us must be Removed quickly before they go deep inside
<i>kati ua mifupa na kufa pamoja nasi. [...]</i>	among our bones and die together with us [...]
<i>Lakini kuitoa miiba hii</i> <i>Tunahitaji macho makali</i> <i>Mikono isiyotetemeka</i> <i>Moyo usio na huruma</i> <i>Na kuona miiba ilipoingia.</i>	But to remove the thorns we need sharp eyes hands that do not shake heart without compassion to see where the thorns entered.

The sense is that of sickness, of infirmity, as a slow torment. Kezilahabi says we must be strict with ourselves in order to find healing. We must investigate our illness and be courageous, because our diagnosis and healing cause pain. This pain allows us to start a process of healing and liberation.¹⁹ Kezilahabi was also criticized for his “pessimism”:

Any writer who is really concerned about their welfare should give them *hope* and *encouragement*, not discouragement and despair. He should also give prescription whenever possible. For, to paraphrase Marx, the point is not to understand how bad the situation is, but to change it. Unfortunately, this important element is all but lacking in this otherwise epoch-making collection. (Mulokozi 1975c:105; emphasis added)

¹⁹ For a study of Kezilahabi’s poetics, see Gaudioso (2019b).

ROBERTO GAUDIOSO

The idea that arts and poetry should only celebrate and praise is very pervasive. This becomes clearer if we recall that Mulokozi is not a detractor of Kezilahabi, but his pupil.²⁰ Mulokozi's position regarding Kezilahabi's poetry is similar to that of Tembo and Gijimah (2013:11–12; emphasis added) regarding Chirikure's poetry:

Chirikure sounds like the Eurocentric artist who is notorious for denigrating Africa by creating myths that are meant to keep the African in a dominated position. [...] Chirikure seems to be preoccupied by the bad afflicting society without turning his art into a spring of *hope*. Instead of fighting domination Chirikure seems to be plucking a leaf out of the racist scholars' books and depict [sic!] Africa as a continent of chaos.

Leaving aside the concept of race, and what a poem may or may not say in metaphorical form about what is vital or deadly, it can be seen that there is strong opposition to individual and intimate expressions that are considered pessimistic, and this, in conjunction with the idea of art as celebration, becomes a significant limitation for poetry, free thought, and free expression. Okpewho (1988:8) also describes this effect of poetry:

There are essentially two ways in which a piece of poetry can affect us. One is by touching us emotionally so that we feel pleasure or pain; the other is by stirring our minds deeply so that we reflect on some aspect of life or some significant idea.

However, artworks that diverge from what is considered traditional or celebratory are often perceived as a foreign intrusion—a betrayal. I ask myself how many texts cannot emerge due to such opposition.

The question of identity in the Swahili tradition is more stratified, because Arabic and European literatures have each affected Swahili literature, at different times and to different degrees, often with only the latter being seen as foreign. This is not surprising: on the one hand, the criticism against free verse can be read as reasserting the cultural identity of the Muslim world of the coast (which it is, in part), but we must also remember that, before contact with the Arab world, Swahili literature was oral. Moreover, the classical age of Swahili literature is considered to be the age that saw the flourishing of epics and religious poems that were greatly influenced by the Arab Muslim culture and textual tradition. However, I do not think that the

²⁰ Mulokozi was Kezilahabi's student both in secondary school and at university. He started to write free-verse poetry in Swahili after being inspired by Kezilahabi (according to my interview with Mulokozi in Dar es Salaam, 2014).

LIBERATING CRITICISM: LIBERATING FORM AND THOUGHT

position of the Swahili traditionalists is tenable from the point of view of verbal arts (see Gaudioso 2019a:22–51), because they tend to see the classical canon as unchangeable, whereas its construction should be considered diachronically (see Khamis 1994). Kahigi and Mulokozi (1979:11) tackle this question from its roots and argue that foreign influences are “natural” in every textual tradition. According to them, there is no justification for criticism on the basis of an element’s foreignness to the context in which it is applied: on the contrary, they show how Swahili culture has benefited from its encounter with different civilizations.

An opposite view was advanced by Saadani Kandoro (1978:42–43), who argued that free verse was brought by the colonialists, and that the poets who experimented with this form in Swahili were not only *not* writing Swahili poetry, but also that this poetry was a detriment to Swahili poetry in general: “Composing imperfect poems is putting imperfections or defects in our compositions intentionally, something that is not good and has no justification.”²¹ This position is very similar to that of Chimhundu on Shona poetry influenced by what he sees as destructive foreign metrics: “A brief comparison of those linguistic features which Shona and English exploit to produce poetry will show why application of English devices by the early writer-poets actually tended to destroy the poetic art in Shona” (Chimhundu 1989:24). This cultural purism is problematic for arts and science. According to Khamis (1994:705), the meeting of Arabic and African textual traditions was very much conducive to founding a tradition:

In Swahili traditional poetry, however, the consensus among Swahili poetic scholars is that Swahili traditional poetry is the written poetry of the eighteenth/nineteenth centuries, which was a very creative period with all major features of prosody.

A similar process took place, for example, in Europe during the Middle Ages, when the arts and sciences were influenced by Arab intellectuals; for centuries, southern Spain and Italy were subjected to Arab domination.²² Or, as Zumthor (1984:232–233) claims, when, for half a century, Afro-American music spread throughout the world and reintroduced to our mentality an almost magical feeling for the sound object. This means not only that African aesthetics deeply affected modern Western aesthetics (for this reason, Zumthor calls it the “Africanization” of the world), but also that African orality set the academic agenda of human sciences. In less than two generations, the musical revolution begun by black orchestras in New

²¹ The Swahili original is: *Kutunga mashairi ya guni ni kukusudia kutia ila au dosari katika tungo zetu, kitu ambacho si chema wala hakina sababu.*

²² I am not claiming that art is immune from this dialectic.

Orleans around 1915 changed the musical tastes and behavior of the masses on three continents and upset the assumptions of an aesthetic. It means that cultural and artistic influences go through the dominant/dominated dialectic, and carry signs of this dialectic with them. Zumthor (1984:232) mentions that Stravinski was influenced by African music, and we could further think of the influence of African aesthetics on Gershwin in music or Modigliani and Picasso in art, to mention just a few. The experiences of Chirikure and Kezilahabi offer us a different vision than the traditionalist scholars and poets with respect to Africans and their arts, full of dynamic creative and critical power. For this reason, they both invoke freedom for their art. Two poems by Chirikure and Kezilahabi epitomize such an invocation: Chirikure's *Maitiro epfungwa* ("Freedom of Thought," 2011:82) and Kezilahabi's *Dhamiri yangu* ("Consciousness," 1974: 36). In Chirikure's poem, with its unequivocal title *Maitiro epfungwa* ("Freedom of Thought"), the lyrical I appeals for the freedom to think and express his ideas; it ends, "*Richazodoka newewo wagudzikana*" ("Before the day is out I shall be vindicated," as translated by the author himself). Kezilahabi express the same need for freedom in poem *Dhamiri yangu*, which closes with the line *Hapa nilipo sina uhuru!* ("Here, where I am, I have not freedom!"). For both of them, this question of freedom is fundamental to their poetics,²³ something that Chirikure clearly states in an interview:

After independence, I was doing more organised performances and I began to appreciate that the word should be used carefully and for meaningful purposes. By the time I got to university and started writing more serious poetry, I decided to depart from what we had before—very good Shona poetry, but it was more like cultural issues, environmental issues, using the language to preserve culture, rather than to communicate contemporary concerns.²⁴

In these lines, Chirikure explains his stylistic choice and informs us that his conception of poetry was something new in the Shona context, or at least in the minority at that time. Here, he portrays his notion of art, its urgency, and the need to speak out. Thus, for him, the task of the artist is not a work of preservation or celebration; it is not a cultural matter; it is rather something projected on the present, on contemporary issues. The expectation of the cultural function of poetry, of its task in defense of cultural or ethical values, is the basis of the rejection of some artwork recognized as inauthentic or pessimistic.

Discussing approaches: Conclusion

²³ For Kezilahabi, see Gaudioso (2022, 2019b).

²⁴ <https://chimurengachronic.co.za/poets-with-guns-a-conversation-with-chirikure-chirikure/>

LIBERATING CRITICISM: LIBERATING FORM AND THOUGHT

The Shona and Swahili examples explored in this article have shown how a comparative approach can be useful in problematizing certain issues that, taken in their singularity, can lead us to absolutize certain phenomena. Comparison helps us to relativize the above-described poetic debates and, in this case, to return them to the context of verbal arts. For example, the fact that, in Bantu languages like Shona, poetry had traditionally been produced in free verse—which might be missed by an approach focused solely on Swahili poetry—clearly supports Swahili reformists’ arguments. The issue of poetic form, however, needs to be approached from a strictly aesthetic perspective if one wants to go beyond the identitarian positions it inspires. I have tried to show that ideological approaches to language, culture, and arts can become prescriptions that limit artistic expression. Moreover, it is stylistically questionable whether it is right to talk of free verse in Shona or in many other African traditions; this position must be investigated further. In his presentation at the University of Bayreuth on May 4, 2021, Emiliano Minerba noted that, in many poetic traditions, verse is not metrical in the sense that it shows a constant and regular pattern; at the same time, the verse boundaries in a poem may not be totally unpredictable, as in free-verse poetry as such: there is always at least one linguistic marker that individuates the beginning or end of the verse. For this reason, Minerba (2021) proposes a tripartition into *metrical*, *free*, and *distinct* verse.²⁵ The question of distinct verse in the Shona and Swahili traditions is worth further investigation; some of Kezilahabi’s poems indeed correspond to this style, as I have argued in my article “This is not free verse! A stylistic study of Kezilahabi’s poems” (2020a).

We have thus seen how culturalist, identity-based, and political approaches to verbal arts can limit the creative freedom of artists. The tools of such limitation are accusations of inauthenticity and pessimism masked as criticism; such accusations risk depriving both poet and poetics of the potential for verbal art. In addition to this, since traditionalists often view poetry as a means to preserve and promote language, they have often accused reformists of using incorrect or impure language (see also Gaudioso 2020b:7, 21); in fact, this is a serious limitation for an art that is so closely linked with language. We have seen how it is possible to mask “technical questions” as linguistic and stylistic ones. The vagueness of analysis mentioned by Barber (as quoted in the first section) is useful for creating a kind of comfort zone (for example: “The oral tradition and its ‘values’ and ‘wisdom’ are often left unanalysed: their function is simply to evoke alterity”; Barber 1995:8) in which divergent praxis finds no space. For this reason, if criticism and literary studies understand tradition as an unquestionable value,

²⁵ Minerba argues, “In Africa there are many poetic traditions presenting unmetrical verse, but that are not equivalent to free verse. In these cases, in fact, verse boundaries are marked by at least one linguistic device, even if such device is not required to be regular or constant: one should therefore talk of distinct verse” (2021).

ROBERTO GAUDIOSO

criticism and literary studies often become tools of blame and prescription, rather than a resource for poets and artists; if traditions are understood only as tools to evoke their own alterity, they all become vague and fixed concepts incapable of taking into account the aesthetics of verbal arts, thus running the risk of becoming more useful to paternalistic and exoticizing views than the research, study, criticism, or analysis of artistically crafted texts. I therefore believe that it is useful to investigate texts for what they are, namely the product of an art expressed in a given language.

Identity-based approaches to art have created challenges in the search for past forms of the respective textual traditions and have severely limited artistic creativity. In the Swahili context, this has led to: 1) two of the greatest innovators in Swahili literature of all time, Ebrahim Hussein and Euphrase Kezilahabi, being little known or underestimated (see Gaudioso 2019a:2) the near exclusion of free (or non-traditional) verse from literary prizes and newspapers, magazines, and radio (see Aiello, Gaudioso & Minerba 2020:3) a certain stagnation in terms of the style and content of traditional Swahili poetry, and the belief that poetry is essentially a celebratory or self-celebratory art, with the exception of the poet Ghassani (see Aiello, Gaudioso & Minerba 2020:4) the underestimation of verbal art from the periphery of “Swahili world”—for example, the evident underestimation (even by the author himself) of the creative force of Patrick Mudekereza’s poetry (see Aiello & Gaudioso 2019). In this regard, it is interesting to note how more lively and vital elements of Swahili poetry have moved to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, i.e., to what is considered the periphery and is often overlooked in the history of Swahili literature. In the Shona context, the situation regarding what is and what is not considered traditional appears to be the opposite; this has imposed fewer stylistic constraints on the poets’ pursuits, but has certainly discouraged them from intimist poetry, which by some critics has been mistakenly considered a symptom of the influence of English romanticism (conflating romanticism and intimism). The historical conditions that would have disfavored this type of poetry should also be taken into account; thus, as noted above, after the premiere of regular patterns in Shona poetry (late 1950s), the Zimbabwean people fought for their independence (Chimurenga) and the subsequent years were characterized by nation-building. However, this no longer reflects the current situation. Maybe there is a need to point out that the Shona people, like other human beings, have an intimate world, beyond the influence of foreigners, and their poetry is capable of expressing all aspects of life, including intimacy.

While the struggle against English influence in Shona literature is less limiting from a stylistic point of view, what is rejected are elements that are considered foreign. This sense of returning to African roots, to a certain purism, to the origins, is what Kezilahabi calls the

LIBERATING CRITICISM: LIBERATING FORM AND THOUGHT

“philosophy of origin,” which is a fascist enterprise, it manifests itself in the violent rejection of contrary voices. Kezilahabi (1981:37) has responded to this not only by defending the position of the innovators, but also by criticizing the concept of tradition as immutable:

Tradition does not stand still. Changes take place from generation to generation. There are people who still lament the past that—in truth—will not return. What we can do is preserve some of our songs, without being able to stop a certain change in them or in a new style. What is worth asking ourselves is what kind of change it is and in what direction it is going. But we can't go back and we can't avoid change, because what doesn't change is dead.²⁶

For these reasons, I believe that we need to engage in an inductive analysis of texts. During my interview with Kezilahabi in Gaborone (July 2015), he reflected on the following:

The truth of art sinks into human thought and it explains more. It cuts across time: past, present, and future. When these three times meet in *sasa* (now), the truth of literature emerges. For this reason, literature has no end, does not grow old, and doesn't go off.²⁷

With regard to Shona poems influenced by English prosody, like those of Chivaura, my question is, if they are a symptom, can we heal from a colonization of the mind by reversing its symptoms? Is this hybrid poetry something more than just a symptom of Eurocentrism? Literature, like verbal art, uses its own language²⁸ to express a truth that can be revealed if we investigate and analyze it as art, avoiding the objectification of the text,²⁹ as Kezilahabi argues (1976:121). As Susan Sontag (2009:21) reminds us:

[A] work of art encountered as a work of art is an experience, not a statement or an answer to a question. Art is not only about something; it is something. A work of art is a thing in the world, not just a text or commentary on the world.

²⁶ The Swahili original is: *Utamaduni hausimami. Mabadiliko yatatokea toka kizazi hadi kizazi. Wapo wanaolilia bado wakati uliopita ambao kwa kweli haurudi tena. Jambo tunaloweza kufanya ni kuhifadhi baadhi ya nyimbo zetu bila kuzuia mabadiliko ya aina fulani katika nyimbo hizo au mitindo mipya. Swali la maana tunalopaswa kujiuliza ni kwamba mabadiliko ya namna gani na mabadiliko kwenda wapi. Lakini hatuwezi kurudi nyuma na hatuwezi kuzuia mabadiliko, maana kisichobadilika kimekufa.*

²⁷ The Swahili original is: *Ukweli wa kisanaa ni ukweli ambao unazama ndani ya fikra ya mtu na unaeleza zaidi. Uko kati wakati uliopita, wakati ujao na uliopo. Hizi nyakati tatu zinapokutana ndani ya wakati wa sasa ukweli wa kifasihi unatokea. Ndiyo maana fasihi haina mwisho, haizeeki, haiharibiki.*

²⁸ For a study of poetic language, see Gaudioso (2019:77–100).

²⁹ See Gaudioso 2017.

I believe that there is a need to remember that artistic texts exist due to their being artworks, and that their life depends on this. A form that is not art would limit their life; we can easily see this by comparing the life of a poem and a commentary on it, or comparing the life of a poem and a newspaper article. However, this does not mean that we should exclude other approaches to literature. First of all, recentering our analysis on the text involves a myriad of different approaches; mine is limited to literary studies and criticism. However, we need to ask what the special value of literary studies and criticism are, in contrast to other disciplines, and what their specific contribution is to the study of texts that have been composed as artworks.

In this way, inductive and aesthetic analysis can promote reconsidering creative texts of the past and reading them from a new perspective, or afford more attention to contemporary experimentalism in literature. According to Amoroso (2008) and Tedesco (in Baumgarten 1999/1735, 2000), Baumgarten's conception of philosophy of art (aesthetics) involves both philosophy of beauty and sensuous epistemology. The former is described by Baumgarten himself as a critical study based stylistically and ethically on a canon (and thus influenced by culture, textual tradition, etc.), while his idea of sensuous knowledge seems more vague. He speaks about a human sensuous-epistemological faculty that is analogous to reason; further, he talks about the effect that an artwork can produce in the reader/audience, but it is not clear how we can analyze a text on the basis of these notions. Freise (2012:16), drawing from Jakobson, answers the question of the relationship between beauty and function by arguing that, for an aesthetic study of a text, we need "to realise the connections that the text makes on different levels and to make them semantically productive [...] Only what has the potential for meaning is beautiful in the aesthetic sense."

In the article quoted at the beginning of this paper, in which Kezilahabi (1976:121) criticizes Swahili literary studies, he also evokes the effect of poetry: "A competent poet will try to use all these tools to make the reader see the picture of the things that are being said inside [his poetry]; he can excite the body or make the reader smell the blood of a goat (for example)."³⁰ The effect of a poem on the reader, even if it is subjective, depends on the text, on how it is constructed ("a competent poet"). Thus, a critical reading or analysis of literature cannot avoid dealing with the text, its linguistic structure, and its aesthetics. An aesthetic investigation is a sensory investigation. Baumgarten argues that this kind of investigation is led by logic (1999/1735:71); thus, sensory investigation (based on sensory knowledge) is an effective way to analyze art. According to Steffen Gross (2002:410), Baumgarten aimed to found a discipline

³⁰ The Swahili original is: *Mshairi mashuhuri atajaribu kutumia vyombo hivi vyote ili aweze kumfanya msomaji aone picha ya mambo yanayozungumziwa mwake; anaweza kuisimua mwili au hata kumfanya msomaji asikie harufu ya damu au beberu (kwa mfano).*

LIBERATING CRITICISM: LIBERATING FORM AND THOUGHT

based on sensory knowledge that goes beyond the difference between rationalism and sensualism. However, this idea is not foreign to African literary criticism. Liz Gunner (2000:17) argues that literature seeks to redefine the “somatic knowledge” of the people involved in its art. The question for literary criticism is how the logic of literature functions and how to analyze it. This is a fundamental point, if, as Khamis points out (1994:701), we want to analyze literature as an artwork (“art form”) and to go beyond its “functional criteria.” Otherwise, contrary to Khamis’s view (and that of Kezilahabi, Barber, Vierke & Gaudioso), focusing on functional criteria, we should acknowledge that anthropology and cultural studies can do this work better than literary studies and literary criticism. What is the particular contribution of literary studies and literary criticism? On the basis of Kezilahabi’s philosophy and literary criticism (1985), which claims that criticism should be bi-focal, liberating, projecting, and based on understanding rather than knowing, I propose an analogical inductive approach to texts, based on translation, performance, and comparison (Gaudioso 2017, 2018, 2019b:77–106, 2020b), which also attempts to propose a concrete methodology based on Baumgarten’s understanding of aesthetics as sensory investigation. This article is an example of a liberating, projecting and bi-focal approach suggested by Kezilahabi. Through comparison, it contributes to the debate within Swahili literature by showing that, in other Bantu languages, the problem may be the exact opposite and, within Shona literature, to the ongoing debate on the poetry of the 1950s and 1960s. Showing how criticism is used as judgment or prescription tends to limit the freedom of the writer to search for his/her own style or to express her/his ideas and criticism, seeks for a liberation of texts from a prescriptive criticism. I have aimed to illustrate these points because, in these divergent poems, I see a richness within the Shona and Swahili textual traditions.

Reading poems in this way, according to Kezilahabi (2012:107), can disclose the possibilities of meaning and praxis and for taking part in a counter-hegemonic and emancipatory discourse:

Literatures in African Languages are instrumental in charting out the route to new possibilities by overcoming ethnic and national boundaries, religious affiliations and to some extent gender differences. [...] In this context literatures written in African languages are to be seen as counter-hegemonic discourses not only vis-à-vis foreign languages, but mainly as thinking and emancipatory projects that seek to open up the creative potential long and greatly suppressed by colonial domination and its modes of manipulation.

It should be noted that, for Kezilahabi (1985:357–358), the manipulation of Africans is not only colonial; Africa is also “plagued” by philosophical “errors” that affect the African

Weltanschauung. Kezilahabi argues that identity should be understood as existing in the here and now, in relation to history and changes, not in connection with a supposed and mythical origin:

Africa has been plagued with philosophies of origin. In the Western world this very philosophy culminated in Nazi Germany, and we know the consequences of this philosophy. The oldest is not necessarily the nearest to our true Being, neither does it have a mandate to rule the present. [...] A philosophy of origins is a Fascist enterprise. Philosophies of origins are another error. The third error concerns moralism. We have, in the past, put too much emphasis on moralism and spiritualism. [...] We have noted that through the glorification of illusory traditional qualities of African society, our leaders create mythologies of a magnificent past and refuse to confront those very institutions which are by their nature retrogressive.

According to this view, we too, as scholars, require a critique of values accepted without scrutiny, as Barber argues. Reading literature in African languages closely and inductively can reveal unexpected possibilities of style, philosophy, and experimentalism that may not be traditional (yet?), but nevertheless belong to African arts, their praxis, and their reception. In this way, according to Kezilahabi (1985; interview, Gaborone 2015), literature can be what it is for our Being: a living event toward truth and freedom.

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