



# ***Third World Express: trains and “revolution”*** **in Southern African poetry**

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## **Abstract**

### ***Third World Express: trains and “revolution” in Southern African poetry***

*This article examines political dimensions of the train metaphor in selected Southern African poems, some of them in English translation. Exploring work by Mongane Serote, B.W. Vilakazi, Demetrius Segooa, Phedi Tihobolo, Thami Mseleku, Jeremy Cronin, Alan Lennox-Short, Anthony Farmer, Freedom T.V. Nyamubaya, Abduraghiem Johnstone and Mondli Gwala, the argument shows some of the ways in which the technological character of trains and railways is made to carry a message of political insurrection and revolution. The author shows that the political potential of the railway metaphor builds on the general response to railways evident in poems indebted to traditional African praise poetry. The article also demonstrates that political contention within different strands of the Southern African liberation movement could also find expression using the railway metaphor.*

## **Opsomming**

### ***Third World Express: treine en “revolusie” in Suider-Afrikaanse poësie***

*Hierdie artikel ondersoek politieke aspekte van die treinmetafoor in 'n verskeidenheid Suider-Afrikaanse gedigte, sommige in Engelse vertaling. Deur die werk van Mongane Serote, B.W. Vilakazi, Demetrius Segooa, Phedi Tihobolo, Thami Mseleku, Jeremy Cronin, Alan Lennox-Short, Harold Farmer, Freedom T.V. Nyamubaya, Abduraghiem Johnstone en Mondli Gwala te ondersoek, word aangetoon hoedat die tegnologiese aard van*

*treine en spoorweë op verskeie wyses ’n boodskap van politieke opstand en revolusie kan dra. Die skrywer toon aan dat die politieke potensiaal van die spoorwegmetafoor voortbou op die algemene reaksie ten opsigte van spoorweë wat in gedigte voorkom wat uit tradisionele Afrika-pryssange voortspruit. Die artikel toon ook aan dat die politieke stryd tussen verskeie stromings binne die Suider-Afrikaanse bevrydingsbeweging ook deur die spoorwegmetafoor tot uitdrukking kan kom.*

## 1. The railway metaphor

Railways have infiltrated the sensibility of Southern Africans in different ways. The title of this article is borrowed from a long poem of the same name by Mongane Wally Serote, too long to include here in full, in which the idea of the express train becomes a cognitive metaphor for the revival of the hopes and aspirations of the dispossessed in South Africa, but also worldwide. The poem culminates in the evocation of an express train roaring through the ghettos, literal and spiritual, of the third world, gathering up the energies of the people for a renewed assault on the conditions of their enslavement:

– it is that wind  
it is that voice buzzing  
it is whispering and whistling in the wires  
miles upon miles upon miles  
on the wires in the wind  
in the subway track  
in the rolling road  
in the not silent bush  
it is the voice of the noise  
here it comes  
the Third World Express  
they must say, here we go again.

(Serote, 1992:35.)

Serote’s poem was published during the run-up to the epochal elections of 1994 which marked the beginning of South Africa’s transition to democracy, but the train as a representation of political momentum, an icon of mass mobilisation and social solidarity, has been widely accepted in popular culture for many years.<sup>1</sup> The railway or

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1 Think, for instance, of the popular music group “Stimela”, founded by Ray Phiri in 1982, and tracks like “Whispers in the deep” which was banned from being broadcast by the apartheid regime.

train metaphor in its specifically political range of reference, climaxing in the idea of revolution, must be distinguished from its role in everyday language. When we say, “that train has already left the station”, or “he was going like a steam train”, or (of someone’s argument) “it was like being hit by a train”, we are using the train metaphor as part of ordinary communication, as one of those “metaphors we live by”, to employ the conceptualisation developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). The basic features which make the metaphor cogent are the train’s mass, its powerful autonomous motion, its mobile collectivity (it moves a group of people *together*), and its size and solidity in relation to the relative frailty of the human body. Miss the train and you are left behind. Get in its way, and you are smashed. The political or revolutionary metaphor adds a further, specialised range of implication which emphasises the train as a means of *mass* transportation or mobilisation; as belonging to a different mode of technology (signifying a changed and more powerful mode of political action); and as the most effective means of moving people *collectively* to somewhere completely different, speedily, reliably and efficiently. In this way the train develops into a compelling rhetorical figure presaging powerful movement towards a new socio-political order.

## 2. Historical roots of the railway metaphor

The potential political significance of the railway metaphor builds on its earlier history in colloquial Southern African language and culture. Railways are not only an important part of the region’s industrial history (quite apart from the vital role they continue to play in the region’s development), but they were also probably the main technological innovation signalling the advent of cultural modernity. The importance of railway poetry in Southern African literary discourse is in part a function of the role of railways as a very powerful and widespread agency of social and political modernisation. It was the railways which first linked rural Southern Africa to the industrial heartlands which opened up in Kimberley and Johannesburg following the discovery of diamonds and gold during the 60s and 70s of the nineteenth century. They played an indispensable part in sustaining the migrant labour system which came into being to supply the needs of the mines, and unwittingly brought about the penetration of urbanised ways of life into the world of small-scale pastoral communities, dominated by the rhythms of clan, herd and season. The impression they created there went deep. Not only did the creation of the so-called “permanent way” bring large-scale interventionist engineering into the experience of rural people on a scale

never before imagined, with cuttings, bridges and tunnels making light of the givenness of nature, but the sheer power and impressiveness of the railways, their speed and tractive capability undaunted by topography or weather, spoke of human capacities previously unknown to rural people. Consider the poem “Woza Non-jinjakazi!” (Come! Monster of steel) by Vilakazi (2008), which starts (in translation):

Come, you monster made of steel,  
You prancing dancer of the roads  
Who races on your double tracks  
Clamped with iron braces!

You curve and climb, descend and wind  
Across the uplands and the plains.  
Yet you who snatched our fathers’ fathers  
Away from home and family,  
Are deaf to prayers for news of them;  
Ignoring questions, all you do  
Is tear on faster and faster still.

The train is admired for its vitality and grace: the steel monster is a “prancing dancer” (picturing, perhaps, the motion of the connecting-rods at speed) moving effortlessly and gracefully over variegated topography. Like some marauding mediaeval dragon, the train has snatched the men-folk from the villages for two generations, but provides no news of them. The fourth verse brings in the anguished note of self-laceration at the onset of modernity, the pain of a culture feeling itself at a loss, ugly feelings of inferiority:

O, go away, you timeless sun  
That never once revealed to us,  
Whose skins are black,  
That hidden store of gold  
Which now we see bestowing wealth  
On peoples everywhere on earth,  
While we, the sons of Africa,  
Can only stare, our thick lips gaping!

Come kindly dusk and usher in the night! –  
Already I hear the shrilling pipes  
Sounding like the water-kelpies  
Vanishing in the flow of the Thukela.  
I hear the Vendas and the Tshopis  
Loudly singing songs of love,  
Bringing to mind the carefree lovers  
Who low like grazing milch-cows –

Those whose colour is black and white,  
Who stray across the African plains.  
I listen as the earth resounds  
To stamping feet that stimulate a dance,  
Reminding me of Mameyiguda  
On Durban's open spaces.  
I hear so many strange new chants  
Unlike the Mfolozis' clans!

The speaker hears the sounds of the train approaching, its whistle sounding like the ancestral spirits, the shades (*water-kelpies* in this translation),<sup>2</sup> playing in the waters of the Thukela River. The Vendas and the Tshopis are "Loudly singing songs of love". The poet hears their too-easy cooperation with the new, confusing world of railways, mines and modernity – an attraction which the poet feels as well. The exhaust-beat of the engine mingles with the stamp of dancing feet, producing a conflation of mine-dancing, the locomotive's own repetitive motion and the rhythmic stamp of the mills at work crushing the mineral ore. He hears "strange new chants", so unlike the traditional songs of his clan. In the end he wants to stave off the monster's arrival, stay musing on the strange predicament, or hide like a child among the pumpkins and mealie-stalks, watching the work-force of modernity passing by, morning and evening:

O, go away, you steely monster!  
Why must you arrive so soon  
When I, at the moment, am lost in thought  
And wish that I could hide myself  
At home among the mielie-stalks,  
Covered with cobs, surrounded by pumpkins;  
For there I should never be disturbed  
By bustling crowds of chattering people  
Passing noisily on their way:  
I see them at dawn, I see them at dusk –  
At sunrise and sunset they pass me by.  
(Vilakazi, 2008:7-9.)

Although related to traditional praise poetry, Vilakazi's (2008) poem bears the hallmarks of a troubled personal encounter with moder-

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2 The translation might be criticised as overly Westernised, but it has some merit. For instance, using the cultural analogy of *water-kelpies* in stead of "ancestral spirits" captures their spontaneity, mischievousness and unaccountability better than a literal rendering.

nity. Much closer to authentic praise poetry is the Sesotho poem of Segooa (2008), “The Train”, which opens:

I am the centipede, rusher with a black nose,  
drinker of water even from the witches’ fountains,  
and who do you say could bewitch me?  
I defeat the one who eats a person [the sun], and also the coal  
black darkness  
where beasts of prey drink blood day and night.  
I am the centipede, mighty roarer with an inward roar.

To be sure, a poem praising the train is not going to be one of the ancient praises passed from generation to generation as part of the oral repertoire. Instead, we have a poem glorifying the train *in the manner* of praise poems. Two features are especially important: the poet’s intense imaginative identification with the train, and the sense of accomplished and appropriate vision. Segooa’s praise, for instance, starts: “I am the black centipede, the rusher with a black nose”. The implied metaphor (a descriptive eulogy) neatly captures some of the visual facts about the train. The train is praised, not for any mushy romantic reason, but because it is powerful, mysterious, impressive, an appropriate object for veneration and evocation. The second line describes it as “Drinker of water even in the fountains of the witches”. Imagine the line-side water tanks as witches’ fountains, and the scale of the imaginative universe becomes clear. Impervious to the rival forces of night and day, “the train” says:

At home they say I am lost to them –  
No sheltered child, I am the centipede that praises the vlei;  
Hunger does not delay me  
Nor am I hindered by sore feet,  
But the mountains, children of the wilderness, they delay me  
They exact a price and I pay it.

Here it is the train’s superior strength, on a cosmic scale, and its evident invulnerability to the frailties that ravage the organic universe of people and animals that attract the poet’s admiration. The train belongs to the mysterious, unfathomable world beyond the known bounds of community; not needing “home”, impervious to “hunger”, never foot-sore or daunted by mountain climbs, unknown to the ancestors. The consequence of allowing this homeless wanderer to break loose is the decimation of village life. Towards the end of the poem, when he tackles the migrant labour question, instead of the personal response we saw in Vilakazi’s poem we have the spectacle of the implacable train, like a river in flood, triumphing over reluctant

labour recruits, carrying away whole villages at a time, dominating even the demands of the economy and the “captains of industry”:

My feet forever on the iron road  
I go falling, falling into ravines,  
I mimic a river in flood  
That carries a man’s whole village to the mines –  
What can the road-owners do to me, the rushing black  
centipede  
that keeps to time?

(Vilakazi, 2008:10-11.)

### **3. Extending the railway metaphor: the political dimension**

The influx of directed, impersonal and technologically-based energy which underlies traditional interpretations of the train as seen in African poetry – its assault on the rural community, destroying families, carrying men-folk off to the mines and the cities – is adopted and transformed to express an unstoppable collective surge towards the future, a future which is always enticing, never bleak. What was unfamiliar, extraordinary, almost miraculous to the praise poets develops into a casually effective rhetorical figure, shared by black and white poets alike. The train is seen as representing powerful, politically-inspired movement supporting change, sometimes resisted, sometimes welcome, but always supposedly unstoppable.

In Tlhobolo’s poem “This Train”, the poem itself becomes “the train”, which sweeps into its form a stream of compact commentary on the unreasoning oppression meted out to Africans – “God’s step children”, in the phrase borrowed from Sarah Gertrude Millin (1924), though she herself used it in reference to so-called “coloured” or “mixed-race” people – throughout modern history, from the time of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, through the period of dispossession, and culminating at the present moment of writing, in solitary confinement, in apartheid South Africa:

It’s hard to believe  
The fate of humanity  
Cries, screams, voices and torment  
Pleas of reason rejected in public  
  
Like slaves in the galleys of ships  
Beneath the howling westerly winds  
Africans detained uncharged

Grieving mothers  
Wrapped in black shawls  
In the land of their birth  
Illegally possessed  
Amidst universal outcries

Abantu daughters molested and left to die  
Blue skies weeping  
Nature pleading for pardon  
On behalf of God’s step-children  
Enslaved

The train/poem presents and represents the long historical legacy of African oppression as an ongoing revolt against nature, or the “natural order”, with political power expressed as the relentless force latent in the railway metaphor, in this instance running contrary to natural justice and universal opinion. The invitation to the (foreign) reader is to board and see “[t]his train of tears and blood”:

For testimonial sake  
Come to my land so to see  
This train that never stops  
This train  
This train of tears and blood  
This train

(Tlhobolo, 1991:34.)

The poem’s appeal is to the outsider, the foreign witness, who may be unable to change the situation but in watching this “train of tears and blood” can for “testimonial sake” affirm the stark reality of suffering. The train here represents the seemingly unstoppable forces of oppression, sweeping on into the future; evidence that the railway metaphor is as hospitable to expressing malevolent historical forces as it is to carrying hopes for an irresistible movement towards political liberation. The train metaphor can equally well be invoked to convey political rivalry and conflict. “The TransBophuta-Venda Bomber Express”, by Mseleku (1982), is about the illegitimate creation of the so-called homelands, the national states or Bantustans, brought into being as the apartheid regime stubbornly pursued its notion of racial separation. Mseleku views with scorn and distaste this express train patronised by crowds rushing towards an ignoble political birth – by caesarean section – in the maternity wards of “separate development”. (There is very little male empathy for the plight of women giving birth in this metaphorical distinction.) The South African Railways at the time had taken to naming, or branding, certain prestige passenger trains like the Trans-Karoo and the Trans-Natal



Expresses. The first homelands to be granted phoney independence were the Transkei, Bophuthatswana and Venda. They were later joined by the Ciskei to become the so-called TBVC states. This forced political development is likened in the poem to a phoney express train whose geographical designation (“TransBophuta-Venda”) straddles disparate territories impossible to serve by means of a single train service, territories which are actually an integral part of South Africa, thereby mocking the political intention represented by the homelands initiative:

The independence express  
Bound for the maternity wards  
In Thoho ya Ndou and Mtata  
Overloaded  
With revelling celebrants  
Of National states  
(Mseleku, 1982:19.)

On a track parallel to this independence express, which is full of revelling dupes bound for the jumped-up “capitals” of the new states, runs the revolutionary bomber express, forced to watch the affair from a distance. The African National Congress, the Pan Africanist Congress, the Azanian Peoples Organization and other militant resistance movements were banned at this period within the country, their enforced exclusion from political activity registering here as the estranging space between parallel tracks:

The bomber express  
Cruising swiftly  
On parallel rail lines  
That never came  
To agree to the journey

The inauthentic (caesarean) “birth” of these faux states is contrasted with genuine revolutionary struggles which gave rise to independence in the rest of Africa (one is reminded here of the traditional saying invoked in the title of Serote’s *To every birth its blood* (1981):

It has been  
A bloodless achievement  
Your birth my sons  
Was good  
Unlike your half brothers  
In greater Africa

As the poem closes, the poet overhears with heavy irony the apartheid architects patronising the collaborators and he responds “*Nithi*

*Lusapho / Lukazimele geqe*: "You say it's a family / born of independence" (Mseleku, 1982:19-20; italics – LW).

#### 4. Multi-valence of the political metaphor

In "Location train through Rondebosch", Cronin creates a metaphor for incipient political upheaval or revolution from the emergence into view, in leafy Rondebosch, of a commuter train from the townships of the Cape Flats, "its red and yellow front / fist out as it emerges through / the rain". Core populations living on the Cape Flats were displaced through forced removal from areas such as the famous District Six in Cape Town, and elsewhere along the Peninsula. As the location train trundles through the genteel suburb, its thundering weight and proximity widens a crack in the ceiling of a line-side flat. The structural separateness engineered by apartheid, which fosters ignorance, is wearing thin:

as it passed  
    we did not look inside  
trains like social movements happen  
as they pass  
    we do not look inside  
moving up and down this line  
things happen  
and the ceiling  
    the ceiling barely holds  
                    (Cronin, 1970:73.)

Cronin's poem forms an interesting contrast with *Parallel lines* by Lennox-Short (1971), showing that the same technology (in rhetorical terms, the same vehicle) can yield wholly antithetical ideological perspectives (divergent tenors). In the run-down suburb of Woodstock – often seen as a grey area in the days when apartheid decreed strict racial segregation – the lines from the sprawling Cape Flats townships of Langa and Nyanga swing in from the East to join the commuter traffic to Cape Town, emanating from the wealthy white suburbs of the Cape peninsula. What starts as a conventional modernist protest at the deadening effects of the daily commute, suburb-to-office-and-back ("Hauling eight coffins and their dead, / My office train for Cape Town / Shoves its brown caterpillar head – / Through Woodstock's slattern wilderness"), turns into a threnody for a divided society:

But as the trains swing in to kiss,  
Behind the glass white handcuffs black,  
Black uncrowns white in the hiss

And chatter of wheel on steel.  
Three feet are thirty thousand miles,  
A carriage depth South Pole abyss.  
The coffins clatter, parallel files,  
And a siren wails a requiem.  
(Lennox-Short, 1971:7.)

Where Cronin's poem acknowledges the imminence of revolution and the sheer tenuousness of the apartheid dispensation, Lennox-Short's seems both daunted and defeated by the implacable givenness of continuing separateness. The railway metaphor, rooted in these instances at more-or-less the same geographical site, sustains these very different political visions equally effectively. In each case it is the tough materiality of railways, the rational geometry of their design, their power and unforgiving permanence, relative to the soft flesh, the relative frailty and the variability of human beings embedded in biological nature, that gives this strain of figurative language its cogency.

In Farmer's "Waiting for the train", which takes a jaundiced look at the Africa-wide phenomenon of postcolonial revolutionary struggle, the train *is* the revolution. The opening verse paragraph portrays guerrilla forces in action, houses burning behind them after a night attack:

There are lights in their hair, not the glint  
Of the sun or the sheen of health  
But the glow of houses burning.  
The wind blows against their legs, flame-thrower  
Threatening the garments they wear,  
And the air seethes with creatures  
Looking for their old food.

Such attacks are linked end-to-end, like trucks in a goods train, the resulting horrors of each assault concealed beneath a tidy tarpaulin. Every incident seems separate, insulated from its fellows, but together they make up the revolutionary train. On the platform, resplendent in newly-tailored uniforms, the postcolonial regime waits for the train to arrive:

The president is happy, the people are happy,  
but they are waiting for a cargo  
carried by clinking wagons and stretched out  
on parallel steel swords. Behind them  
there is a glow among the houses, for which  
no one will admit responsibility.  
(Farmer, 1990:13-14.)

The revolutionary elite is there to welcome the people they come to govern, people who are heaped in the tarpaulined trucks – alive, dead, who knows? The blood-thirsty insects seething in the air round the guerrillas near the beginning of the poem reappear at its end as the tarpaulined trucks themselves, seen as flies (tsetse flies? mosquitoes?) each bearing a bloody cargo. The tracks are “parallel steel swords”. The implication seems to be that revolutionary reality is a product of the means used to achieve it, and the cadres of the struggle on the ground are linked with their enemies as blood-suckers, even though both sides are in fact victims who have paid the heavy price which the grand presidential party on the platform perennially evades.

A comparable disenchantment pervades “The train was over-booked” by Nyamubaya (1985), a former member of the ZANLA forces in Mozambique. Ostensibly just a complaint about chaotic over-booking on the train from Beira to Salisbury, which is “Now called Harare”, the poem signals the disgruntlement of former freedom fighters discovering that those who struggled and sacrificed in Zimbabwe’s liberation war were not necessarily those who benefited from the revolution. Some of those with tickets legitimately purchased, who had paid the price, are seen

Wandering about at the station,  
Old people staggering, luggage in hand,  
Awaiting official announcement  
Young people hustling at enquiries  
Trying to check the departure time;  
But the train had gone halfway the journey.

Was the train actually over-booked? Those who had simply hung around in the waiting room somehow also made it to Salisbury:

Those on the waiting list  
Got seats also to Salisbury.  
Who else took the booked one?  
It was discovered right in Harare:  
With no tickets and no passports:  
Crooks in the waiting room Really made it to  
Harare.

(Nyamubaya, 1985:5.)

Again, the train metaphor captures the tension between a political collectivity, a *movement*, and the disparate actions and dispositions of individuals who may or may not be authentically part of that movement. The poem urges that a great many political bystanders,

who played little part in the revolutionary struggle, benefit from the efforts of true political activists, be they democratic party-workers or committed revolutionaries. With heavy irony, the poem affirms that “Crooks in the waiting room”, lacking the proper credentials, reaped the rewards paid for by others when the train arrived in Harare – when liberation had been achieved (a prescient thrust at the Mugabe regime).

Where legitimate means of political expression are disallowed, the desperate faith in violent revolution as a political solution, as the only means available, persists despite all evidence that it seldom yields a satisfactory social outcome. The social conditions that support human flourishing are not those attendant on military coups and palace revolutions. Southern Africans have on the whole been remarkably restrained in their search for political emancipation, some would say (thinking of the Mugabe regime in Zimbabwe, perhaps too restrained). But typically, as the pressure for change builds, violence becomes more and more to seem the only possible solution, as in Johnstone’s poem “Pula Pulani” (“pay attention”):

Pula Pulani  
Freedom train is here  
Bring your luggage  
Makarov  
Limpet mine  
Grenade  
Pangas  
Bombs  
Molotov Cocktails

Pula Pulani  
Do not leave your baggage behind  
(Johnstone, 1990:20.)

Here the bald railway trope stands for the inevitable, all-or-nothing, option of violent revolutionary conflict as the only political way forward. As Horn expresses it, “In Johnstone’s poetry, words and guns are interchangeable” (Horn, 1994:131). Any ethical ambiguity latent in a call to arms expressed in poetry pales next to the social conditions that make such an articulation necessary – or so we are asked to suppose. The overt lack of any attempt at literary finesse conveys the message.

Finally, the political dimension of the railway metaphor in Southern Africa appears in all its baldness in a poem by Gwala (1987), “The

train is coming", dedicated to "the suffering people of South Africa who are waiting for their liberation":

The train of liberation is coming –  
From where? I don't know  
But it's snaking its way to South  
Africa. That's inevitable.

It offloaded people like  
Jomo Kenyatta in Kenya,  
Julius Nyerere in Kenya  
Kenneth Kaunda in Zambia  
Seretse Khama in Botswana  
Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe  
Samora Machel in Mozambique.

Steadily but surely  
The train is coming  
With Rohlhlahla Mandela  
To South Africa and with  
Sam Nujoma to Namibia.

The suffering people of South Africa  
Are impatiently waiting for the train.  
But the clique of oppressors and  
Their puppets are praying day in,  
Day out for its delay.

Unfortunately for the oppressors  
And their puppets, the train of  
Liberation is about to reach its  
Destination – South Africa.

(Gwala, 1987:11.)

Though the settlement negotiations were already gaining momentum, this fact was not public knowledge and Gwala's words articulate a long-term political certainty far from evident at that time. The faith is expressed through the train metaphor. Trains reach their destination, because that is where the tracks go, and political outcomes are as sure: if only it were as simple as that. Viewed from the perspective of the dispossessed, the actual political history tied to the names of the liberation heroes whom Gwala lists is utterly compromised, both in terms of nurturing democratic values and sustaining economic progress. But the idea of liberation which these heroes embody, like the pristine railway metaphor, remains uncompromised, a shining ideal untarnished by grim historical experience.

## 5. Conclusion: the value of the railway as a political metaphor, and its inadequacy

With typical imperial gusto, Winston Churchill once described the railway in East Africa as “one slender thread of scientific civilization, of order, authority, and arrangement, drawn across the primeval chaos of the world” (Churchill, 1908:8). The remark cruelly negates the social achievements of traditional societies, evincing that very blindness which makes colonialism in every age such an ambivalent force. But it also captures quite precisely the impact of railways on societies where they intrude for the first time. It is not merely the introduction of large-scale mechanical transportation that makes the difference – their empirical function – but rather the brush with new ways of thought, with large-scale, western-style organisational systems, their time-frames, planning and operational routines that jolts rural societies from their accustomed rhythms.

It is evident that for several significant Southern African poets in the twentieth century, when they wanted to capture the prospect of inevitable political change, liberation or revolution, it was natural to reach for the railway metaphor. Not only was the railway by the twentieth century a ubiquitous part of peoples’ lives, it was a prime example of relentless, seemingly unstoppable power; not only the physical power of steam and then oil or electricity, but also the mental power embodied in the technologies demonstrated by railway engineering. The counterpart to this admiration for railways is acknowledgement of the comparative frailty of the human being, in his/her unaided physical capacity. Faced with the seemingly unshakeable political presence of colonial exploitation, and in South Africa the apartheid madness, the railway became an apt metaphor for the *Sturm und Drang* of mass politics, the politics of urban modernity. The metaphor seemingly embodied those same claims of exceeding the human scale, of expressing well-controlled, unstoppable energy, which the writers hoped to see in the political movements they wanted to extol or critique.

How valuable is the railway as a political metaphor? From the evidence provided by these poems, it functions as a tool of mobilisation, conscientisation and (to a degree) rational political reflection, albeit in the minority medium of poetry. It also implies inevitability a pure ideality which is wholly at odds with the unpredictable nature of political life. Even surging political bandwagons, evincing the herd-like behaviour characteristic of so many mass movements, have none of the predictable, rational orderliness seen in the railway idea. To this extent, the railway metaphor in its political dimension could

be described as paralogical. It has proved a useful and sometimes moving instrument for conveying wishful ideological thinking, for persuasion and encouragement. But the metaphor is intrinsically flawed, as all metaphors are to greater or lesser degree. It is as unconvincing in its own field as are the computer-based metaphors which saturate cognitive linguistics today. This is hardly surprising. Technological metaphors are always suspect. Indeed, a metaphor as such encodes a sense of the inadequacy of denotative language. A metaphor is thought supplementing language's deficiencies by resorting to persuasive analogies borrowed from other experiential fields, cloaking the ground or vehicle in a suggestive aura of analogous connotation. Technological metaphors are especially seductive because they rely on the human thought-ways embodied in our own material devices, drawing on them to illuminate other matters, other patterns. We project the strictly delimited character of our technological creations onto material which differs in both quality and complexity, often to powerful rhetorical effect. Political reality is a great deal more intellectually intractable than the railway enterprise. Humans nevertheless remain deeply fascinated, even enthralled, by the metaphorical power of their own technologies, and employ these linguistic aids to thinking and feeling, even when in some ways they hinder authentic apprehension.

Railways have been a source of inspiration to poets from many parts of the world. In Southern Africa poets have used their skills to capture the unique feeling of railway life, from the celebration of South African steam locomotives, to the evocation of haunted lives lived alongside desolate sidings, to the metaphysics of journeys and travel, to the trauma of meetings and partings on railway platforms, and many other subjects (cf. Wright, 2008:xii-xxx). One can find counterparts to these *donées* in railway poems from several other countries (Hopkins, 1966; Carr, 1978; Ashley, 2007). But the sustained preoccupation with railways as a political trope, as a metaphor for revolution, its hopes and provocations, seems to be unique to the strain of Southern African poetry discussed here – a small but significant fraction of a much larger literary heritage devoted to railways and railway life.

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**Key concepts:**

cognitive metaphor  
paralogical metaphor  
political modernisation  
political revolution  
praise poetry  
railways  
social modernisation  
trains in literature

**Kernbegrippe:**

kognitiewe metafore  
paralogiese metafore  
politiese modernisering  
politiese revolusie  
pryspoësie  
sosiale modernisering  
spoorweë  
treine in letterkunde