

This issue of *Stand* concentrates on three specific themes – *The Making of the Polity, Africa* and *The Family* – with an additional section of poetry criticism. But these divisions are only signposts, as much of the conversation is going on behind the scenes – it's the subtexts and parallels, the correlations and implications of what is and might be that generate a special energy. On the surface, these sections, or groupings, are about the different ways people interact with each other, and about the relationships between the individual and the structures that negotiate an individual's place in the world, be it the polity (the organisation and control of these relationships through the "city state"), or the hierarchy of the family, or the collective label of an *Africa*.

Each has its own privileges and prejudices, its ways of unifying and divorcing the individual from the collective. In the case of the Africa section, we consider the ideas of exile and home, of tyranny and collective identity, and the state and the individual. All too often, historical shifts from colonial to post-colonial societies have only served to remind us that there is always a new imperialism to work against. But one of the rewards of the Africa section is also its subversion of the idea of the "other" – the undoing of the notion of us and them. In Jack Mapanje's prison chronicle we experience the wry humanising of oppression – the triumph of words, of language. The story, the narrative, develops its own ironic truth as the circumstances warrant – everything is context.

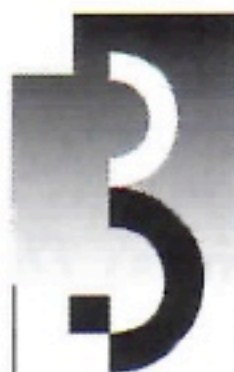
The questions here are largely internal. In his review of Wole Soyinka's *The Burden of Memory, The Muse of Forgiveness*, Martin Banham writes: "In seeking a closure of horrors of the past and of the present, Soyinka seems to say, the poets of Africa, formed in their various approaches by historical accident and alien oppression, yet rooted in the continuum of spiritual and mortal life that is their common black and African heritage, may be able to articulate, identify or stimulate the act of catharsis that is at the heart of truth, reconciliation and reparation." The point of this observation perhaps extends into other filial relationships – where the self, "family" and society are the corner stone of all human interaction.

Many of the pieces in the *Family* section struggle to deal with the elementalism of the family – of its resistance and vulnerability to loss and change, the mechanism of guilt and reconciliation, the magnificence of responsibility and inheritance. In the end, filial relationships are qualified against a backdrop of society. And when that society is turning in on itself, and the individual is lost to more primary struggles, a sense of belonging changes, mutates. Assia Djebar, in her return to Algeria in 'Sitting by the side of the road, in the dust'

says powerfully: “they have sullied the word ‘people’; they have perverted the sense of ‘nation’; they have soliloquised the word ‘Algeria’ as if the reality did not own its myriad eyes to watch them play out their pitiful comedy, as if it had lost the subterranean voices with which to deafen them!”

Ultimately, we are left to ask questions about where we stand regarding the structures that govern our lives. The polity markets itself in different ways – the organisation of knowledge in the library (for its political value as a cultural signifier, see Raymond Stock’s piece on the Alexandria library), the machine of “nation”, the defined and yet subtle workings of family.

In the next issue of *Stand*, we pursue these questions further, turning the spotlight on Europe and also celebrating Eugenio Montale and Peter Porter. For their help with the Africa feature in this issue, our especial thanks to Martin Banham, Tim Cribb, Abiola Irele, Jack Mapanje and Bill Swainson.



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