Sea Point Contact: Preface to a Literary History of Cape Town (Never Written)

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> …their talk, their excessive talk about how they love South Africa has consistently been directed towards *the land*, that is, towards what is least likely to respond to love: mountains and deserts, birds and animals and flowers.
>
> J. M. Coetzee, Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech (1987)

I

The Sea Point Contact is the name of a once famous geological site, at the southern end of Cape Town's seafront promenade. Today, amongst the walkers, sightseers and surfers it is easy to miss: just a rocky outcrop marked by a trig beacon, smelling of seaweed; a car park where locals sit in their vehicles to watch the ocean. But a plaque explains how the rocks along this shore record an event 540 million years ago when, at great depth, molten granite was intruded into the darker siltstones of what is now called the Malmesbury Group. Such was the heat of intrusion that these strata were (as the geological prose tells us) "softened, stretched and dismembered along the contact, forming a complex zone of mixed rock called migmatite. The transition from undisturbed dark rocks on the right, through intimate and complex mixtures of the two rock types to homogenous granite on the left, may be traced over a distance of 150 metres".

Cited as a clinching argument in early nineteenth-century debates about the age of the earth, this 'unconformity' showed that granite was emphatically not the oldest rock in existence. And so it helped to tip scientific opinion in favour of the 'Uniformitarians' (those who insisted that the physical geography of the earth could be explained by reference to gradual forces still acting), rather than some biblical, diluvian catastrophe, as believed by their opponents, the 'Catastrophists' or 'Neptunists' (who claimed that granite was the distillate of some primordial ocean, the fundament of all rock types). The site was even visited by a young Charles Darwin on his voyage of the Beagle in 1836, and an information board reproduces some lines from his *Origin of Species* (1859). They remain untranslated in the Afrikaans and isiXhosa panels provided by the officially trilingual municipality of greater Cape Town. One of the long, rolling sentences that tries to bring a new and (and in a quite specific sense) unimaginable conception of planetary timescales and organic evolution into nineteenth-century English prose:

> A man must for years examine for himself great piles of superimposed strata, and watch the sea at work grinding down old rocks and making fresh sediment, before he can hope to comprehend anything of the lapse of time, the monuments of which we see around us.

The monumental aspect of the surrounding city's geography is itself a result of the volcanic intrusion which the Contact renders visible. The granite and baked shales form a hard base that deflects downwards the forces which would otherwise cause folding in the rocks above. As a result, in a process known as 'emerging relief', the sandstone massif of Table Mountain has for some 280 million years been rising up from the ocean floor – "with such quietness and regularity", as John Playfair explained to the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1813, "and in so great a body, as not to disturb or alter the relative position of the parts" (269).[1]

From a tidal pool, across the tarmac and along a beach where municipal workers rake kelp off the sand each morning, past the toilets where homeless people wash their clothes, you can walk along the remnants of this unimaginably distant and violent intrusion. The coastal promenade sits atop a marker of deep geological time. The oldest visible rocks of the Cape peninsula, eroded by the Atlantic swell, are met by the blank international modernism of the holiday apartment blocks that face the sea. But between them is a space of human pleasure, public display and performance, an area that was once zoned for Whites Only under apartheid's Group Areas Act, but is now one of the few truly mixed spaces in the city – at least on a weekend. In François Verster's 2009 documentary, *Sea Point Days*, the camera lingers on human bodies of all kinds: swimmers in the public pool, figures sleeping it off on the lawns, pensioners taking their constitutional, squinting at Robben Island through the glare.

This meeting of land, sea and a remarkable diversity of human cultures seems an apt site from which to begin when trying to understand Cape Town as a place of both striking physicality and a complex, traumatic history. That "patch of flatness on the sea's horizon" as Mtutuzeli Matshoba described Robben Island in his 1979 "Pilgrimage to the Isle of Makana", serves as a constant reminder that this is a space where natural and social history are relentlessly implicated in each other. A site of banishment, exile and quarantine for centuries before the arrival of Sobukwe, Sisulu and Mandela, Robben Island is "a ship of ghosts patrolling just offshore along the Cape coast", in the words of one poet (Breytenbach, *Return to Paradise* 100). For another, its proximity and symbolic density make its role as a barometer for even the most innocent kind of weather report seem laced with other, more menacing conditions:

IF YOU SEE

the clear outline of the island
a smudge of land in a brown haze
a shimmering blue blur

IT WILL BE

rain is on the way, and winter winds
there is dangerous smog in the air
there will be long and windless heat

(Karen Press, *Echo Location* 91)

1 Radioactive dating confirms that the Malmesbury Group, absent of fossils, are indeed the oldest visible rocks of the Peninsula, having accumulated as sediment some 560 million years ago in an ancient ocean basin ('Adamastor') which was subsequently closed by the massive tectonic collision resulting in the formation of the super-continent Pangea ('the Pan-African Event').

Today, visitors leave for Robben Island every half-hour by high-speed ferry from the Waterfront shopping mall, while busloads of tourists waiting their turn on Tafelberg Road are scooped up by cable car. From sea level to the mountain-top almost exactly a kilometre above it, the two prime tourist attractions of the city remain locked in an uneasy dialogue with each other. It is one which suggests how Cape Town presents a peculiar challenge for the writer in being a place where the visual impact and sheer sense data of the city – its grand gestures and sweeping panoramas, the overwhelming juxtapositions of mountain chain and man-made structures – threaten to outdo any act of the descriptive imagination.

In his year-long meditation on place, *A Writer's Diary* (1997), the poet and critic Stephen Watson quotes a friend from Paris who remarks that she could not really find Cape Town beautiful because "unlike that European city, the South African one did not have its Baudelaire or Utrillo (the artist who had represented much of the arrondissement where she'd lived). Hence it had never been transformed into a place in the mind, the imagination. The beauty of the place thus remained on the level of the merely spectacular, the touristic" (9-10). As a result, in the popular perception (and perhaps, the global imaginary), a sense of place here tends to be rendered in clichés and explained away in convenient shorthands – the Mother City, the Fairest Cape, the Tavern of the Seas – which bear little relation to the city as it stands today. But could a city like Cape Town ever be given a 'sense of place' in this traditional literary sense? Is such a thing even possible in a postcolonial, African metropolis of the 21st century?

II

If the Sea Point Contact serves to introduce the first major term here – all those complex and contested ways of rendering the non-human implied by the phrase 'natural history' – then for the second subject, that of colonial history, we need to move into the city centre: along the flanks of Lion's Head (with its huge granitic whalebacks showing the extent of the geological intrusion), round Signal Hill and into the central business district. "So little of the original Cape Town remains", writes one contemporary novelist of the city, "Just the heavy star of the Castle pinning down its surroundings like a brooch" (Rose-Innes 83).

The Castle seems too grand a name for the building near the minibus taxi rank: a squat, five-pointed garrison made to watch over the entrance from both land and sea, once known to the indigenous Khoikhoi peoples of the peninsula as *kuikeip*, 'place of stones'.[2] Stones, that is, which belong explicitly to colonial rather than natural history;

2 The term is noted by Lieutenant-General Robert Jacob Gordon, commander of the VOC garrison at the end of the eighteenth century: "het casteel hiet kuikeip of klip kraal" [1791]. See Nienaber and Raper, who give the contemporary spelling as |Ui!khaeb, and assert that this was the "ou naam van die Kasteel en ook van Kaapstad self" (the old name for both the Castle and Cape Town itself) (796).

and which signalled, almost immediately, an unprecedented disruption and re-shaping of the local environment with the arrival of the European maritime empires.

When this colonial pentagon was built in the late seventeenth century, the shoreline of Table Bay reached up to where Strand Street runs today, before topsoil washed down from the rapidly deforested slopes above changed the shape of the coastline and modern planning schemes pushed the ocean even further from the city. On the earliest maps of the settlement, a road curves wide around the base of the Windberg (the 'Windy Mountain', now Devil's Peak) to travel on gentler gradients, then divides in two. Towards the east is the ancient cattle track used by the Khoikhoi herders as they moved inland and back again with the seasons. To the south runs the *wagen pad* (wagon road) cut by Company servants and slave parties bringing timber from the mountain gorges for lime kilns and palisades, ship repairs and the jetties which had to be constantly extended as the coastline receded.

The Castle is now dwarfed by downtown banks and corporate headquarters, but for a hundred years a small watchtower on its western battlement remained the highest man-made structure at the Cape. Until they were taken down in 2012 at the request of African National Congress MP Nomfunelo Mabedla, who suggested that they should be "put away in a museum with other artefacts dating from that era" ("Shock"), six flags flying on the Castle battlements used to provide a quick historical summary of a place (as Rudyard Kipling put it) "snatched and bartered oft from hand to hand" ("Song of the Cities" 177): Dutch East India Company (VOC) rule from 1652; the first British occupation in 1795; a brief window of remote control by the Batavian Republic from 1803 to 1806; the British Empire proper during the nineteenth century, the old South Africa during the twentieth and now the colourful, abstract Ndebele patterns which seem to break with the heavily representative symbols of successive colonial powers.

"Thus from the ground a wall of stone is raised", the second Commander of the Dutch station, Zacharias Wagenaer, orated at the laying of the foundation stone in 1666, "On which the thundering brass can no impression make": "s*oo doet men uijtter aerd een steene wall oprechten / Daer't donderend metael seer weijnigh can ophechten*" (Wagenaer 238).[3] Composed for the occasion by an unnamed member of the garrison and preserved in the records of the colony, these belligerent rhyming couplets make up the first 'poem' known to have been written at the Cape, a fragment preserved by generations of archivists, antiquarians and anthologists concerned more with literary heritage than literary merit:

> For Hottentots the walls are always earthen
> But now we come with stone to boast before all men,
> And terrify not only Europeans, but also
> Asians, Americans and savage Africans.

3 The translation that follows is by H. C. V. Leibbrandt, included in his *Precis of the Archives of the Cape of Good Hope: Zacharias Wagenaer, Journal, 1662-1670* (1901) and reprinted as "The First Stone of the New Castle" in Gray, 27-28.

> Thus holy Christendom is glorified,
> Establishing its seats amidst the savage heathens.
> We praise the great Director and say with one another,
> Augustus' dominion nor conquering Alexander,
> Nor Caesars's mighty genius has ever had the glory
> To lay a cornerstone at earth's extremest end!

Nonetheless, the rhetorical bluster aimed at all comers captures something of the mixture of embattled isolation and imminent globalisation as it impinged on a place which still appears in most historical sketches as a 'refreshment station' for European shipping en route to the East.

The *Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* was perhaps the world's first true multinational, and one matched only by the companies of Henry Ford and Bill Gates for its influence on the planet.[4] Just as its monogram was delicately traced onto the porcelain now displayed upstairs in the William Fehr Collection, branded onto the bodies of prisoners and horses, etched on ships, sea chests and cannons across a vast geographical area, so too the ravelins of Cape Castle took a similar shape to those laid down amid the swamps of Batavia (present-day Djakarta) where the real interests of the Company lay. Unlike Batavia or most European towns, though, the *Kaapsche Vlek* lacked outer walls; despite its tollgates and defensive hedges, the boundaries were shifting and porous as it expanded along the Liesbeeck River, and so within the Castle's five battlements were concentrated a whole range of activities, a colony in microcosm.[5] Hospital and bakeries coexisted with dungeons and *wapenkamers*; there was both Orphan Chamber and torture chamber, and before 1679 a Slave Lodge, later moved next to the Company Gardens but doubling all the while as a sailors' brothel.

III

"A colonial culture is one which has no memory", wrote Dan Jacobson in his 1971 introduction to a work that was once claimed as a very different point of literary origin in South Africa, Olive Schreiner's unlikely masterpiece, *The Story of an African Farm* (1883) (Jacobson, "Olive Schreiner" 115). This is all but inevitable, given the discontinuities and 'unconformities' of the colonial encounter:

> A political entity brought into existence by the actions of an external power; a population consisting of the descendants of conquerors, of slaves and indentured labourers, and of dispossessed aboriginals: a language in the courts and schools which has been imported like an item of heavy machinery; a prolonged economic and psychological subservience to a metropolitan centre a great distance away… (115)

Yet, he goes on, this is not to say that such an absence of memory means a forgetting of historical enmities. Rather, as violent beginnings are glossed over, mythologised

4 *The Economist*, Millennium Special Edition, December 1999 (Cited in Giliomee 3).

5 See Wayne Dooling, "The Castle: Its Place in the History of Cape Town, c.1666-1760".

and recast, such divisions tend to be regarded as so many given, unalterable facts: "phenomena of nature, as little open to human change or question as the growth of leaves in spring or the movement of clouds across the sky" (115). In another context, he deepens this meditation on the supposed absence of history and brings it into the twentieth century:

> Though my latest return to South Africa happened to coincide (quite unintentionally) with the Sharpeville crisis, my single overwhelming impression of South Africa, when I look back now, is not political. What I chiefly remember of the country are its spaces, simply: all the empty unused landscapes of a country that still seems bereft of any human past, untouched by its own history. Blue sky, brown earth, and people who live unaccommodated between: that is the abiding image of South Africa. (Jacobson, "South Africa" 79)

The drift of Jacobson's similes here – from political discontinuity and trauma to leaves, passing seasons, skies and empty spaces – signals the major, interlocking concerns that any literary history of a city like Cape Town must grapple with: the recovery of the colonial past and the representation of the natural world.

In considering a range of literary treatments of the colonial encounter at the Cape – the "intimate and complex mixtures" of its contact zones – I hope to ask how and with what results the contemporary writer is able to bring a sense of the past into the present: a past that is not dead, that is (as Faulkner remarked) not even past. What is the relation between specific archives – the records of the Dutch East India Company, Enlightenment travelogues and nineteenth-century natural history, the Bleek and Lloyd Collection of indigenous |Xam oratures – and the work of South African writers from the late twentieth century onwards? How do they imagine the relation between the pre-colonial trace, the early colonial record and the postcolonial imagination? Although it seems impossible to write a single literary history of Cape Town, I hope to ask what it might mean to read a history of the city through its literature.

Yet moving beyond an initial enquiry into the role of imaginative literature in bringing historical records into the public domain this work asks a more pointed, more local question. What are the consequences for such literature in a place known for its natural beauty and biodiversity, but also for historical trauma and ongoing social inequity? As such I hold in mind a substantial body of criticism that has traced the vexed attempts of naturalists and nationalists, novelists and poets to 'read' and write themselves into the South African landscape. It is a persistent area of literary enquiry in this part of the world, yet one that has in a sense rarely moved beyond the insights of one of its earliest texts, J. M. Coetzee's *White Writing*.

In this 1988 essay collection, the novelist and critic suggests that even the most accomplished English and Afrikaans literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Schreiner's liberal, anti-colonial *African Farm* included) betrays an inability or unwillingness to imagine a peopled landscape. It is marked by a "failure of the historical imagination" that expresses itself, he suggests, in two rival "dream topographies"

which recur throughout the literature (Coetzee, *White Writing* 6-7).[6] The first is the familiar motif of settler-colonial writing: a "network of boundaries, crisscrossing the surface of the earth, marking off thousands of farms" in gesture of heroic self-making. The second is more subtle, and more easily masked by 'nature writing' or 'landscape poetry':

> South Africa as a vast, empty, silent space, older than man, older than the dinosaurs whose bones lie bedded in its rocks, and destined to be vast, empty, and unchanged long after man has passed from its face. (7)

If call and response is the lifeblood of so many indigenous African forms, then for the transplanted Romantic poet – "no longer European, not yet African" (11) – there is no reply. The rocks, kloofs and kopjes withhold their meanings, giving back only silence, or a distorted echo.

It is a strangely persistent aesthetic vision, Coetzee suggests, and one that can all too easily shade into complicity with the colonial and apartheid historiography which claimed that, until the nineteenth century, the interior of what is now called South Africa was largely unpeopled. That the terrestrial adventure of Africa and the maritime endeavour of Europe arrived south of the Limpopo at roughly the same time, battling for supremacy at the expense of the Khoi-San, a 'vanishing race' doomed to extinction and so able to be seen as the 'truest' natives of southern Africa in both the ethnography of colonial intellectuals (like Wilhelm Bleek) and the poetic elegies of liberal dissenters (like Thomas Pringle).

My premise is that the distortions, contradictions and overdeterminations of this history – its staggered or textured coloniality, the multiple claims to indigeneity and belonging that it produces – are inevitably displaced into a nature that does the work of culture: the geographical as a flight from the historical; the natural as an avoidance of the social. Both the dream topographies identified by Coetzee, whether utopian or dystopian, result in an aesthetic mystification of (and an imaginative over-investment in) *the land*: in flora, fauna, inanimate topography and the non-human. It is, as Rita Barnard writes, "a strange, antisocial displacement of affection" that inheres in the complex relations between territorial possession, social exclusion and a literary fascination with an unforgiving African landscape (83). In his Jerusalem prize acceptance speech of 1987, Coetzee talks in less guarded terms about love: misdirected, ineffectual, suspect love of mountains, deserts, birds, animals, flowers and all those things least likely to return love.

Yet in developing different readings of the iconic natural history of the Cape peninsula, can one depart in some way from this by now well-trodden critical path? The

6 In his introduction, Coetzee explains that the phrase *white writing* does not refer necessarily or narrowly to writing by white people: "Nor does the phrase … imply the existence of a body of writing different in nature from black writing. White writing is white only insofar as it is generated by the concerns of people no longer European, not yet African" (11).

gaze towards hinterlands and the arid 'heart of the country' that has compelled so much attention in South African letters might be exchanged for an attention to pockets of wildness within the city, to coastlines and the littoral zone: that restless and shifting border which, in the words of Douglas Livingstone, has "always reflected that blurred and uneasy divide between humanity's physical and psychic elements" (62). I hope to contrast the scepticism which sees the political uses in claiming a close fit between land and language with the powerful litanies of place that characterise so much writing from southern Africa: a self-aware, post-apartheid tradition which assumes the confidence to name the land in a hard-won gesture of belonging. And while remaining acutely aware of how each half of the phrase 'natural history' tends to obscure, mystify or betray the other, I am interested in treating and reading these as distinct for as long as possible rather than automatically collapsing nature into culture.

IV

Remembering the competing claims of sunlight, history and poverty during his childhood in Algiers, Albert Camus wrote of a place that was both intensely physical but also patently unjust. It is one of several aphoristic, even gnomic lines in his essays and notebooks, where such rival impulses are held in an unresolved dialogue:

> Yes there is beauty and there are the humiliated. Whatever may be the difficulties of the undertaking I should like never to be unfaithful either to the second or the first. (53)

To anyone who has looked at it long and hard enough, Cape Town is hardly a beautiful city; in many ways, I would suggest, it is a uniquely ugly one. The raised freeways of the Foreshore, their unfinished outer viaducts suspended in the air, stand as memorials to an ideology of division so ambitious it achieved an almost total segregation between city centre and ocean. But setting aside the question of aesthetics, Cape Town is surely a physical, elemental site: a place where the elements impinge, like the south-easter worrying at the built environment and human structures of meaning more generally. "You can live in New York all your life and, give or take a blizzard or two, somehow persuade yourself that nature does not apply to you", writes Peter Carey in his 2001 homage to Sydney:

> I would never seek to define Manhattan by asking my New York friends for stories of Earth and Air and Fire and Water, but that is exactly what was in my mind as I walked through immigration at Kingston Smith Sydney International airport. It was a nice simple idea and I could head for EXIT B totally confident of the wealth of material that awaited me. (11)

In its careful attention to the physical world, mine too is an approach borne partly of an impatience at the predictability (even the complacency) with which much twentieth-century critical theory tends to reduce any instance of nature to a 'text' or a product of human representation. It responds instead to those writings that carry the sense of having been tempered and buffeted by outdoor conditions; it seeks a critical language shaped and thickened by the landmass to which it refers, complicated by its textures,

made more subtle by its gradations. Yet equally, I am aware that the case of southern Africa provides a unique test for any attempt to bring into dialogue what might broadly be called the 'postcolonial' and the 'ecocritical'. If the first has been associated with notions of hybridity, mixing, displacement, migrancy and historical recovery, then the latter is often concerned with their opposites: discourses of purity, conservation, regionalism, solitude and timelessness.[7]

Paying attention to variegated ways of writing nature at the Cape, and wondering how they might comprise a very different kind of 'natural history' for this part of the world, I keep in mind a distinction made by Jonathan Bate in *The Song of the Earth* (2000). Comparing the 'hectoring eco-pieties' of Gary Snyder with Elizabeth Bishop's finely worked meditations on apprehending the non-human, he discriminates between texts that adopt ecological themes, and those that do ecological work (Bate 199). Those in the first category merely dramatise a pre-existing political programme; the latter seek out ever more radical and imaginative ways of conceiving the relation between culture and nature, language and land, writer and place. Following this astute reader of Shakespeare, Wordsworth, John Clare, Adorno and Heidegger, I suggest that the questions we should ask of more recent Cape writing are those that ecologists ask of biological organisms – "How are they influenced by climate? In what kind of landscape do they flourish? What are their modes of creating shelter, their relations with other species?" (Bate x) – while at the same time wondering to what extent an ecopoetics shaped in such close dialogue with the European canon can survive transplantation to a very different part of the world. One of the guiding principles here is an attempt to retrieve details from writers, diarists, travellers, journalists, poets and prisoners and that may once have been deemed irrelevant, or those too fragile to survive in a time of acute political tension. I hope to excavate delicate insights that were understandably submerged during the political struggles of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and even to broach the potentially radical question: what does it mean to read such literature purely for pleasure?

The most basic literary pleasures, perhaps, are those of recognition: of matching a known environment to its verbal approximation on the page. Yet immediately this begs the further question: whose pleasure exactly? The literature of the Cape, so often penned by visitors, passers-by or else that literate minority "no longer European, not yet African" (Coetzee, *White Writing* 11), suggests again and again how the urge to read or write one's natural surrounds so often signals a certain disconnection from them, an ill fit or 'unhomeliness' which the very act of writing tries to assuage. In an important sense this is an account of literary failure, the repeated failure of writers to give Cape Town a credible, or shareable, literary identity. At a further remove, it asks

7 I am indebted here, and throughout this work, to Rob Nixon's textured and urgent account of the difficulties but also possibilities of bringing environmentalism into dialogue with postcolonialism. See in particular his *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* 234-6.

what such a traditional 'sense of place' – a city chronicler in the tradition of Dickens or Baudelaire – could possibly mean in a linguistically divided, spatially distorted (and relentless privatised) city of the global South. "I live in a country with eleven official languages, / Mass illiteracy, and a shaky memory", writes the ex-prison poet (now Deputy Minister of Transport) Jeremy Cronin:

> Here it is safe to assume
> Nothing at all.
> Niks. (92)

Nonetheless, in paying attention to actual prisons, gardens, roads, monuments, and mountain paths, my account of Cape Town and its literature looks beyond, around and below the well-known landmarks – both the iconic attractions and the well-worn literary debates – in an attempt to read the city in other, more unexpected ways. As a chain of disparate writings bounded by shared contours and weather systems, escarpments and rain shadows, the literature of the Cape is one that asks for a more creative reading of the relation between the topography of the city and the inroads of its inhabitants, a more expansive literary ecology for understanding the compelling but always elusive dialectic of mind and place. As such, I hope that the three words of my title will pull away from their immediate context and each other to combine and recombine in different and unexpected ways as the work unfolds:

Sea: the presence of the non-human, inanimate and elemental, preserved in the indigenous Khoi name for the Table Mountain chain, *Hoerikwaggo*; the constant pressure it exerts at the boundaries of human representation. Point: a navigational vector and symbol exclusive to the Western world, but also a complex history as a colonial port which opens its history to the East. Contact: the intrusions and disjunctures of the colonial encounter, but also its "intimate and complex mixtures". And also, finally, a more solitary impulse, continually frustrated, continually renewed, to find words equal to the 'endless forms' of an intensely physical world.[8]

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8 The phrase is from the closing line of Darwin's *The Origin of Species* [1859] 460.

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