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## 'Now with my hand I cover Africa': a love-poem sent by Stephen Spender to William Plomer

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The bodies of those I love engirth me and I engirth them

Walt Whitman, 'I Sing the Body Electric'<sup>1</sup>

William Plomer (1903–1973), addressee and recipient of the love poem discussed in this paper, was born in Pietersburg, South Africa, shortly after the British-South African war of 1899–1902. He had travelled between England and South Africa for much of his early life, his mother loathing South Africa after the death in Johannesburg of her second son, John, in 1908. She felt that the family should return to England but two factors worked against this: Plomer's father loved South Africa and its people, and there was never enough money to provide a secure life-style if they actually returned.

When Plomer finally left school in Johannesburg, his wish to study at Oxford was denied on financial grounds, so he worked first in Molteno and then with his father in a general store in Entumeni, experiences which were to inspire his first novel *Turbott Wolfe*,<sup>2</sup> a biting attack on racism in South Africa. *Turbott Wolfe* was well received in both Britain and the United States but, not unsurprisingly, was condemned in most quarters of South Africa where its open handling of the taboo subjects of racism, brutality and miscegenation horrified the white inhabitants. The public response to the book was partly responsible for Roy Campbell and Laurens van der Post inviting Plomer on to the editorial board of *Voorslag* (Whiplash), a new South African journal dedicated to art and literature. This collaboration was short-lived, however, because the editors' criticism of South African people and South Africa's political establishment was too much for the financial backers to accept. After the effective

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sacking of the trio, Plomer made his way in 1926 to Japan where he stayed for three years. This departure was accompanied by another burst of creative energy: Japan with its landscape and its growing militaristic power was perfect for Plomer's style of pastoral poetry and satirical prose narrative. The result was the collection of short stories *I Speak of Africa* (1927), the 'Japanese' novel *Sado* (1932) and two collections of poetry, *Notes for Poems* and *Five-Fold Screen*.<sup>3</sup>

In 1929 Plomer travelled to England, where he was to spend the rest of his life. He became 'reader' for the publishers Jonathan Cape, and perhaps the single issue he is now remembered for is his promotion of the writer Ian Fleming, creator of James Bond. He developed a friendship with Benjamin Britten and wrote libretti for the operas *Gloriana*,<sup>4</sup> and *Curlew River*,<sup>5</sup> the latter inspired by Britten's and Pears' visit to Japan in 1956, a trip organized by Plomer. After *Sado* his novels descended into weak Edwardian satires; it seems that without a powerful political edge his prose lost direction and importance. *Museum Pieces*, his last novel, was written in 1952, twenty years before his death. However, he continued to write poems until his death, the best of which retained a political edge, dealing with, for example, apartheid.

Perhaps Plomer's greatest (and certainly his bulkiest) legacy is his correspondence with literary figures of the twentieth century. The boxes of correspondence held by Durham University Library hold 24 metres of letters to Plomer. We are fortunate that he apparently refused to throw away any of this richly-ranging correspondence, including letters from E. M. Forster, Virginia Woolf, through to Spender, Isherwood and Auden, up to Derek Walcott and Nadine Gordimer towards the end of Plomer's life. With a few writers he maintained a life-time correspondence, notably E. M. Forster and Stephen Spender. Many of the 'queer' letters show how the homosexual middle-class writers of the 1930s had a particular attraction to working-class men, and to labourers and soldiers in particular. The links between homosexuality, upper-middle-class identity and left-wing politics and Thirties writers, such as Spender, Auden and Isherwood, appear to have been pivotal: as Spender would say later in life 'Sex with the working class of course had political connotations [...] It was a way in which people with left wing sympathies could feel that they were really getting in contact with the working class'.<sup>6</sup> In one early letter, part of the large volume of correspondence between Spender and Plomer from 1930 until Plomer's death in 1973, Spender sent a poem to Plomer that somehow displaces this working-class fetish to one that focuses on the cultural, African, Other. It is this epistolary enclosure, which dates from the very beginning of their friendship, that is the subject of this essay.

In early 1930 William Plomer met Stephen Spender at the Oxford English Club,<sup>7</sup> Plomer having been invited to speak there on the topic of Japanese literature. He became a close friend of Spender, and they developed a friendship that was to last Plomer's lifetime. On 4 May 1930 Stephen Spender sent William Plomer a letter, in itself rather pedestrian, but intriguingly containing a rather tortured, half-competent 'love' poem, written between February and May of that year. It is the only fragment of their correspondence in which Spender views Plomer as 'exotic' and worthy of erotic attention. The poem is clearly sexual in nature, and gives fascinating insight into Spender's portrayal of the addressee's Otherness, which can be seen to be fetishized. This paper offers a reading of the poem, an understanding of which is based on the perception of a double fear of both homosexuality and the colonial subject.

In this early poem by Spender, the erotic appeal of the working-class male is translated into the allure of the colonial, so that this poem illustrates how those issues of class and the colonial subject can interact and function as a similar sexual fetish. Of course, there is nothing new in middle-class queer men objectifying either working-class or black men. This problematic of sexual desire and the objective fetishism of the working class and/or the colonial subject appear in the most unexpected of places.

When dealing with the relationship between the fetish, the homosexual and class difference, we need to consider their connections within the context of psychoanalysis and materialism. Yet the former – at least classical Freudian psychoanalysis – has been problematic with regards to the fetish and homosexuality. For Freud it seems that the homosexual and the fetish are two mutually exclusive matters:

Probably no male human being is spared the fright of castration at the sight of a female genital. Why some people become homosexual as a consequence of that impression, while others fend it off by creating a fetish, and in the great majority surmount it, we are frankly not able to explain.<sup>8</sup>

The 1930s writers' sexual attachment to the working class or, as here, the colonial subject, cannot be framed within the mechanism of the Freudian fetish, as the homosexual's horror at the female's *lack* is actualized not through an object fetish (fur, boots, luggage) but through a sexual relationship with the *self-same*, or a manifestation through narcissism. A more fluid, and inclusive, definition of the fetish has been offered by Laura Mulvey:

A fetish is something in which someone invests a meaning and a value beyond or beside its actual meaning and value [...] Like a red-flag at the point of danger, the fetish object calls attention to a nodal point of

vulnerability, whether within the psychic structure of an individual or the structure of a social group.<sup>9</sup>

Spender's poem can be framed within Mulvey's definition of the fetish, concerning itself with feelings of vulnerability, fear and desire; and I will be arguing that the fetish (or the value and meaning) of working-class men is transposed on to the colonial subject.

It is obviously impossible to tell whether this poem alludes to an actual sexual experience, but, even if it does not, it is clearly a love-poem. We get an indication that there may have been some erotic encounter between the European 'I' with his 'gusty, Northern passion' and an African 'you' of 'imprisoned skies'. Yet if intimacy did happen, we see that this is an unsatisfactory union, 'we were strangers lying side by side'. The yearning and feelings of guilt in the poem are somehow uncontrollable.

Given Plomer's 'action-packed' and fruitful literary life, it is understandable that the young Spender would see him as a figure of hero-worship. His poem presents a strange mixture of admiration and sexual desire, suggesting both a naïf attitude to politics and an almost uncomfortable attitude to colonial subjectification. The opening stanza contains a worldliness that seems too precocious for the 19-year-old Spender:

This world grows tracks in my heart, maps the brow ...  
Yes, with brow bent troubled like Europe  
I feel Africa push roots already,  
The ports you rest at grow like cancers in me.

These opening lines seem to refer to the state of a Europe 'troubled' by post-war poverty, the repercussions of the Wall Street crash of 1929 and the rise of politics polarized between extreme left and right. However, political allegory gives way to an image of sexuality and colonialism, disease and disgust. Africa is presented as a subterranean conqueror, its tentacles 'pushing' the ground beneath Europe, quaking a decaying civilization. The line, 'I feel Africa push roots' already overtly sexualizes the stanza by suggesting the image of sexual penetration. As this poem was written for and to Plomer, may we assume that we are dealing with reference to anal penetration? The African roots take on a phallic function, evoking a fantasy of Plomer the African penetrating the European Spender. These lines seem to be connected to two ideas, or fears, of colonialism. The first is within the discourse of the black man (in this case, read African) as phallus, as put forward by Fanon, 'He [the Negro] is a penis';<sup>10</sup> the second, a colonial reverse or fear of the colonized pushing back into the European 'origin'.

Yet this penetration is not accompanied by any form of *jouissance*

on the part of the speaker. The ports the addressee rests in (for much of 1929–30 Plomer travelled Europe) are both literal ports and metaphorical orifices. A port is a site of entry, and of course exit, from the national body; moreover, ports are traditionally sites of promiscuous sex where sexually-transmitted diseases are rife. Leo Bersani points out in 'Is the rectum a grave?' that in the context of the HIV pandemic, contagion and infection are defined in terms of sexuality: children and heterosexuals with HIV are seen as innocent, but men who have sex with men are seen as guilty, 'It is as if gay men's "guilt" were the real agent of infection'.<sup>11</sup> Although, of course, Spender was writing decades before the advent of Aids, the analogy with Bersani is useful because Spender himself seems to be connecting sexual guilt and anxiety with sodomy and disease. The bodily guilt which Bersani has analysed in terms of heterosexist anxiety is heavily implied through Spender's metaphor of a cancerous growth, connected to the port – that is, the rectum. The poem thus puts into play the image of the diseased, cancerous rectum contaminated by the Other, the colonized.

Whether the anxiety controlling these tropes is a fear of the unknown (Africa), or guilt about same-sex desire, is never clarified in the poem, whose emotional tangle grows more complex as it proceeds. The second stanza embodies the personal and the political, not in a unified fashion but by creating a fissure between the sexual self and the political representation of Africa:

Now with my hand I cover Africa  
 If it were I struck here, you there  
 The hands could reach across darkness.  
 Surely the heart would not fear.

The first of these lines suggests both the European lover with his hand over the body of the African (an act of tenderness after sex?) and the active colonial desire of occupying Africa. This is a disturbing image, in that the European feels that he has enough power to eclipse the whole continent of Africa with just one hand, and this colonial arrogance can be seen to continue in the rest of the stanza. We may also see a connection with the idea of a map. Given the close friendship between Spender and W. H. Auden, and Auden's fondness for the map as a trope of psychosexual life,<sup>12</sup> it seems plausible to read this image in geographical terms, as if the poem envisages the Mercator map of the world, with Europe looking 'troubled' on top of Africa down below it.

More tricky are the lines 'The hands could reach across darkness/ Surely the heart would not fear'. Spender's apparent reference to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) reveals further complexities within his own poem. What is the purpose of the invocation of this text by

the young poet? As an epistemological offering on the nature and substance of colonialism? After his death in 1924 Conrad's reputation was riding high, and importantly one could read his work as a critique of the colonial process. The *Heart of Darkness* allusion in this poem offers to Plomer Spender's anti-colonial sympathies, even though they seem to be framed in a confused colonial mind-set. One other explanation for this reference to Conrad is based on a homo-social/homosexual reading, along the lines suggested by Gregory Woods,<sup>13</sup> from which it may be suggested that Spender's apparently crude allusion may be pointing to darker, deeper possibilities. Woods has pointed out the strong homosociality, bordering on homosexual desire, between Marlow and Kurtz. It may be that Spender positions himself in the role of Marlow in search of a Kurtz who is perceived to have 'gone native'. The lines evoke the images of separation and journeying from *Heart of Darkness*; and ultimately, if the simile is extended to Conrad's narrative conclusion, the thought of a separation made final through death can be read back into the poem as the impossibility, undesirability and fear of a relationship. Kurtz (Plomer) was too hot for this Marlow to handle. This poem points to a conclusion that denies the possibility of two lives shared.

We must address ourselves to the question of why this relationship is doomed, at least sexually, before it begins. What is Spender's own 'Horror!' in this poem? Is it the fear of sex with men? Clearly not, for other correspondence sent from Spender to Plomer after this poem, indicates that he seemed to have no problems with one-night stands and affairs with men. Was it Plomer's connection with the Other, his African roots – the fetish, as Mulvey says, that flags up a point of danger? This is surely the answer, for how else could we read the admission in the third stanza that 'we are divided before parting;/ Not miles not seas could so divide.' Spender attempts to reconcile the metaphorical and literal Africa and Europe, yet even during the sexual act there is a distance that cannot be bridged. It is not the geographical distance that divides these two individuals, it is the psychological and material burdens.

So far this poem reads as a tortured lament, a poem that sets out the impossibility of love, of only transitory sexual desire, ridden with guilt and rejection. The impediment is identified in the next line of the poem which sees the African Other as the abject: 'the unknown that cut between us/ We were two strangers lying side by side.' The textual unknown in *Heart of Darkness* is translated to the explicitly unknown of this poem, cutting right into its heart. This cut, painful as any surely must be, is phonetically repeated in the final stanza's 'ruts blossoming in my heart' – where 'rut' means a hollow or mark in a road in the geographical landscape, and also an animalistic urge or sexual excitement.



This poem is both avowing and disavowing sexual desire, yet its fetishist connection to the 'unknownness' of the addressee never lets go. The sexual desire at first emanates from the ontological nature of the addressee, and yet it must be disavowed because of the same. Does this confusion arise from Plomer's double-life? He is clearly African for Spender, yet he is the product of a white, middle-class, émigré family. 'We were strangers' implies we do not know each other and, also, we are the strange, the foreign, the unfamiliar.

At this point the poem seems to lose momentum, becoming overly metaphorical in style. It is unable to resolve the subject matter in hand, and resorts to the clichéd rhetoric of the love poem:

And the great gulf swept up between us in the dark  
Yours were the sun and the imprisoned skies  
My gusty, Northern passion must destroy.

The unknown that cuts has now become 'a great gulf'. The quake that begins in the first stanza, leads to a bridgeable cut in stanzas two and three, and becomes a gulf in stanza four, making the process of rejection and abjection complete. The 'troubled' Europe of the opening simile is sexually destructive, it is a 'Northern passion that must destroy' the 'sun and the imprisoned skies'. Read in terms of colonialism, Spender's love is both destructive, destroying or at least eclipsing the sun, and redemptive in that it has the power to destroy 'the imprisoned skies', presumably representing the racial abuse and forced occupation of South Africa. It is a raw passion that cannot be harnessed for good or bad, it is directionless and arbitrary. Or is it? The final verse of the fourth stanza asks 'How could I quench that candle in your eyes?' The line rests on the modality of the verb 'could'; how could I possibly do that, to you? Again we turn from the political to the personal. This again points to a poem about the rejection of an individual, yet is undermined and subverted by a love that cannot let go – a love not merely sexual desire, but a redemptive longing.

The final stanza interestingly connects the 'cut' of stanza three with the themes of separation and animalistic desire:

Thus from my heart the ruts collected and scatter  
Times painful blossoming shoots forth these words  
From a town's smoke and the black telegraph,  
Not like my thoughts under the feet of birds.

These 'ruts' are also emotional scars, once again desire and love are played off against one another. In these lines Spender is also setting up a contrast between smoky towns and black communications technology of industrialized Europe and pastoral Africa. Yet Plomer himself did not often enter into such a pastoral in his own writing on

South Africa. The veldt described by Plomer in *Turbott Wolfe* is a violent landscape contaminated by the brutalities and inaction of the white settlers. One of his earliest poems, 'A Fall of Rock', which pre-figures one of his best short stories *Ula Masondo*, is an attack on the inhumane conduct of mine owners and white workers towards the black workers which reads as a humane, politically charged manifesto against the capitalist system that creates such inequalities:

[...] 'Oh!' Cry two or three, while red and blue  
Sparks fly from diamond earrings; several men  
Are glad for the excuse to squeeze white hands  
And murmur reassurance in small ears  
They say perhaps it was a fall of rock  
In the deep mines below.

...  
[...] Two kaffirs trapped  
Up to the waist in dirty water. All the care  
That went to keep them fit - !  
Concrete bathrooms, carbolic soap,  
A balanced diet and free hospitals  
Made them efficient, but they die alone [...] <sup>14</sup>

(It is ironic that, as we shall see, Spender was shortly to criticize Plomer's work as politically lightweight.) Conversely, Spender's own image of industrial 'smoky towns' may remind those familiar with Plomer's work of the Blakean landscape seen by the eponymous hero of *Ula Masondo* entering Johannesburg for the first time, '[...] distant ships between dark sky and dark sea, and from round them, as from ships, stood out faint fumes of smoke, faint fumes in space'<sup>15</sup> – a long way from the romanticized idyll of birds pecking in the kraal. It seems that Spender's poem is reflecting a certain naïf perception of a South Africa which was heavily industrial in parts, and equally brutal throughout. The last line is, to this reader, the strangest of the poem; we may see the poet's 'thoughts under the feet of birds' as a rather bizarre intertextual allusion to Yeats' 'Tread softly for you tread on my dreams',<sup>16</sup> asking his addressee to think kindly of the words that he has transcribed. After all Spender is presenting this poem to a poet and novelist who, at that time, was better known than himself.

In the surviving letters from Spender to Plomer, this is the only item that resembles a love statement. Plomer obviously very quickly became demoted from erotic/exotic object to friend status, not so much somebody to be respected as somebody to see as an equal – an attitude which at times clearly irritated Plomer. When *Sado* was published in 1931, Spender wrote to Plomer that

Your book interests me in a way it is very unsympathetic to me. There

is a didactic note in it which is no doubt deliberate and creates its effect [...] Some of the statements you make are true, but I am curious to know what standpoint you make them? [...] It seems to me that the only thing a writer can do is draw attention to the real issues [...] of fucking, money, religion, food, and all the primitive needs in life [...]<sup>17</sup>

Plomer's response must have expressed annoyance at Spender's letter, for in the following letter Spender states

I'm awfully sorry if my remarks seemed inappropriate, I was not so much criticizing your book as trying to explain my point of view by putting myself on the opposition side as it were ...

... I think that your novel would have been so much more terrific if instead of walking between two civilizations, the East and West – and the other two civilizations – the past and present – and making statements about the people in your novel, who really represent nothing more than they are going to disappear (so how can one be didactic about them?) that you had *accepted* the fact stated in p. 156. [*Sado*] that the masses are going to dominate.<sup>18</sup>

Spender's own inconsistencies with regard to aesthetics are obvious. Firstly he criticizes Plomer for being didactic instead of talking of 'fucking and money', and in the later letter he attacks his novel for not being didactic enough because it (or Plomer) does not accept that the 'masses are going to dominate'. Perhaps we can forgive the young Spender this incoherence on the grounds of youth and political uncertainty. Certainly his reply to Plomer's letter alerts us to the fact that Plomer was still a figure not to be crossed aesthetically. A sharper division came when Christopher Isherwood read *Sado*, after which Spender had the back-up he needed in terms of Isherwood's critique of the text. He sent Plomer a rather long letter, naïvely criticizing the text for its lack of political content:

Christopher told me that he liked your book very much although he criticized it on rather the same political or social grounds as I had done. He seemed to feel that when your characters were talking although they talked about the East and West, etc, etc, they were only really interested in their own individualities. Of course the people in your book may have been like that in actual life, but somehow I feel that nowadays unless an artist shows great awareness of the much more important social problems behind the lives of his characters, his work tends to be disappointing.<sup>19</sup>

In fact nothing could be further from the truth. In a similar vein to Plomer's first novel, *Turbott Wolfe*, *Sado* is an excellent account of Japan in the 1920s and the rise of militarism.

These letters of 1932 suggest that Plomer very quickly ceased to be an object of sexual fascination for Spender. The excitement of the

African very quickly began to wear off; when Plomer began to play his part in the English literary circle his exotic nature dissolved, leaving just another middle-class homosexual. For Spender fun was to be found elsewhere. He wrote to Plomer in 1931 that he was

looking for a Friend. [...] I still hope that the Anarchists or Syndicalists Union of Neu Köhn may yield something. Or failing that the Winter Swimming Baths, the Ping Pong [...] the Turkish Baths, the Six Day Bicycling Race, the International Football Matches, Skating, Ice-Hockey, hockey, Gymnastics, rowing, Literature [...] the Flicks, the New Cinema, the New Art, the New Photography. There are many roads to Rome ...<sup>20</sup>

After the brief token of love or affection offered by the poem, Spender's relationship with Plomer becomes one of friendship. Their correspondence illustrates the development of that relationship and the change in Spender's own politics and sexuality. After the radicalism of the thirties, we see Spender becoming the 'family-man' to whose son Plomer stands godfather, and the promotion of both men to figures within the artistic and cultural establishment of Britain. The poem in itself may represent nothing more than a young man's infatuation with a rising light in the arts who had a certain erotic and exotic allure. Yet it remains culturally important for the way in which the African Other was given form and was made into a fetish.

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