The 80 000 people of the Upper Tugela Location are adamant they will not move. The government is caught in an impasse. Its own policy of bantustans and influx control has created a situation which it can no longer control. The strategic Tugela Catchment area is gradually being eroded away as the people of Upper Tugela resist further impoverishment through removal.

The emergence of new black political organization has meant that existing organizations like Inkatha, so as not to lose popular support, will be compelled to take up the issue of removals with ever more vigour. This is bound to make consolidation even more difficult for Pretoria.

The government is thus caught in a difficult situation. Determined to press ahead with consolidation and already having spent vast amounts of money on it, it has to attempt to juggle the numerous pieces of KwaZulu into some sort of geographical unity and at the same time take into account the many pressure groups at work. Inkatha, for instance, must now take a more and more active interest in removals or be discredited. Half a million more people are to be moved in Natal and Pretoria is forced to realise that the discontent engendered by this massive relocation can be used by political organizations for their long term ends. □

by COLIN GARDNER

TWO POETS IN NATAL

In the last fifteen years or so there has been an explosion of lively and varied South African literature in English. Why should this have been so? The answer to such a question is never easy: the causes of any socio-cultural development are complex. Indeed the development itself may have to be viewed with circumspection: a number of the important writers of this period had been at work for some years — Alan Paton, Es'kia Mphahlele, Nadine Gordimer, Richard Rive, Guy Butler, James Matthews, Douglas Livingstone. It seems safe to assert, however, that a crucial fact in our cultural as well as our political history was the rise of corporate black confidence in the early 1970s; this was manifested in the black consciousness movement, in labour activity, and in literature and other arts. All this in turn produced ripple-effects throughout all the alert areas of South Africa's political and cultural life, in such a way that even the writing of white authors whose focus is not primarily political has been subtly affected.

Natal is in many ways a microcosm of South Africa. It happens at the moment to be fairly rich in poets who have brought out work recently: Douglas Livingstone, a poet of great range and depth, a master of many different tones and forms;[1] Mafika Gwala, one of the most notable of the new black 'poets of resistance'; Nkathazo kaMnyayiza, whose quiet voice expresses strong and compassionate views;[2] Chris Mann, an imaginative and thoughtful observer and analyst; Shabbir Banoobhai, who has produced powerful lyrics on mystical, political and personal themes;[3] Peter Strauss, a poet of subtle, almost metaphysical intensity;[4] Dikobe wa Mogale, painter and poet, who was sent to jail for ten years (under the Terrorism Act) in the same month as his first book of poems appeared;[5] and several others.

In this article I am going to consider two books of poems, both published in 1982: **No More Lullabies** (Ravan) by Mafika Gwala, and **New Shades** (David Philip) by Chris Mann. A comparison of this sort is bound to be in some ways unfair to both poets — after all, they published their poems so that they would be read and responded to for what they are, not so that they might be compared and contrasted with another set of poems — but I hope that the juxtaposition may prove fruitful and suggestive, that it may indeed provide some insights into two of the most significant impulses in contemporary South African poetry. This is not to say that either Gwala or Mann can be thought of as merely typical. Both seem to me to be fine, important poets.

Mafika Gwala was born in Verulam in 1946. He has worked in a variety of jobs and has had a spell at the University of Zululand, but he has for many years been closely involved in the community life of Mpumalanga, the township adjacent to the so-called 'border industry' area of Hammarsdale, between Durban and Pietermaritzburg. At the moment he is a teacher. He has been engaged in both political and cultural work, and has suffered periods of detention-without-trial. Besides poems he has published short stories and articles of social, political and literary criticism and analysis. His first book of poems, **Jol'iinkomo** (Donker), appeared in 1977.

Chris Mann was born in Port Elizabeth in 1948. He has degrees from Wits, Oxford and London, and has taught in Swaziland and at Rhodes University. He is now one of the directors of the Valley Trust, a medical and agricultural project in the Valley of a Thousand Hills. He has an active and learned interest in African oral traditions, has mastered Zulu and Xhosa, and is a leading member of a Zulu band, Zabalaza. He has co-edited an anthology of South African verse. His first book of poems, **First Poems** (Bateleur), appeared in 1977.

These two poets, of about the same age, living and working a few kilometres apart, have certain important things in common. They are both very conscious of themselves as inhabitants of Africa; they both write in English while penning an occasional poem in Zulu; they both feel, in their different ways, the need to keep in touch with and extend certain African oral traditions. Yet no two writers could be more different – in their conceptions of poetry, their types of urgency, their tones, their forms, their music.

Chris Mann

Mafika Gwala's starting-point, like that of almost all recent black writers, has been the experience of oppression, frustration, dehumanization, particularly in the urban townships. He has felt himself to be a part of and a spokesman for a community: communal feeling, far more spontaneously alive among Africans than among most whites, has on the whole been heightened by shared suffering. This doesn't mean however that black solidarity is a phenomenon that Gwala simplifies or sentimentalizes; he is acutely aware of the 'black status-seekers', the social climbers, and those whom he calls 'non-whites', the people who for whatever reason acquiesce or appear to acquiesce in customary white evaluations of themselves. Gwala's poetry exhibits a number of modes and approaches, but in general he has felt the need to pass beyond the stage of protest and ironical analysis (which one associates with Mtshali's first volume and with much of the poetry of Sepamla) into what he would feel to be the more positive and energetic phase of creative resistance.

Often he speaks for his people with a prophetic intensity:

As our heroes die
As our heroes are born
Our history is being written
With the black moments given
looking the storm in the eye
Our hope is not gone

Our blackman's history
is not written in classrooms
on wide smooth boards
Our history will be written
at the factory gates
at the unemployment offices
in the scorched queues of dying mouths.

(from 'Afrika at a Piece', p. 44)

But even when he speaks more quietly and altogether more personally, one has a sense that, though he may have had to endure isolation, he carries a community with him:

Tap-Tapping

Rough, wet winds
parch my argonized face
as if salting the wounds of Bullhoek
Sharpeville
Soweto,
unbandage strip by strip
the dressings of Hope;
I wade my senses
through the mist;
I am still surviving
the traumas of my raped soil
alive and aware;
truths jump like a cat leaps for fish
at my mind;
I plod along
into the vortex
of a clear-borne dawn.

(p. 7)

This seems to me a very effective poem: it manages to dramatize both pained weariness and an undying determination to move onwards, however stubbornly, towards a transformed way of life – towards what eventually begins to emerge, 'through the mist', as a sudden dawn of new hope. We feel that the dawn is partly created by the protagonist's way of combining wading, surviving and plodding with all that is suggested by 'alive and aware' and the cat-like jumping of truths at his mind; but the dawn is also partly inevitable – the righting of wrongs and the making of new structures, that emerges as surely as day follows night. The poem provides us, incidentally and unselfconsciously, with a vivid sense of what it means in practice to be heroic in circumstances of oppression.

While Mafika Gwala's poetry, then, is rooted in a particular situation and radical in its tendency, Chris Mann's might well be described (in the rather combative parlance of current socio-cultural debates) as liberal. Though he is a sensitive South African involved inexorably in anxious, sometimes anguished probing, as a white person he has not had to endure oppression beyond that of being born into, and to some extent caught up willy-nilly in, the white ruling class. He has travelled, he has studied here and overseas, and he has taken up and tackled in verse a great variety of themes. In this respect he is a poet in a very traditional Western sense: a largely free person, slightly disengaged from the immediate practical concerns of most people; a man given to sympathetic imaginative response, to contemplation and meditation. He has not

however been wholly content with this role: as a number of his poems make clear, he has pointed his creative capacities in the direction not only of a specifically South African awareness but of an awareness which attempts to bring together certain traditional features of Western thinking and of African consciousness (as he has come to conceive of it, as a result of his personal contacts and of his study of Nguni oral poetry). If Gwala's title **No More Lullabies** is a call to his fellow blacks and to other South Africans to wake up to the real psycho-political demands of their situation, Mann's title **New Shades** is an invitation to the reader (white or black, but probably more often white than black) to recognize the rich humane significances that can be discovered in the shades, the **amadlozi,** 'those who although physically dead or absent influence the living' (p. 43). One of the points of interest – and one of the ironies – of the comparison that I am making is that Gwala, though he shows a lively belief in the potency of the example set by heroes, would probably be in some ways doubtful about the **amadlozi** as they are re-created by Mann. There are no simple answers to the questions that Mann's poetic speculations pose.

Because of the varied nature of his concerns, it isn't easy to offer wholly typical poems. Here is one of his references to the shades:

> Nerves, heart, the gut . . .
> they root and register feeling.
>
> Same with napes.
>
> Sometimes a density gathers into them from the shoulders.
>
> There's a phrase in Zulu for this,
> **'Nginezibopho'**, it goes, 'I'm troubled by knots.'
>
> That means your shades have congregated,
> your teachers and loved ones and lost ones are there.
> They want you to slough off the petty passions of the day
> and be attentive, deeply attentive to them.
>
> Napes!
>
> Life fingertips,
> they give us access to a realm beyond.

(from 'Napes', p. 19)

This is a poetry of the human psyche, an explorating of the subtle relationships between the body, the mind, and the world of the spirit. The socio-political implication, in so far as there is one, is that we are all human beings who can learn from one another's intuitions: we are all part of one potential community.

The "politics' of most liberal poetry works, and has always worked, in roughly this way. An imaginative grasp of ourselves, of our world, opens up the possibility of a richer humanity, a deeper set of resonant harmonies between people, and between people and 'nature' and even God:

> And yet these images of earth and sky
> are present myths that scholars build and break,
> for science, that leads us like a honey-bird
> will never rest, will never grant us more
> than transient truths, productive metaphors,
> before it flutters round our heads again,
> and draws us onward through the dim receding bush.
>
> Small cries, like 'Primum Mobile', or 'God',
> escape our lips when we confront the deeps,
> the lights and frozen dark through which we spin.
> Such sounds, like little drops of midnight dew,
> crush up the stars within a speck that melts,
> and yet they are our signs of human awe,
> and when science's theories alter, awe remains.
>
> We say, this night, that Saturn's slimy gas,
> the mammoth ferocity of the stars,
> are by their placement made harmless as mice,
> and I, gazing through their tranquil glitter,
> know only that we are carefully poised
> among infinities, have life, can love,
> and that there's reason to give thanks and praise.

(from 'Words before Sleep', p. 13)

Mann's concern here, within the formality of the metrical pattern, is intensely personal; in fact the piece has begun as a love poem, as he expresses:

> a calm delight, that we
> who float upon a ball of boiling rock,
> can lie in steady cool within each other's arms.

But the poem culminates in perceptions that are social, scientific, philosophical, religious.

Mann tends to focus upon the world of nature, and more particularly the open country: stars, sky, birds, bush, midnight dew, mice. In this too he is working within a Western tradition, which in English takes us back through Hughes, Lawrence and Frost, to Wordsworth and Blake's **Songs of Innocence,** and beyond them to Milton, Shakespeare and some of the poets of the Middle Ages. Gwala on the other hand, like so many twentiety-century writers, and like Dickens and Baudelaire and the Blake of the **Songs of Experience,** is an urban poet. (It is surely no coincidence that while Gwala lives in Mpumalanga, Mann is at the Valley Trust.).

By now some readers will be asking an inevitable question, which might perhaps run like this: 'Mann's poems display various kinds of sensitive awareness, but can his type of writing be considered truly **relevant** in contemporary South Africa? Isn't he missing the really salient issues? And doesn't his work, in its tendency towards idealism (in several senses of that word), fail to offer, implicitly or otherwise, the sort of rigorous analysis of social and political developments that a serious approach to South African reality demands? Indeed doesn't a poem like 'Bush and Sky' (p. 23) –

> Stare, stare at the seething bush
> and wonder why berries grow.
> Gaze a night at the Milky Way
> and think where the galaxies go.
>
> For berries are a throng of heads
> and stars nod in a crowd,
> and no one knows his genesis
> or how to shrug off his shroud. –

present an unfocussed philosophizing which in the end has to be described as self-indulgent or irresponsible?' I hope what I have said already will suggest how I respond to that question. There obviously are important approaches to South African reality which Mann doesn't – perhaps couldn't – attempt. But what he gives us is, it seems to me, deeply valid. As a poet he offers us his own particular insights into the reality that he apprehends: the only question we can honestly ask is whether what he presents makes vivid sense. (Of course some readers and critics may find themselves unable to dwell on Mann's images and themes). It must be said, too, that it is only from one very specific perspective that 'Bush and Sky' could be said to be 'unfocussed': the poem has just the degree of particularity that it needs in order to set in motion the swirling – and serious – issues which provide its dynamic.

But of course to defend Mann in this way is not to belittle Gwala. There can be no doubting (it seems to me) the value, the profound human necessity, of Gwala's vision:

In Defence of Poetry

What's poetic
about Defence Bonds and Armscor?
What's poetic
about long-term sentences and
deaths in detention
for those who 'threaten state security'?
Tell me,
what's poetic
about shooting defenceless kids
in a Soweto street?
Can there be poetry
in fostering Plural Relations?
Can there be poetry
in the Immorality Act?
What's poetic
about deciding other people's lives?
Tell me brother,
what's poetic
about defending herrenvolkish rights?

As long as
this land, my country
is unpoetic in its doings
it'll be poetic to disagree.

(p. 10)

But some readers would question Gwala's poetry, in some such terms as these: 'One appreciates his urgency, his anger; the life of a black person in contemporary South Africa is indeed a painful and frustrating one. But don't his concerns restrict him to a very narrow emotional and imaginative range? And indeed can such a straightforward series of complaints as we find in 'In Defence of Poetry' really be called 'poetry' at all?' Of course Gwala's poem is very different in its methods and its texture from most of Mann's. There are certainly no images of nature (though such images are to be found in 'Tap-Tapping', which I quoted earlier), but what the piece offers is a considerable richness of political and (implicitly) human detail, and the set of questions is swept along by an impassioned but supple rhetoric. The poem culminates in a cathartic resolution – a clinching of the issue, a clarifying of the emotion – which gives it an almost traditional pattern. And of course the whole movement is buoyed up by its initial irony; the piece is distilling its own poetry from – precisely – 'unpoetic' materials. It is the poet's human response which makes things poetic; poetry is the articulation of a true humanity.

In one respect the two poets have a common aim: each is an observer of the world he knows – though (as one would expect) Gwala's poetic intensity is almost always fairly closely related to his central commitment. For example:

You blew
You pianoed
You strummed
You drummed
And the Shange brothers
Claude your teacher
Boyce
Sandile
– all the jazzing brothers
listened to your music play
As tyres from Mayville
painted Blackhurst with red mud

(from 'For Bhoyi', p. 52)

Mann observes a scene with a similar precision, but with a certain detachment, in this case affectionately ironic:

On Saturday morning, half-past ten,
Aunt Frieda, Aunt Winnie, and Flo,
Aunt Anna, Aunt Dolly, and Granny Nel
meet at the West Beach kaif for scones,
meet at the kaif for tea.

And Frieda's eyes are deep as the sea's,
and Winnie's are bright as the spoons,
And Flo and Anna, and Dolly as well,
have faces that droop with soft lace,
have bodies soft as lace.

(from 'Saturday Morning at the West Beach Café, p. 18)

A brief article cannot hope to do justice to these two volumes of verse. Each has more variety than I can illustrate. Each has its high points and its slightly lower points. On the whole Gwala's book seems to me a little more uneven than Mann's; but this may be partly because it contains more elements – details of content, facets of attitude and tone – which are not wholly familiar to me as a white person.

Mann's treatment of political themes, of the kind that form the staple of Gwala's work, is not always indirect. In two poems particularly he discusses political commitment..

The first is called 'Naturalists' (p. 20). In three full stanzas he describes, with good-humoured admiration, those who have devoted themselves entirely to the intricacies of the life of biological nature. Here is the first stanza:

The naturalists I know
have brown arms and green thumbs,
and butterflies roost in their beards.
With tiny pads, they wipe polluted dew
from tender throats, and when they sneeze
they pollinate peaches and plums.

He points out how many valuable discoveries they have made, how much sensitive and alert people owe to them. One has a sense that Mann is in many respects a naturalist himself: perhaps much of his poetry is to be seen in this light? But after stanza two one comes to this quatrain:

Molecules and galaxies
swirl and erupt
in universes beyond their focus.
They find enough to live by in between.

They are content, they have quite enough to keep them going; yet they are blind to certain greater and smaller facts. But does that matter? Then after the third stanza the poem concludes with a modified quatrain:

Quarrels and conquests
swirl and erupt
in universes beyond their focus.
They find enough to marvel at between.

The Naturalists are also apolitical. Does it matter? Mann admires them; yet he records a narrowness. Perhaps if they weren't narrow they couldn't do what they do, be what they are. But politics is important. Is it important for everyone? Can some people live out valid lives without it? Or do the naturalists dwell, in the end, largely in a world of illusion? The poem is carefully and subtly poised between two alternative visions. Mann is not wondering whether political events are important: clearly 'quarrels and conquests' are as solid and momentous as 'molecules

and galaxies'. The question is whether every person needs to be a political animal.

'Strategies' (pp. 34–5) adopts a different approach. In five six-lined stanzas, each with its refrain of three lines, the poet ranges through South African society, through its 'statistics of woe', its many sufferings, its angers, its failures of communication, its despairs, and he concludes in each refrain that revolution is inevitable:

> **And they are right, surely they are right:**
> **revolution smoulders within the ghettoes,**
> **revolution shudders the ground.**

Many cry out; he too has cried out:

> I've been one amongst the prophets,
> a writer of tracts and anxious poems . . .

and they and he have been right to cry out:

> **And I was right, surely I'm right:**
> **revolution gathers beneath the surface,**
> **revolution shudders the ground.**

Those who feel the necessity for revolution, and those who warn of this necessity, are all justified. We are here fairly close to the world of Mafika Gwala. But the last stanza and refrain offer us a different perspective, a different 'strategy':

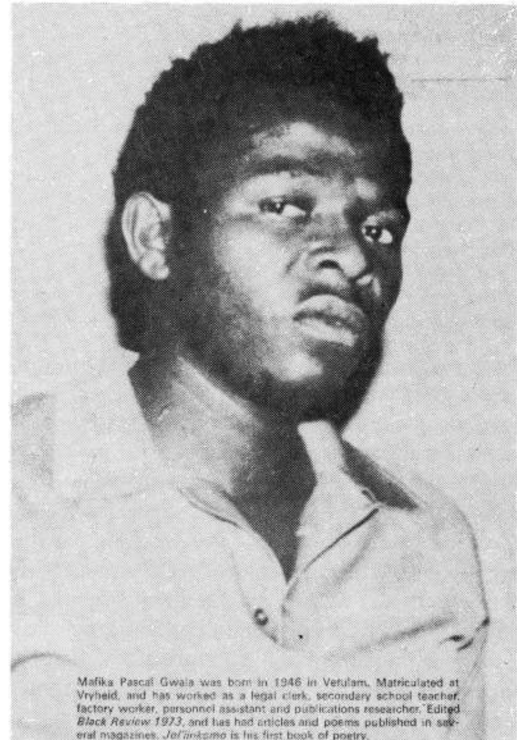
> Homer, Milton, Cetshwayo's bard,
> while men about them hacked and howled,
> while galaxies and planets burst
> and spilled across the lifeless skies,
> reworked their time's religious ore,
> and crafted it to shapes that sing.
> **And they are right, surely they're right:**
> **revolution burbles beneath the earthcrust,**
> **revolution shudders the ground.**

The line 'while galaxies and planets burst' reminds us of 'Naturalists', and Chris Mann is perhaps offering here something of a solution to the problem posed at the end of that poem. Poets must be concerned, involved even, in the great and necessary movements of society; they cannot opt out like the naturalists. But they can be a little like them in attempting to take as their themes, even at the very moments of crisis and transformation, some of the deepest subject-matter of human life. Does this mean – a sceptic might ask – that Mann is suggesting that while political battles are being fought a poet may retire to themes that are simply 'eternal' and 'universal'? No, for Mann makes clear that poets have always taken up the deeper themes (as he sees them) in their specific socio-historic contexts: they have

> **reworked their time's** religious ore,
> and crafted it to shapes that sing.

The poet, then, for Mann, lives and works in an area between commitment and a kind of detachment, or rather his commitment to what he sees as most valuable involves a certain strategy of detachment.

Gwala – who incidentally has defined his aims in prose in a way that Mann has not – would no doubt accept that a writer, to be a writer at all, needs some degree of detachment; but for him the equation is inevitably very different from Mann's. He would probably agree with Richard Rive's view that black literature 'must differ in texture and quality from that emanating from a people who have the vote, suffer no discrimination and are in a power position because of the colour of their skins' [6] and this way of seeing things might well imply an acceptance of what white writers are able to do. Certainly Gwala suggests that black culture, in challenging the domination of white culture, has brought about a situation where both may become 'sub-cultures, part of a greater South African national culture'.[7]



Mafika Gwala

But his own concern has of course been with the concrete particularities and the human and political urgencies of the world in which he lives: 'We cannot write outside of our experience in a society where social deprivation is taken for granted'.[8] But doesn't this suggest – our other sceptic might again ask – a poetry that is debilitatingly circumscribed? I think not, for several reasons. First, as I have suggested earlier, what might from one point of view appear to be Gwala's narrowness of base is in fact his great strength: a socio-economic and cultural community which is rendered vibrant by powerful ideas and feelings, a group of people many of whom are on the move towards liberation and justice. There could be no more potent source of poetic inspiration. But (it might be asked) isn't this 'justice' in danger of being sectional, divisive ? Not as far as Gwala is concerned; he is firm on this point:

> One would have to seek an approach which, from certain perspectives, would be desirable after blacks have achieved their liberation. Or rather, after South African society has become normal, open to all its people.

and

> Our critical attitudes towards racism, exploitation and inequality will inevitably dominate. It is total criticism of that inhumanity of man to fellow man that carries the hope of our regaining humanity for all.[10]

One must remember too that every poet, whether he admits or knows it or not, is to some extent a mouthpiece for a particular community or group, or set of experiences; this is true of Mann as well. And it is **through** his or her particularity of vision that 'general truths' can be arrived at.

(In saying this I am not wishing to imply that only 'general' truths are of value; but a perception must have some degree of 'generality' if it is to be apprehended at all fully by a reader – like myself, in this case – who is not a member of the poet's immediate community.) Finally, it is useful to know that Gwala – who is a well-read person, with a considerable range of cultural experience – is very conscious of the artistic and linguistic process that is being brought about by himself and his fellow black writers of commitment:

> It has not been easy to harmonize our black subject matter with the language forms of a dominant English culture. No one can objectively blame us if at times the culturally enriched English language has been stripped naked. One is reminded of how, at the height of cultural resistance by black Americans, Imamuli Baraka (Le Roi Jones) advocated 'poetry that kills' amongst blacks.[11]

and

> This means that the language of oppressed cannot always be lyrical, highly nuanced and frolicsome. Our language often answers to immediate needs . . .[12]

'Lyrical, highly nuanced and frolicsome' are words that could be applied to a number of Mann's poem. What then does Gwala offer by way of alternative? Here is roughly the second half of 'A Poem (after James Matthews)':

> Collect yourself to truths that remind you:
> you were not born to slave
> for the boss who drops you Rand notes
> so's you can play Judas on your fellow workers,
> your people who scare you;
> Remind yourself how many times
> you've betrayed the future of your children
> as you came out bloody number ten
> by your playing second fiddle;
> Upturn your thoughts
> as you fugue away from yourself
> to healthy moments when life was real;
> Rechannel your inner soul's fears
> as you wipe your salty eyes
> with a beer mug dripping froth
> pausing on the token of the 'Best Taste'
> at the boozejoint next to your matchboxhouse;
> Jump to the values of your ancestors
> as you cling to sober traditions
> worrying about those children with ribs
> like steel rods
> dying of kwashiorkor and dehydration
> in some remote bundu;
> Brace yourself when the sun, hot as your tears
> scans the gables of your neighbourhood,
> with children laughing and chasing
> dreams they may never grow to realize.

(pp. 18–19)

The voice is vigorous, pressing, tough, but humane; and above all it **is** a voice. One has a sense that one person is addressing another in an all-too-real situation; and yet there is an element of ritual in the poem too. A great deal of meaning is packed into the energetic verbs of command or exhortation: 'collect yourself', 'remind yourself', 'upturn', 'rechannel', and so on.

Mafika Gwala's voice is also a voice of hope. He tells us that at the moment when black consciousness began to emerge and he found himself working with students and others in a shared dedication,

> my poetic life, if one may call it that, changed accordingly. The brooding was replaced by an understanding of hope. I have been striving to define that hope since then.[13]

Chris Mann in his very different way is also a poet of hope:

> How dimly in its yolk of flesh
> a fledgling taps the shell and sings,
> and I will tap and grope until
> there comes the cracking of the eggs,
> until her rose grey nape appears,
> and then if grace be given us, wings.

(from 'The Growth of the Dove', p. 14)

Are these two hopes compatible? Can they in any sense live and work together? I believe that they can, and that these two voices – so different in tone, in urgency, in wavelength, in focus – enrich and help to propel our literature, our humanity and our ever-mobile social formation. ☐

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