

# I MUST SHOW YOU MY CLIPPINGS

by Wopko Jensma (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1977)

Reviewed by Marie Dyer

Readers and reviewers have often been puzzled in the past about Wopko Jensma's identity. His names are hard to categorise; he has used English, Afrikaans, and the urban-black dialects with equal fluency and assurance. Membership of most South African language and racial groups (and an American one) has been speculatively suggested for him. This book, however, is decorated with enlargements of a "clipping" which places him more securely; it records that he was at high school in Middelburg (C.P.) and played rugby successfully there; and an old photograph suggests that his family owned a dairy in a small town.

The persona of the poems is appropriately less diverse than before. There are comparatively few excursions into dialect; most poems are all English or all Afrikaans. "I, Jensma" – or, more accurately, "i, jensma" – appears specifically in one poem and is implicit in many; perhaps, allowing for ironies, in most. In previously published poems he seems to have made himself a mouthpiece for the experiences and feelings of many different South Africans, but here the concerns, though always socially relevant, are more particularly his own.

His themes here are often of violence and imprisonment: sometimes literal and bodily, with images of gallows, cracking bones, shackles and cells; but often also metaphorical, to do with the mind and heart. He seems to see members of his society, both black and white, as assaulted, agonised, deadened and strangled not only by overt brutality but also by social pressures for convention and conformity, the mindless routines of suburban or industrial living, psychological and anthropological categorising, the values of consumerism.

This is not all immediately apparent (if indeed it is crucial or central). Jensma makes very great demands on his readers. A knowledge of Villon's French as well as a little German and Gammattaal is assumed; but more importantly, his technique of fragmentation and dislocation – of images, syntax, even spelling and typography – involves immense effort in bringing the disparate elements into some kind of coherence. In one poem, avowedly 'dada' in influence (**chant of praise for the idi amin dada**) he expresses some dadaist intentions and attitudes:

PROTEST AGAINST LAW  
the law of tension  
the law of precalculation  
the law of reason  
the law of aggression  
the law of intrigue, the game . . .

This seems to be a manifesto applicable to many of his own poems, which in their disparate images, incomplete sentences, non-sequiturs, and anti-climaxes, are constructed

in a kind of defiance of disciplined reason and the tensions of logic.

On the one hand, it is difficult to be sure that the main intention of these poems is being conveyed to the reader; on the other, it seems clear that the technique itself is an act of protest against what Jensma sees as the crippling, limiting, and fundamentally aggressive domination of rigid reason and calculation in human affairs. In all his poems he reveals a sense of the sickness of his society; it appears that he is exploring here what may be regarded as the philosophical as well as the political sources for it.

The severed ear of van Gogh is a recurring symbol in these poems, apparently suggestive of the power and truth of genuine suffering; and Jensma seems to contrast this both with the "artistic" images of van Gogh's paintings and also with his own poetry. These lines from **the ceiling just caved in today** seem to imply that Jensma is afraid that art itself can impose an unreal or petrifying pattern on the vitality of real experience:

i jensma, i am also a so-called real artist . . .  
". . . but don't worry, van ol chap, i jensma  
i am having it bronzed!"

The nature and "feel" of the poetry can best be given by a quotation. This is the middle section of the last poem in the book: **i know no heroes**;

in these subterranean rooms  
my entrails under paper weights  
i keep singing this song  
of one thousand unmade beds  
of one thousand dust bins  
of one thousand dark alleys  
of one thousand chicken livers  
(neatly tied in plastic packs)  
as i turn stones on my life  
grab scorpions sleight of hand  
unwind untie the poison sting  
let my past slip down my gullet

This is characteristic in its un-worked-out quality: its compelling but unelucidated images, its unexpected juxtapositions of various tones and styles, its catalogue of illogically selected elements, combining to evoke a sense of protesting alienation.

It seems that in these poems Jensma struggles continually not to be facile, not to falsify complexities with imposed order and clarity. (Even the drawings and photographs, though intriguing, are enigmatic.) These struggles are sometimes exhausting rather than illuminating to the reader – like watching a man straining to pick up invisible weights. But they are impressive and disturbing, and demand, if not to be understood, at least to be seriously attended to. □