

The Specters of the *Mendi*: An Attempt at South African Hauntology

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Abstract: The article is an ambitious and complex study of Black response to war trauma, occasioned by the tragedy of the *Mendi*, a troop transport sunk with great loss of life in 1917. The majority of the victims were South African Blacks on their way to the Western Front. The tragedy inspired a very powerful poetic response, which the author analyses in terms of an indigenous African modernism, and which later on prepared the ground for contemporary nationalist mythopoeia in the Republic of South Africa. Although the country was part of the British Empire in 1917, the position of the Black community was reminiscent of the nations in secondary theatres of war. The recurring presence of the tragic event in South African culture has been analysed in terms of Derrida's hauntology.

Keywords: First World War, Mendi, South Africa, death, modernism, sinking

1. Introduction: Haunted History

The centenary of the First World War, in many countries, brought on a certain renewal of interest in the history of the conflict, in different forms of participation in the conflict between various, often very remote cultures entangled in the war by a complex network of political imperialism, global economy, and the idea of solidarity among European nations and their overseas dominions. Even if "in South Africa First World War centennial fever is extremely mild if not largely absent" (Grundlingh 2014, 1), mainly due to the relatively small importance of the global conflict for South African politics of the time, there is a constant flow of scholarly publications and events focussing not only on the nature of South African participation, located "on the periphery of the global conflict of 1914–1918, which played mainly

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on the killing fields of Europe”, but also on the “subsequent memory work”, following the “South African black and coloured participation in the war, the experiences of the troops and the wider effects thereof, as well as the way in which their participation has been remembered” (Grundlingh 2014, 1-2).

The concept of the First World War as a catalyst of political and social changes, also in colonial countries, is widely circulating among scholars, who

have tried to look beyond the smoke of the battle fire (...) focussing on war as an agent of social change and incorporating the socio-political repercussions of military service. The participation of groups other than whites in colonial warfare is a recurring theme in South African history (Grundlingh 2014, 2).

Even if the participation of Black South Africans was restricted to non-combatant service in South African Native Labour Contingent (SANLC), the Black elite firmly believed that “[d]espite the fact that Defence Force Act 13 of 1912 precluded Africans from armed military service (...) they should fight for the right to fight” (Grundlingh 2014, 35).

The hopes were not fulfilled; the involvement of Black and Coloured troops in the backstage of the Western Front went into oblivion, and instead, the tragic sinking of a troop transport has become the most powerful symbol of Black participation in First World War. The sinking of the *Mendi* killed more than 600 Black recruits traveling to France. The disaster and its implications for South African history, politics and poetry will form the starting point for my essay. Without ignoring the political and social context of the poetry related to the disaster, this essay suggests a reading of the poem “Ukutshona kuka*Mendi*” (The Sinking of the *Mendi*) by S. E. K. Mqhayi within a broader context of wartime trench poetry and modernist poetry. Chris Dunton (2013) has already mentioned some analogies between Mqhayi’s poem and T. S. Eliot’s “The Journey of the Magi”, whereas Gerhard Genis (2014) included Mqhayi’s war poems, as well as poems by other indigenous poets, into the general context of South African English war poetry. This essay compares Christian motives and water images in Eliot and Mqhayi, and applies Jacques Derrida’s concept of hauntology (Derrida 1994) to answer the question why specters of the *Mendi* have constantly reappeared in South African literature and art.

The application of French theory to reading of South African literature is a relatively popular practice (Crous 2013). For instance, Genis (2014), in his poststructuralist and postcolonial interpretation of war poetry, opted for Julia Kristeva's *abject*, and focussed on the hidden presence of the rotting corpse. The present essay adopts a similar approach, but with a different concept, applying Derridian hauntology as a key word for analysing different aspects of the vague but persistent presence of the historic past. "Hauntology supplants its near-homonym ontology, replacing the priority of being and presence with the figure of the ghost as that which is neither present, nor absent, neither dead nor alive" (Davis 2005, 373). In a sense, in South African culture, the First World War is, at the same time, all-present and absent; its iconic moments, such as the sinking of the *Mendi*, became through the years overcharged with recent politics and manipulated accordingly to the interests of the leading party. Therefore, the true, real core of the tragedy appears still to be overshadowed by the myth that arose around it. Moreover, the aspect of social justice, the *Mendi*-fallen were hoping for, appears still beyond reach in the new, democratic RSA. Another "rotting corpse" of South African official discourse is the troubled colonial past, "neither dead nor alive", haunting contemporary politics, social and cultural life.

The specter is a paradoxical incorporation, the becoming-body, a certain phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit. It becomes, rather, some "thing" that remains difficult to name: neither soul nor body, and both one and the other. For it is flesh and phenomenality that give to the spirit its spectral apparition, but which disappear right away in the apparition, in the very coming of the revenant or the return of the specter (Derrida 1994, 5).

The Derridian text opens with the specter of Hamlet's father and Hamlet's contemplation of the skull of Yorick, followed by Paul Valery's reading of Hamlet, stressing the urgency to communicate with ancestral skulls to become and remain oneself (Derrida 1994, 4). Genis's analysis of South African First World War poetry opens with the same figure of Yorick's skull, which introduces the main claim of his analysis: "that it is the poetry that more fully reclaims the human story of war by flushing out and fleshing out, even though only partly, the 'bit-less' corpse or *manqué*" (Genis 2014, 14-15). Yorick's skull leads Genis to the skull of Adamastor, the monstrous giant

described in *Os Lusíadas* (1572) by Luís Vaz de Camões. In Genis's reading, Adamastor becomes the monstrous, haunting presence of the Other: he is black in poetry by white South Africans, and white for the indigenous poets. Poetry is for Genis an act of "remembering of body parts" (Christie 2007, quoted after Genis 2014, 17), a concept commonly used in post-colonial theory (Ghandi 1998; Wylie 2009). The analogy can be extended by recalling Antje Krog's *Country of my Skull* (1998), a non-fiction account of the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee. As if to make a full circle, Krog, an acclaimed South African academic and writer, translated Mqhayi's poem about the *Mendi* into English.

Motives and figures symptomizing the haunting presence of the dead but unexcavated and unburied victims of South African colonial history focus in the tragic memory of the *Mendi*. For a century, the spectres of the *Mendi* have been haunting South African literature, society and politics. The un-buried, officially forgotten bodies of sunken members of Labour Contingent became, through collective recollection, orature and poetry the incorporation of traumatic experience on both, the historical and the structural level (La Capra 2013, 82). Historical facts were dramatic enough to traumatize the survivors and the mourners alike. The steamship *Mendi*, which carried Black volunteers from South Africa to France, sank on the final leg of its voyage, between Southampton and Calais. The tragic event occurred on 21 February 1917, about 19 nautical miles from the Isle of Wight, when *Mendi* collided with a merchant ship the *Darro*. More than 600 volunteers of the South African Native Labour Contingent, recruited and trained to serve on the Western Front, lost their lives in the icy waters of the English Channel. The fallen of the *Mendi* became, as the entire war effort of Black and Coloured troops, a part of a political game between pro-British and Afrikaner forces in the South African parliament (Grundlingh 2014, 29–35) and as result became non-existent in the official history. The neglect of the tragedy transferred the historical event into the symbolic order. Historical trauma, which could not be worked through, as it officially was of no meaning, became a foundational trauma (La Capra 2013, 23) and called for symbolic expression in art, poetry and theatre.

The fallen from the *Mendi* became almost immediately an important poetic trope and a powerful political symbol, an incorporation of colonial fears, frustrations and lost hopes. Therefore, the annual *Mendi* Commemoration Day, an important social and political event, called into being by the Black

community in 1930s, was annexed in the course of history by various political interest groups, eager to play upon the spectral, haunting presence of the past for their recent political purposes. For that reason, in South African arts and poetry, the story of the tragic sinking appears to be coming back to life most intensely at times of political unrest, times “out of joint” (Derrida 1994). There exists therefore a complex relationship between poetry and politics, into which both the history and the myth of the *Mendi* are woven.

The haunting presence of the *Mendi*-fallen is one of poetical tropes recurring regularly in South African poetry, every recollection bearing the signs of political and social tensions of their own time. South African poems commemorating fallen members of the SANLC were written or performed under strong historical and political contexts, and must be read as testimonies and legacies of their time. Many of these poems, including the crucial one by S. E. K. Mqhayi, were originally performed and written in indigenous languages. Despite the attempts to bring the original poetry in native languages as close as possible to the English-speaking world, it is difficult to judge how much was lost in translation and transition from orature into literature. Hence, the commentary on the *Mendi* poetry must be tentative (Dunton 2013, 136).

The uneasy relationship of South African poets with English, the language of the imperial authority, opens the possibility to read these poems in a wider context of English literature and European culture. Therefore, this essay goes in a direction different from that chosen by Genis and Dunton, who read *Mendi* poetry as the continuation and cultivation of Xhosa and Sotho traditions of oral literature. The tentative corpus of poems related to the tragic sinking, mentioned by Genis and Dunton, includes the works by Mqhayi (1931), Nhlapo (1939), Sidyiyo (1948), Darlow (1951), Tyamashe (1952), Mopeli-Paulus (1953), Walter (1994), Somhlahlo (1994), Sole (1994), Mabuza (1997), and Rakoma (2004). The centenary of the sinking is very likely to bring another revival of memory of the *Mendi*, already introduced by the bestselling novel *Dancing the Death Drill* by Fred Khumalo (2017). The existing poems vary in their tone, imagery and purposes for which they were composed: some of them are critical voices against recent political events and social attitudes (Sole 1994), some are reflections of what was achieved throughout the years of struggle against racism (Mabuza 1997), some were written from European perspective (Darlow 1951), and many were performed during ceremonies commemorating

fallen members of the SANLC (Mqhayi 1931; Sidyio 1948; Mopeli-Paulus 1953; Rakoma 2004).

“Of the different genres, war poetry is most closely bound up with the politics of cultural memory” (Das 2013, 26). The politics of cultural memory were certainly responsible for the initial marginalization of the *Mendi* Commemoration Days and occasional poetry, lasting from the 1930s until the 1980s. After international sanctions, the apartheid regime rediscovered the myth of the *Mendi* and its potential of warming up the image of the Republic of South Africa abroad. Throughout the decade, many symbolic gestures were made to honor and commemorate the drowned soldiers (Grundlingh 2011). The symbolic burial site was created first in 1986, 69 years after the actual disaster, when a bronze plaque commemorating the victims was inserted at the memorial site of Delville Wood in France (Wauchope 2010, 189). After the apartheid collapsed in 1994, the democratic RSA needed the *Mendi* myth even more than the former regime and the tragic disaster became a foundational myth of the African National Congress, which “could not point to a particularly heroic military past” (Grundlingh 2014, 130).

The democratic turn in the RSA meant also a rediscovery of the *Mendi* as a powerful symbol in African-British relations. In 1995 Queen Elisabeth unveiled the *Mendi* Memorial at Avalon Cemetery in Soweto (Wauchope 2010, 189). In 2004 “the SAS *Mendi* [called to honour the fallen] and the British Navy’s HMS *Nottingham* met at the site where the SS *Mendi* sank” (delvillewood.com). In 2007 another commemorative ceremony was organized at the Hollybrook Memorial in Southampton, “followed by a wreath-laying ceremony at the site of the tragedy by the SAS *Mendi*” (delvillewood.com). In 2009 the shipwreck became an official war grave, after ten years of campaign by a retired British Army major Ned Middleton, who realized that according to African religious beliefs the *Mendi* soldiers “have been left in limbo. They believed they needed a grave to get to the afterlife” (Telegraph 2009).

In many aspects, the history and myth of the *Mendi* transgressed national boundaries and became present in European (mostly British) perception of the Great War. Still, its presence in English literature is marginal. The Scottish-born poet laureate Jackie Kay, who broadcasted her “Lament on the SS *Mendi*” (2008) for the BBC, is a rare recent example of a British literary response to the event. Scientific publications about the phenomenon of the *Mendi* poetry and art are scarce and describe the poems in isolation from other literatures, European and colonial alike.

The sinking of the *Mendi* appears to be a continuing and strong South African concern. The unburied remains of victims of the tragic events are cyclically haunting South African literature, art and politics in “dual movement of return and inauguration” (Buse and Scott 1999, 11) of the “lost futures” (Fisher 2013) and broken political and social promises. “The *Mendi* is a symbol of loss, in both the spiritual and physical realms” (Genis 2014, 335), but it is still a marginal story within the official narratives of the Great War, even though the sinking of the *Mendi* was the subject of scientific (Grundlingh 1987, 2011, 2014) and more popular publications (Clothier 1987). The participation of Black and Coloured South African troops was researched and documented by historians (Grundlingh 1985; 2014; Killingray 2010; Nasson 2014; Samson 2012, 2014). Still, the rediscovery and revaluation of colonial effort during the global conflict is an ongoing process. Recently, David Olusoga (2014) claimed a vital change of perception of the global conflict and shifting of the focus onto the experience of colonial soldiers. Similarly, Olivier Compagnon and Pierre Purseigle (2016) suggested a general re-shifting of ‘centrum’ and ‘periphery’, of ‘empire’ and ‘colony’ within First World War studies.

Within British literary studies,

The near-invisibility of archipelagic and colonial poetry within the First World War canon points to a greater problem: the continuing absence of a critical and contextual framework to address and sometimes even being able to recognize poems that do not conform to the British constructions of war memory or the dominant model of the trench poetry (Das 2013: 26).

The marginalisation of South African war poetry appears thus to be a part of a more complex problem. The claim that in South African literature “[t]he First World War produced screeds of patriotic doggerel but nothing of lasting value. South African Troops who endured the horror and discomfort of the Western Front have left no published record of their feelings” (Hutchings 2005, 1631) seems to be an exaggeration in view of more recent research. However, a lot of First World War poetry in South Africa needs to be further researched, compared with British and Imperial war poetry, and popularized within South Africa and beyond its borders.

“Ironically, it is the black body that was politically and socially othered after the Great War, or even completely forgotten and buried, that has been more completely exhumed and ‘re-membered’ in the South African literary history of war” (Genis 2014, 17). Black poetry appears to be better researched than the corpus of texts written by white volunteers, white female writers or white intellectuals, but the situation also changes recently (Genis 2014, 17–19). While, however, white South African poetry is read parallelly with its English contemporaries Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfried Owen, Ivor Gurney or Charles Sorley and described as tending towards Rupert Brooke’s sentimentality rather than Isaac Rosenberg’s directness in describing war horrors, black poetry is contextualized within indigenous tradition of Xhosa, Zulu and Sotho religious beliefs, tribal legends and traditions (Genis 2014; Dunton 2013).

This approach, noble in its premise of decolonisation of aboriginal literatures, appears to ignore the obvious fact that all native poets of that period were literate, educated in English-speaking missionary environments and embracing, not without criticism, European set of values, the aesthetic of British romanticism shaped by Keats and Wordsworth (Genis 2014). S. E. K. Mqhayi, the appraised Xhosa poet who shaped the myth of the *Mendi* within South African culture, is perfect example of cultural hybridity. His poems cannot be therefore read in separation from the English literature of his time.

2. S. E. K. Mqhayi: Christian Intellectual and Rural *Imbongi*

Samuel Edward Krune Mqhayi (1875–1945) was a trained teacher, celebrated intellectual and author of numerous poems and of the first Xhosa novel *U-Samson* (Opland 2007). According to Genis “Mqhayi was the most eminent and prolific Xhosa *literatorus* and *imbongi* of the first half of the 20th century, publishing biography, poetry, fiction and history” (Opland 2007, 105; Opland 2009). He wrote in Xhosa within the *imbongi* tradition of poetry composition and oratorship, but was influenced by European texts as well, including the English Bible (Genis 2014, 270). Dunton, another critic who discussed Mqhayi, distanced himself from the laudatory opinions about the poet and from Opland’s (2009, 27) judgement that “[i]n time [Mqhayi] will come to be rightfully acknowledged as the greatest literary figure [South Africa] has ever produced” (Dunton 2013, 137).

Probably the most paradoxical description of Mqhayi as poet, performer and anti-colonialist came from Nelson Mandela (1995, 38), who witnessed a performance of Mqhayi at Healdtown College in 1938. At that time Mqhayi had already become the poet of the *Mendi* and the *imbongi* (orator) of the ship's chaplain Isaac Wauchope Dyobha (Genis 2014, 295). To Mandela's astonishment, the poet entered the classroom by door reserved for white teachers and spoke very openly about the clash of cultures and the necessity to reclaim the land and rights by Black community. Mandela recalled being deeply moved by Mqhayi's words and his praise of the Xhosa tribe: "I felt such intense pride at that point, not as an African, but as a Xhosa; I felt like one of the chosen people" (Mandela 1995, 38). Still, even if won by his words, Mandela was slightly disappointed by his appearance: Mqhayi performed "dressed in a leopard-skin kaross and matching hat" and "was carrying a spear in either hand", but "except for his clothing, seemed entirely ordinary" and struggled searching for words in his native Xhosa.

The way Mqhayi performed displays his awareness of how important was the orature and the traditional way the *imbongi* presented it; at the same time it exposes a Westernized intellectual trying to re-enact the spontaneity of an oral performance. A question worth further research is, how far the acting as a *native* Mqhayi was affected by his education, and how the literary background enabled him to speak freely about very subversive topics. In Mandela's recollection (which cannot be, in my opinion, fully trusted, as nearly sixty years passed between the event and Mandela's quotations of Mqhayi's speech), the poet spoke about

[T]he brutal clash between what is indigenous and good, and what is foreign and bad. We cannot allow these foreigners who do not care for our culture to take over our nation. I predict that one day, the forces of African society will achieve a momentous victory over the interloper. For too long, we have succumbed to the false gods of the white man. But we will emerge and cast off these foreign notions (Mandela 1995, 38).

Mqhayi, qualified in Frantz Fanon's terms as "a 'second phase' indigenous writer" whose "poetry has not fully evolved into a 'fighting literature'" (Genis 2014, 286), appears in Mandela's recollection as an opponent of the colonial system nevertheless. To Mandela's confusion, the poet "had moved from

a more nationalistic, all-encompassing theme of African unity to a more parochial one addressed to the Xhosa people, of whom he was one" (Mandela 1995, 38). Walter Nhlapo, who also authored a poem "The Mendi" (1939), described "the secret of the greatness of his [Mqhayi] works: it is Bantu in blood and soul. His literary works are to the Xhosa what the Strauss Waltzes were to Vienna, and what Napoleonic victories were to the French" (Genis 2014, 313).

The above quotations qualify Mqhayi as a Xhosa writer rather than as an apostle of emerging pan-Africanism. Still, in the 1930s, when the ANC was "completely disorganised and toothless" (Saunders & Southey 2001, 2, 195, quoted after Genis 2014, 312), "[i]t was the poetry that most audibly proclaimed an inclusive and racially exclusive black nationalism within a white dominated world: a pan-Africanist brotherhood" (Genis 2014, 299). The political meaning of Mqhayi's poetry and his public role as treasurer of the heroic past overshadow the fact that "Mqhayi, a keen observer of his time, must also have been aware of the fin de siècle crisis in the English literary consciousness, which unleashed a flood of doubt in what the future might hold, and the questioning of the previous generation's self-confidence" (Genis 2014, 294). This suggests that Mqhayi's lectures mentioned contemporary British literary works and that he did not write in isolation from the ideas and images present in European literature of his époque.

3. Death by Water by S. E. K. Mqhayi and T. S. Eliot

Mqhayi's poems provide excellent material for transfer studies: the poet tried throughout his writing career to achieve a new quality in Xhosa literature: he not only transferred the oral praise poetry and narratives into written language but also expressed the new mixed identity of indigenous intellectual embracing proudly history and traditions of his tribe who at the same time was also a pious Christian and an obedient servant of British Empire. A good example of such a mixture is Mqhayi's poem "The Late Frances Nonhi Mkencele" combining the traditional form of praise poem, *izibongo*, with the acclamation of religious faith and praise for Christian virtues impersonated by the poem's late heroine. The poem was published in 1908 in *Izwi Labantu*, an influential newspaper, supporting the SANNC, the forerunner of the ANC (Switser and Switser 1979, 275). The ties between traditional

African poetry, Christianity and political hopes for increasing participation of black intellectuals in public debate in South Africa are constant elements in Mqhayi's life and writing.

"Mqhayi committed to writing original poetry in style and purpose hardly distinguishable from the oral poetry in style and purpose hardly distinguishable from the oral poetry of the traditional imbongi" (Opland 1983, 94). The novelty of Mqhayi's poetry lies, in my opinion, in writing traditional poetry serving a relatively new set of values. While Mqhayi shared fears and hopes of his own tribe he also managed to express them in a poetic language, traditional but universal, transgressing the boundaries of his native Xhosa culture, exploring Christian and European heritage, accepting but also challenging political and racial circumstances. "His millenarian writing is fully immersed in the real politics of his time" (Genis 2014, 294).

The links with European literature appear most evidently in his two war poems, "The Black Army" and "The Sinking of the *Mendi*", which might be classified as "instances of the awakening of anti-colonial violence", still "the violence is directed outwards towards the German enemy, who, as in the 'white' poetry, is ascribed an uncanny and even diabolical nature" (Genis 2014, 293). In war poems Mqhayi millenarian imagery turned against the Germans, portrayed as an apocalyptic peril, attacking from the skies and hidden in the depths of the ocean (Genis 2014, 294). There might be a hidden, subversive anti-colonial layer, as Genis argues, still overtly these poems comply with the British patriotic poems, dehumanizing and monsterizing the enemy, apparent not only in Rudyard Kipling's "For all we have and are" (1914) but also in several stanzas by Rupert Brooke and more prominently by popular poets, e.g. Jessie Pope.

The main shared source of Mqhayi's poetry and European war poems was the Bible, as Mqhayi worked in the early 1900s on a revised edition of the Xhosa version of the Scriptures. Unlike in the case of white South African authors of war poetry, Genis did not search for probable influences of Mqhayi's poems, still if the English South African wartime poetry breathed the air of Keats, Wordsworth and Coleridge, it is to be assumed that the tendency towards Romanisation of death, suffering and fear and hiding the abject aspects of dying and decay was also consciously shared by the well-educated Xhosa poet.

"The Sinking of *Mendi*" goes beyond the historical event to address universal themes of necessity of death and suffering and their soteriological

meaning. The drowned soldiers are accepting freely their fate, giving their lives for the cause of freedom, understood as the highest value of human condition, rather than in political terms. Their death is not an accidental episode of war but a sacrifice of African people, comparable only to the sacrifice of Abel and the ultimate sacrifice of Christ. While “Abel was the sacrifice of the earth” and “Christ was the sacrifice of heaven”, the fallen African warriors must be located somewhere in between these two realms. Their death by water reinforces the image of deep waters as highly dangerous and of a sea travel as metonymy of dying (Genis 2014, 299). Submerging into the ocean is at the same time a clear metaphor of baptism, of receiving a new, immortal life; therefore, the poem ends with acclamation:

How I wish I could be with them,
 How I wish I could stand with them on resurrection day,
 How I wish I could sparkle with them like the morning star.
 Let it be so! (Tr. Krog et al. 2008)

The Black warriors in Mqhai’s poem consider themselves as a sacrifice from Africa, “opening the road to freedom” and continuing the mission of Abel and Christ, the effort of building a new, free community. The martyrs of *Mendi* can face God, as they are continuers of Christ’s redeeming death. By fulfilling their plight towards humanity, they died for the cause of the Good and proved that Africa is a part of the civilized world, ready to fight the Evil on the cost of the life of its own sons. Mqhai’s warriors are immortal in a theological sense. They will be raised from death on the Resurrection Day to take their share in God’s final triumph over the Evil and Death. By their sacrifice, they have shown the real meaning of life as struggle for freedom and a better world. Therefore, Mqhayi’s poem belongs, in a sense, to the heroic tradition of First World War poetry. Like Rupert Brooke, Ivor Gurney, Julian Grenfell or Will Streets, Mqhayi sanctifies the ultimate sacrifice of life, given freely away for the sake of God, the Country and the fellow humans.

The translation made in 2008 by Antje Krog, Ncebakazi Saliwa and Koos Oosthuyzen tries to stay as close as possible to the Xhosa original but also to give justice to the aesthetic value of the poem. The earlier version of 1968, authored by Jack Cope and M. C. Mcanyangwa, was “one considerably ‘worked up’” in comparison with the original, perhaps to satisfy conventional English notions of the ‘poetic’” (Dunton 2013, 137). Genis, who based his ana-

lysis on Cope's translation, noted: "Mqhayi's translated poem is stylistically based on English Renaissance poetry, with eight-line stanzas, in rhyming couplets, and with alternating rhythm of iambic/anapestic tetrameter and pentameter. But it is essentially a traditional praise poem that lauds the *Mendi-dead*" (Genis 2014, 289).

Interestingly, Dunton noticed that this translation highlighted the similarities between Mqhayi's poem and the poetry of T. S. Eliot.

The translation (...) adopts an intertextual approach, interpolating echoes of T. S. Eliot's "The Journey of the Magi," a poem published in 1927 and therefore approximately contemporaneous with that by Mqhayi. In the Eliot poem there are references to the crucifixion being immanent in the nativity, the idea of destiny—of an unbreakable link between past and present—being central as well to Mqhayi's poem (Dunton 2013, 137).

Dunton mentioned thus only marginally some motives appearing by both Eliot and Mqhayi, highlighted by the translators' choice (probably Jack Cope, a relatively famous South African English poet of 1950s and 1960s, decided to make Mqhayi's poem sound more familiar to English-speaking readers). Dunton used a literal translation made by Maleshoane Rapeane. However, all the translations, I will argue, show some parallels between motives used by Mqhayi and by Eliot, in "The Journey of the Magi" but also in the remaining parts of *Ariel Poems* and in *The Waste Land*. It appears to me quite unlikely that Mqhayi had read Eliot's poems but it cannot be excluded: even if the poem was composed directly after the sinking of the *Mendi*, the final version was written most probably in the early 1930s, after "The Waste Land" (1922), "The Journey of the Magi" (1927), "A Song for Simeon" (1928), "Animula" (1929), and "Marina" (1930) were published. It appears much more likely that both poets shared the same profound knowledge of the Bible and, in some aspect, the same *zeitgeist*, therefore the metaphors, images and figures they chose for show some resemblances.

While Dunton focused mainly on "The Journey of the Magi", the idea of destiny or "of an unbreakable link between past and present" (Dunton 2013, 137) appears to be characteristic also to other Eliot's poems written around that time. Such is, e.g. the idea of the necessity of death which opens the gates to a new, eternal existence and a more complex cognizance of God,

expressed in “A Song for Simeon” and in other Eliot’s poems (Nowakowska 2016, 8-9). Such is the hopeful tone of “Marina”, expressing belief in life after death (Llorens-Cubedo 2013, 95-96), a life experienced and described as a navigation through stormy seas, leading to “living to live in a world of time beyond me” (Eliot 1974, 106). The death appears as a painful and frightening moment, still, in a religious sense, the first touch of sanctity, the call of the Divine, implies the necessity of death, which is transition into a new quality of life rather than the final act of existence.

The motive of drowning, of “death by water”, already present in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1915), becomes a crucial part of “The Waste Land” (even if the final version is about nine tenths shorter than the initial text, Llorens-Cubedo 2013, 90) and reappears in “Marina” and “The Dry Salvages” (1941). The meaning of drowning changes and evolves constantly, expressing the poet’s changing existential and spiritual experience;

“[F]rom *Prufrock* to the *Quartets*: drowning as the result of paralysis and solipsism, as unresolved ritual and finally, untimely end that responds to the divine order of things; shipwreck as the consequence of vain ambition or as the critical crossing of the frontier between mortality and eternity; sailing as determined spiritual progress, the courage to accept and surrender (Llorens-Cubedo 2013, 97).

After Eliot’s conversion to Anglo-Catholicism in 1927, the motives of sea journey and of drowning evolved accordingly to his religious beliefs and interests, reaching beyond Christianity: “Eliot’s imagery of the soul’s transition is coherent with Christian mysticism, but not exclusively: according to McNelly Kearns, “The Dry Salvages” evidences Eliot’s familiarity with Indic philosophy and religion” (Llorens-Cubedo 2013, 96).

The persistence of the drowning motive, rooted by Eliot in works of Shakespeare, Dante, Tennyson, Coleridge and Byron (Llorens-Cubedo 2013, 88) and expressing a universal human yearning for a deeper sense of existence, suggests a similar search for philosophical and aesthetic values in Mqhayi’s poem, operating similar motives and expressing similar religious convictions. Still Mqhay, one of the “elite African Christians”, was also the one of the Xhosa who generally “assigned mystical qualities to the sea, the place from where the white oppressor emerged (Genis 2014, 280), and who believed “that a black

body could not return alive from beyond the great waters". The decision to embark the ships was, as Genis argued, a choice of the lesser of two evils: "Being consumed by the Leviathan of the deep was preferable to being torn apart by the white Adamastor of colonial tyranny". Water was associated with danger, death and uncanniness of the existence after death.

However, water also served as a space of regeneration in a traditional South African cosmology (...) was the birthplace of people and cattle; the water metaphor also encompassed the birth of a Christ-like saviour Sifuba-sibanzi during the Xhosa cattle-killing". (...) Water also represented the baptismal font of the missionary schools, where so many Xhosa elite received a western education. Amathongo [ancestral spirits] and Christ, therefore, all emerged from a watery source (Genis 2014, 280–281).

Mhquay's poem combines the complex symbolic of the water motive by evoking the fatalistic dimension of the journey, which was expected to bring death upon the best warriors, carefully chosen by black communities to represent their honour in the war. The offering is presented as a perfect one, as African tribes are sending their best representatives overseas to fight and die generously for the sake of the liberation of the humankind. The political conflict becomes an ontological and religious one: it is in fact a part of the eternal struggle between forces of God and forces of Evil, and Africans taking part in that struggle become martyrs rejoicing in the presence of God.

Somebody has to die, so that something can be built;
Somebody has to serve, so that others can live;
With these words we say: be consoled,
This is how we build ourselves, as ourselves.
(...)
Their brave blood faced the King of Kings.
Their deaths had a purpose for all of us" (Mqhayi 2008).

In such a reading the deep waters of the ocean become the baptismal font from which a new, eternal life emerges. The moral triumph of black warriors, following only their moral impulse and giving their life away for the greater good is obvious, their sacrifice purposeful.

Our blood on that ship turned things around,
It served to make us known through the world!

This is, of course, a reading influenced by the parallels with Eliot's poetry and focussing on Christian aspects of soteriology presented by Mqhayi. Genis proposed another complex reading based on soteriological hopes which emerged from the visions of Xhosa prophetess Nongqawuse. In 1856, the Xhosa girl had a vision of ancestral spirits who promised her the coming of the Golden Age and retreat of white settlers and required the Xhosa to destroy their crops and cattle herds. The massive cattle killings led to starvation and death of nearly three quarters of the population (Mda 2000). Genis mentioned several other similar prophecies which in the nineteenth century led to similar disasters, but on a lesser scale. In his reading Mqhayi's poem is echoing these futile sacrifices rather than Christian soteriology.

Mqhayi was consciously under the sway of this sacred vision that never came to fruition but which only led to the death of many thousands through starvation. Ironically, both the Xhosa cattle-killing prophecy and Mqhayi's poetic vision are centred on the seemingly futile blood sacrifice in obtaining ancestral sanction. (...) In Mqhayi's poem, the young black recruits metaphorically become the cattle that are slaughtered and whose blood again seals the bond between the living and the dead (Genis 2014, 293).

Genis's reading highlights the influence of the Xhosa millenarian prophecies and Xhosa mythology on Mqhayi's vision, which, in my opinion, tries to integrate indigenous beliefs, Christianity, and vocalize emerging political aspirations of the black community. Mqhayi's poem goes beyond the fatalism of ongoing blood sacrifices, in a sense the voluntary sacrifice of the chosen sons of Africa resembles the ultimate sacrifice of Christ, the chosen Son of God, who "[n]either by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood (...) entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us" (Hebrews 9, 12, KJV). Mqhayi becomes, through such reading, a prophet of the ultimate and final sacrifice and of resurrection day, understood in religious and political terms.

7. Conclusions

Why are then the spectres of the *Mendi* still haunting South African cultural debate? The haunting presence of the spectres of the *Mendi* can be observed on different levels. On the socio-political level, the drowned members of the SANLC continuously reappear because they are still needed and exploited as a powerful symbol by different political groups. In a more metaphoric, but strictly political sense, their recurrence seems to be an outcome, or a sign, of unfulfilled or broken political promises of the post-1994 democratically elected governments. The RSA, freed from the burden of the apartheid policy, is still struggling with inequality, tribalism and violence. This appears to be a betrayal of the legacy of the *Mendi*, represented in the apartheid era as a pledge to become a unified entity, a brotherhood of all Black tribes and nations populating the country. The haunting memory of abandoned ideals, compromising identities, and misused symbols, paradoxically keeps the spectres of the *Mendi* alive and enforces the re-examination of South African history and mythology.

There is still a quite material aspect of the haunting story of the troopship *Mendi*. Most of the 600 bodies were never found and buried properly. The official wreath laying ceremony took place first in 2007. This was a substitute burial, accompanied, predictably and appropriately, by a praise poem performed on board of the SAS *Mendi*, itself a material incarnation of the ghost ship hidden in the depths of the Ocean. The place where the *Mendi* sank was proclaimed an official war grave first in 2009. The “macabre puzzle” (Clothier 1987, 99) of unidentified bodies, decaying under the sea or drifting to distant shores, and souls thrown according to African religious beliefs into a kind of limbo cannot be ignored in any of *Mendi* literary or historical accounts.

Another question still haunting the *Mendi* researchers is to what extent the high number of deaths was caused by the racial prejudices held by captain Stump of the SS *Darro*, who could have saved many of the men but did nothing. While in 1987 Norman Clothier ignored any hints of racial issues behind the tragedy, in more recent publications there appear allegations of that kind. The most recent research questions and problematizes the role of South African Black intellectuals, such as Sol Plaatje, Rev. Wauchope Dyobha or Samuel Edward Krune Mqhayi in recruitment campaign for the SANLC. These who tried to build the bridges between the British authorities and Black

communities may be considered as indirectly responsible for the *Mendi* disaster and for the oblivion and negligence the White government paid its loyal Black servicemen with.

The persistent presence of the spectres of the *Mendi* appears productive and inspiring for South African art and social conscience. Numerous poems, official ceremonies, scholarly publications and congresses, a stage drama *Did We Dance: The Sinking of the Mendi* by Lara Foot (2012), a novel *Just a Dead Man* by Margaret von Klemperer (2012), a monumental triptych painting by Hilary Graham (1993), numerous monuments, including the shipwreck sculpture by Medi Phala (2006) and body art by Peter Emmanuel (2014; 2016), are trying to fill the lacunae in popular knowledge and awareness of Black participation in First World War. They are most recent links in the chain of voices that was heard throughout the last century, but they also very consciously handle both the history, the myth, and the ideology behind the *Mendi* narrative, elements which became inseparable.

Hauntology must be also noted as an ontological aspect of poetry and art, trying to express the *manqué*, the absence, the unspeakable: it tries to express the most intimate truth of human emotions, it touches the mystery, the core of human nature, its existential condition, its directedness towards the death, the great silence echoing the yearning for eternal life and final sense of existence. "Works of art are haunted, not only by the ideal forms of which they are imperfect instantiations, but also by what escapes representation" (Gallix 2011). "[T]o tell a story is always to invoke ghosts, to open a space through which something other returns" (Wolfreys 2002, 3). The reoccurrence of the spectres of the *Mendi* would hence not only express political and social injustice, existential fears and religious hope, but also profoundly reflect the nature of art in general.

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