

Transvaal Romantic: an exploration of Romantic elements in the landscape paintings of Moses Tladi

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Little comprehensive literature is available on Romantic expressions by black artists in South Africa. The work of Moses Tladi, a recently re-discovered Pedi artist, offers a unique perspective on the iconic landscape genre that found its origins in this era. The artist, recently researched by Angela Read Lloyd, was born in 1897 and made a living as a gardener for a prosperous English family in Johannesburg. His landscapes adopt the language of the Romantic sublime, expressing a fascination with nature and one's being-in-nature as it exchanges a mimetic representation of reality for one imbued with the spiritual and imaginative. By comparing and discussing his work in relation to seminal Romantic artists such as J.M.W. Turner and David Caspar Friedrich, I hope to commemorate Tladi's work, as well as draw attention to how his unique South African setting influenced his painting methods and Romantic inclinations. Intertwined with (and problematised by) the social and political currents of his time, Tladi's paintings become the interpretation of nature's forces.

Keywords: Tladi, nature romanticism, sublime, political

Romantiese kunstenaar van die Transvaal: 'n ondersoek na Romantiese elemente in die landskapskilderye van Moses Tladi

Byna geen literatuur bestaan tans oor Romantiese skilderwerk deur swart kunstenaars binne die Suid-Afrikaanse kunsversameling nie. In die werk van Moses Tladi, 'n Pedi kunstenaar wat onlangs herontdek is, word daar 'n unieke perspektief op die ikoniese landskap genre gewerp, 'n genre wat sy oorsprong in die Romantiek vind. Die kunstenaar, nagevors deur Angela Read Lloyd, is gebore in 1897 en het as tuinier gewerk by 'n goeie Engelse huisgesin in Johannesburg. Tladi se landskappe gebruik die taal van die Romantiese sublieme en druk 'n fassinasie met die natuur en die mens in die natuur uit, eerder as 'n wêreld-getroue uitbeelding daarvan. Deur sy werk te vergelyk met dié van belangrike Romantiese kunstenaars soos J.M.W. Turner en David Caspar Friedrich, hoop ek om Tladi se werk te herdenk, asook om aandag te vestig op die manier wat sy unieke Suid-Afrikaanse omstandighede sy tegniek en Romantiese temperament beïnvloed. Verweef met (en gekompliseer deur) die sosiale en politieke strominge van sy tyd, word Tladi se skilderye 'n vertolking van die natuur se mag.

Sleutelwoorde: Tladi, natuur, romantiek, subliem, polities

The work of Moses Tladi, an early landscape painter from the former Transvaal province, reveals a unique interpretation of South African art heritage. Unlike his peer, Gerard Sekoto, his paintings unfold not as extensive civil and social illustrations, but rather as meditations on nature. By engaging in this genre and exhibiting among mainly white artists in a Romantic realist style popular in the 1930's in South Africa, I believe the artist makes a statement of assertion. Tladi uses the subtle yet powerful language of beauty to express (as equal to others') his encounter with the world – an intricate world of man and nature, craftsmanship and patronage, ancestry and policy, labour and transcendence.

The journalist Angela Read Lloyd, following the recollections of family members and acquaintances and exploring gallery archives, made Moses Tladi's oeuvre accessible for the first time in the biography, *The Artist in the Garden - the Quest for Moses Tladi*. Lloyd is the granddaughter of Tladi's employer, Herbert Read, who was the owner of the family estate Lokshoek, in Johannesburg where Tladi worked, and she relates how her life and family history overlapped with that of the artist. Angela Read Lloyd however admits (2009:18), “[m]emory is capricious” and the familiar and professional relations revealing aspects of Tladi's character and

life, not unbiased. The archival discourse surrounding Tladi's career was published by Lloyd in 2009, presented as a personal quest and narrative. This remains as the most extensive text on Tladi's life and work, and includes media extracts, interviews, and an account of her journey to Sekhukuneland where Tladi grew up. Lloyd's approach is generous, but Moses Tladi remains elusive.

As a landscape painter myself, Tladi's work struck me in its painterly sophistication and atmospheric character. His work, which reveals a characteristic brushstroke and relentless attention to detail, seldom features figures and landmarks, but focuses rather on the natural world itself. He worked *in situ* and often alone, carrying the mark of someone who painted as one would write poetry; privately and meditatively. Tladi's work received some acclaim in his time and he exhibited often, albeit usually in the 'native' or 'naturelle' section¹. In the political and social turmoil of the century his traces were lost however and his work concealed for almost forty years. Found in the possession of family members and intimate friends, it now exposes a meaningful and personal interpretation of his era.

In an attempt to write a more art historically centered piece on Tladi, I studied his work alongside the 19th century Romantic movement in Europe, proposing that Tladi's specific use of landscape engages the notion of the sublime landscape and transcendence. Although some of the political implications of his 'assimilated style' are expressed², a much more comprehensive study could be undertaken with regards to this, as well as attention given to Tladi's relationship to other South African Romantic Realist painters (for instance Volschenk, Roworth and Coetzer)³. The focus of this study falls predominantly on Tladi's paintings and the emotional credence and sense of conviction with which Tladi transcends his (assimilated) landscape painting tradition. This focus, both in Tladi's relationship to the land and in the manifestation thereof in the painting medium, celebrates the artist as he approaches the Romantic painting tradition from his unique socio-political position.

Disparate definitions

Romanticism remains a dynamic and controversial yet enduring set of beliefs and expressions. As an art-historical Movement, it was one of the earliest *avant garde* movements in the sense that it placed renewed focus on subjectivity, expressive agency, creative genius and the artist's role as philosopher and lyricist. In this new autonomous state, the Romantic artists proposed quite unconventional ways of thinking about traditional painting. It was the Romantics who first asserted what Vaughan calls the 'supreme importance of landscape'. In the painting tradition that was until then concerned with the historical and narrative, Vaughan explains that it was by asserting that the "forms of nature could in itself have such deep significance" that Constable and the other landscape painters established this new form of art. (Vaughan 1978: 132).

Isaiah Berlin, an influential Romantic scholar, explains that the Romantics were sceptical of the popular empiricism of intellectuals like Lock and Wolff and believed that "there was a flow of life, and that the attempt to cut this flow into segments killed it" (1999: 42). The Romantics would view 'life' or 'nature' not as pieces of matter in an observable world, but as a 'forward-thrusting' of energy, a malleable life force. Eric Newman describes the Romantic rejection of Enlightenment ideas best as a rebellion against law. "Obedience to laws produces conformity, and conformity produces recognizable patterns of behaviour" (Newman 1962: 125). With its rebellious character and focus on anti-rationalism, Romanticism was tied to a deep sense of pessimism. The earlier German *Sturm und Drang* movement, for instance, translated

the disbelief of universal truth with a defeatism which claimed nothing could essentially be done to improve life on earth, and that “conflict, collision, tragedy, death – all kind of horrors - are inevitably involved in the nature of the universe” (Berlin 1999: 56). Other Romantic thinkers were more aware of agency and will, and proposed that instead of finding answers to life and the universe’s questions, we have the ability to create them. Schiller, Fichte and especially Kant wrote extensively on the power of the human will and yearning to create. Berlin sums up this new idealism: “[I]deals are not to be discovered at all, they are to be invented; not to be found, but to be generated, generated as art is generated” (1999: 87).

Amidst their attempt to generate a harmonious ideal, the early Romantics’ confrontation with modernisation and industrialisation as well as the increasing study of the observed world were imperative in forming their ideas. Some 17th century critics and artists such as Reynolds believed that the natural world tends towards beauty, perfection, harmony and symmetry (Berlin 1999: 28). Others like Schiller, viewed nature as elemental, capricious, causal and chance-directed. The latter is a dualist view of nature, and essentially patriarchal: in contrast to man “who has morality, who distinguishes between desire and will, duty and interest, the right and the wrong, and acts accordingly” nature is the feminine other, who is herself amoral and ruthless (Berlin 1999: 80-81). Kant was especially resolute that man is at his noblest when dominating Nature and imposing himself upon her (Berlin 1999: 76). Schelling, on the contrary, believed that we too are fundamentally part of nature, owing to the fact that everything in nature is echoed in our human behaviour and conflicts; we are simply nature’s “most self-conscious representatives”.⁴ The relationship (and struggle) between man and nature became a popular subject in art. Dramatic scenes of conflict in nature could be used to convey the power of creation or the vulnerability of man (for instance in the work of Johan Christian Dahl) while the uncommon stillness of a mountain landscape might also convey a kind of mystic admiration (Rosenblum 1988: 14).

Synonymous with the “mystic” forces which stand outside of and opposed to man, the term ‘nature’ is useful in understanding the works of Turner and Friedrich for instance, although I am critical of its binary opposition to the term ‘culture’. The conception of ‘landscape’ was also used differently than the iconic historical and ornamental status that ‘paintings of nature’ have attained today; the genre for the Romantics had a foundation of rebellion, mysticism and radical philosophical enquiry.

Being one of the few early black artist working and exhibiting in this genre, Moses Tladi, I believe, shared their rebellious and individualistic character. His connection to them can also be grounded in two related historic theoretical observations, from which I will argue my point; firstly that his portrayal of nature is “self-sufficient”, no longer needing to “justify herself by being regarded as an ‘environment’” (Newman 1962: 63), and secondly, that Tladi depicts nature as transcendent.

Newman explains that the Romantic painter “disregards the physical world in so far as it provides a set of symbols for the spiritual or emotional life of the individual” (1962: 29). The subject matter of the great German Romantic landscape painter, David Caspar Friedrich, was not necessarily different from popular 17th century Dutch themes; the sea, landscape, church views, figures in the landscape. Yet, through the use of light, colour and especially composition he generates what Rosenblum calls a platform for spiritual meditation, rather than of mimetic representation (Rosenblum 1999: 7). Vaughan explains that in Friedrich’s organization of composition, he had found a way to “heighten the drama of a landscape so that it no longer requires the presence of some human event to make its meaning explicit.” The forms in nature

become the protagonists (1978:146) as the observable world is translated into expressions of the ineffable, infinite, mysterious and enchanted.

Fertile ground

Angela Read Lloyd writes that Moses Tladi was born in 1897 and grew up in a rural part of what is today Limpopo Province. The area, Sekhukuneland, was named after the Pedi ruler Sekhukune, and was bordered on the east by the Drakensberg Mountain range. Moses herded cattle as a child and attended school, but as a young man he left the homestead in Ga Phaala for the city, and found work as an estate gardener for a prosperous British settler Herbert Read on his estate in Federation Road, Johannesburg. In the early 1930s, he also married his wife, Sekhubami More. They had four children. Moses and his family first lived in Evaton, later in Sophiatown, and then settled in the more rustic area Kensington B in Randburg.

Herbert Read, an Englishman having grown up in London, came to South Africa in the early 1890s with the Gold Rush and found a job as an administrative officer at the Rand Mines. Read seemed unmindful of political tension between Afrikaner and English South Africans and married an Afrikaans girl, Lily Visser, in the midst of the Anglo Boer War. They set up home in Federation Road in Johannesburg, where they were at the centre of economic and cultural activity, rubbing shoulders with the Oppenheims, Howard Pim and many influential artists such as Pierneef en Pilkington. Tladi stayed in the loft of the Read home and partnered with Herbert Read in the design and upkeep of the family's elaborate garden.

Moses' talent was admired by the family and he drew immense advantage from the artistic and affluent circles of Herbert Read. He also had an active family life and usually went home over weekends; his wife and children were familiar with the Lokshoek estate. Some of his children later acquired tertiary education. Over weekends, he tended to his own home and garden, something he was passionate about. His daughter Rekiloe explains that he did not like Sophiatown, he wanted to raise his children in the country. It was the plot in Kensington B, North of Johannesburg, that the family seemed most attached to. After many years working for the Reads, Tladi was called for army service. By this time, however, he was already ill with tuberculosis. In 1956, to the shock of the family, their home in Kensington was expropriated and the family was forced to move to Soweto, leaving the garden demolished and their belongings reduced. The trauma of this move, as well as his illness, could have caused Tladi's death not long thereafter at the age of 65 (Read Lloyd 2009: 143-145, 182), yet there are also accounts that suggest an accidental overdose on medication may have caused his death.

Tladi received no formal training in painting, yet was increasingly exposed to artworks done in Western art methods and styles - an influential but contentious part in his development as painter. Colin Allen, a neighbour of the Reads and artistic companion to Tladi, says that Moses initially "use[d] burned sticks with material tied to the front as brush and old house paints he collected from here and there" (Read Lloyd 2009: 76). The children mentioned this to Herbert Read, who undertook to give Tladi materials and develop his skill for the rest of his employment there. Also over weekends, Rekiloe remembers, her father would go out into the countryside, sometimes with his friend and pupil John Mohl, to draw and paint (Lloyd 2009: 46). Howard Pim, who was an influential friend of Herbert Read, organised a special visit for Tladi to the Johannesburg Art Gallery in 1928. Works by many of the Romantics and Pre-Raphaelites were exhibited, including Henry Harpignies, Buxton Knight, Mark Fisher, Edward

Millais and Wilson Steer. Howard Pim remembers that Tladi showed no interest in works that were not landscapes.

Patronage problematizes the discussion and understanding of Tladi's work. Although according to Angela Read Lloyd, Tladi and Herbert Read had a "benign, creative partnership", and her father "a certain awe and affection of the artist" (2009: 29), the late colonial mentality present in South Africa at the time surfaced in most of Tladi's encounters. A 1928 newspaper, *Umteteli wa Bantu*, describes Howard Pim as having discovered a "[n]ative genius" (Read Lloyd 2009: 24). Journalists often referred to Tladi's "international" or "European" style of painting and in a 1931 article in *The Star* entitled "Bantu art drifts from the symbols of spirituality", a reporter writes that "the last few years have seen the rise of outstanding Bantu men, whose contributions have shown that Bantu art is rushing away from the symbols of spirituality". Tladi, who is here referred to as "Moses Tladi, the garden boy" is said to "paint [...] in oils and watercolours [...] without any training". Furthermore, "[p]ainting in the European technique among the Bantu is an original phase. Moses Tladi has established a reputation in landscape [...] Moses Tladi is a revelation of a new felicity in native painting" (Read Lloyd 2009: 103). In most cases, Tladi's inclination to realism was regarded with interest. A 1938 Newspaper clipping reads, "sekhukuniland" (sic) is a well-composed oil of mountain scenery. The drawing and colours of the mountains and vegetation in the background are done with realism and yet imagination. The artist gives an effect of his home scenery that is more convincing than the facile painting of more sophisticated artists" (Read Lloyd 2009: 65). In another; "a gardener by profession, Moses Tladi has carried a love of nature into his work. There is naturally a good deal of the primitive about some of his pictures. But drawing, perspective, composition and even colour denote a measure of technique that compels the visitor (and critic) to take his art seriously" (Read Lloyd 2009: 65).

Enwezor, an important critic in postcolonial writing and theorist on black subjectivity in Apartheid South Africa, claims that: "nowhere is the ideology of this racial fundamentalism in the shaping of national identity more potently manifested than in the arena of sports and visual arts" (quoted in Pinder 2002: 373). Enwezor explains that the us-them separation, (in this case the appraisal of Tladi's work as 'European') works on the premise of two assumptions: "one, the ontological description of the native as devoid of history, and two, the epistemological description of the native as devoid of knowledge and subjectivity" (quoted in Pinder 2002: 375). Ascribing the quality of Tladi's painting to a mimicking of European styles implies the native as a 'blank' subject to which European artistic styles are directed and developed.

Power-struggles over artistic autonomy (as well as for land and land-ownership) fashioned the conception of the South Africa landscape and landscape painting as primarily political, even though such a reading was not given of Tladi's work during his lifetime. Michael Godby explains in *The Lie of the Land*, that it was the Dutch lowland peoples who invented the landscape genre, partly because they did not have a landscape of their own. "The Dutch liberation of their land from political and religious oppression – and indeed, fighting the encroachment of the North Sea itself [...] imbued their new 'tradition' of landscape painting with a sense of significance, pride and, indeed, nationalism" (Godby 2011: 9). In South Africa, according to Godby, similar ideas and sentiments have been important. The contentious character of landscape painting found its greatest derivation in the struggles over land between the country's "ascendant white-settlers minority and a defensive black indigenous majority" (Walker 2011: 12). In the forty years of Apartheid rule following 1948, division and separation was enforced through vigorous legislation, creating as result a white core, comprising 87% of the land, and the black periphery in the remaining 13%. The latter was later divided into the independent homelands or so-called

'bantustans' (Walker 2011: 12). After 1994, and even today, restoration to victims of land dispossession is a challenging topic in the country's historical climate.

Artists reacted to the South African landscape and its segregation in different ways, and one might argue that nationalist ideas were but one part of its vocabulary. For some artists, Godby explains, the landscape remained 'exotic'. The work of Reginald Turvey, for instance, with its recurrent use of animals, seemed to depict a kind of "African Golden Age" (Godby 2011: 68). Artists like Erich Mayer and Gerard Benghu chose to ignore the evidence of history and represented the landscape nostalgically, as the home for a 'vanished way of life' and 'traditional values' (ibid.). The 'alien' and 'hostile' in the environment is embraced in the works of Jane Alexander and Jo Radcliff, using metaphorical vocabulary (Godby 2011: 82), and a quasi-religious quality or spiritual presence can be identified in the work of Maud Sumner and Mduduzi Xakaza (Godby 2011: 72) among others. Godby believes that until the middle of the nineteenth century "the discourse around art concerned mainly its likeness to nature and there were no academic institutions that could accommodate more philosophical issues" (2011: 74). It was in this artistic context that Tladi's works were publicly assessed, and even though (or especially as) he had no institutional training, his realist technique was admired.

I believe, however, that Tladi's work is much more philosophically motivated than was perceived in his time, and that this stems from a Romantic temperament. The landscape genre has merely surfaced as most effective in expressing his personal vision. *Morning at the Magaliesberg Mountains* (figure 1) is said to be Tladi's last work (Read Lloyd 2009: 191), and apart from its sophistication in painterly skill and use of colour, a sense of the transcendental and sublime is evoked by its use of light, where, as in Turner, the physical environment becomes imbued with the fantastical and imaginative. Rosenblum explains that this "capacity to translate the natural to the supernatural" is the most important feature of the Romantics. This is also what separated them from the vision of the Impressionist painters later in the century, who were equally preoccupied with the representation of light (1977: 25). The Romantics were "convinced that, though visible things are the instruments by which we find this reality, they [...] have indeed little significance unless they are related to some embracing and sustaining power" (Bowra 1950: 9). In the same way, works such as *Morning at the Magaliesberg Mountains*, *River Scene* and *Flowering Tree*, which will be shortly discussed, aim not merely at a realistic representation of the perceivable landscape, but present moments of 'spiritual' reflection, something Vaughan describes as the human individual's 'response to nature', his 'encounter with the world', its 'awareness of the infinite and divine' (1978: 153).

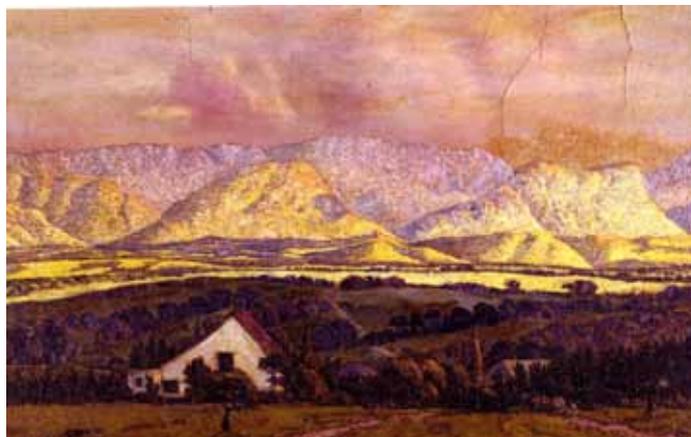


Figure 1
Moses Tladi, *Morning at the Magaliesberg Mountains* (undated), oil on Bristol board, 47 x 73.5cm, private collection (Read Lloyd 2009: 191).

Morning at Magaliesberg Mountains stands out as one of Tladi's most visibly transcendent works (Lloyd 2009: 143), and could, apart from presenting the artist's rapture with the landscape before him, also symbolise a personal (and political) ideal or vision. In a work by Friedrich, *Meadows near Greifswald*, a feeling of the visionary is evoked by the morning light illuminating a landscape with a city in the distance. Rosenblum explains that this creates a mood "so hushed and meditative that the topographical facts of the distant architecture – the tiny houses and church spires whose diminutive silhouettes are just visible through the haze on the remote horizon – become almost visionary in character, the apparition of some Heavenly City of Jerusalem viewed across a plain radiant with a quietly glowing sunlight" (1977: 20-21). Perhaps Tladi's work meditates such a visionary ideal. And it is not impossible that the language of pastoral beauty that Tladi implements here is imbued with a political awareness of its contrast to Sophiatown and Soweto.



Figure 2
Moses Tladi, *Flowering Tree* (undated), oil on cardboard, 25.5 x 31.5,
private collection (Read Lloyd 2009: 230).

Although not as atmospheric, a work such as *Flowering Tree* (figure 2) suggests the use of anthropomorphism or the 'pathetic fallacy', typical of the Romantics and especially Friedrich's work. Rosenblum explains that often, in the landscape painting of the early nineteenth century, there emerges an intense empathy with the life of an individual tree, causing the inanimate landscape component to "suddenly become a sentient, almost human presence" (1977: 36). The artist Thomas Cole also recognised this resemblance in claiming rather poetically that "[t]here is an expression of affection in intertwining branches" (1977: 39). The oeuvre of Moses Tladi includes many reflections on trees, including *Sekhukuniland* (sic.), *Blue Gum Tree by Water*, *Tree with Hamerkop's Nest*, *Winter - Trees*, *Driefontein*. The work *Flowering Tree* reminds especially of the mulberry, olive and cherry trees painted by the Dutch post-impressionist artist Vincent van Gogh. Perhaps Tladi experienced the same intense associations with trees as Van Gogh, who described them as if "clinging to the earth in the same convulsive and passionate manner" as humans do (Rosenblum 1977: 40). In his *Flowering Tree*, the obsessive burst of flowers in an open landscape seems restless under the unforgiving Transvaal sun. In a similar but more atmospheric work by Friedrich, *The Solitary Tree*, the artist paints his subject from a strong frontal position and, unlike in a conventional picturesque landscape composition, forces the gaze of the spectator on the subject. Rather than leading the viewer further into the landscape, the landscape becomes a portrait in which the viewer encounters some characteristic of the

artist, or perhaps some attribute of him or herself as if in a mirror. By centering the composition, Rosenblum explains, “the randomness of nature has been replaced by a fixed, emblematic order that may elucidate an eternal truth” (Rosenblum 1977: 31-32).

In contrast to this ‘order’, the irrational and volatile side of nature is equally important to the Romantics and finds expression in dramatic representations of the sublime and treacherous. Edmund Burke contemplates famously in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) that the key features to the sublime are predominantly negative, including elements of terror, obscurity, fear and privation. The Romantic expression of the confrontation with these elements is especially expressed in the works of Goya, Delacroix and Gericault, and is echoed in a few examples of Tladi’s ‘darker’ works. Instead of reverting to a sentimentalised and vaguely picturesque style (which, one may argue, some of his paintings do in fact revert to), works like *River Scene*, *Cloudy Evening (at Kroonstad, OFS)*, *Landscape With Trees and Landscape Two Trees*, all reveal elements of mystery, conflict and Burkes’ ‘sublime’.

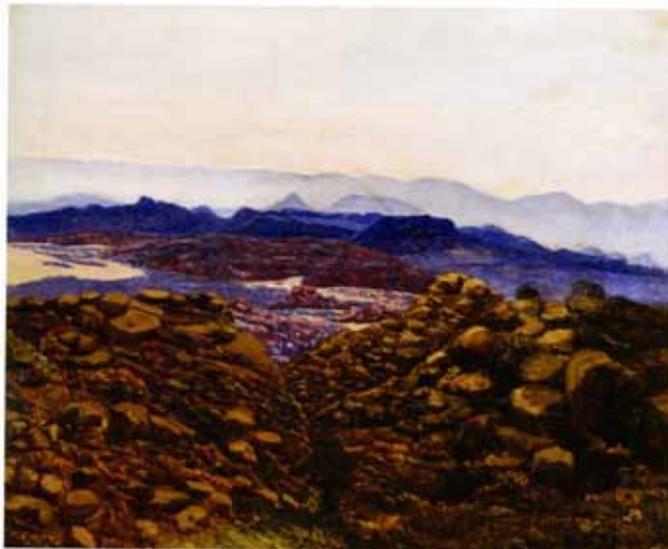


Figure 3
Moses Tladi, *River Scene* (date unknown), oil on canvas, 51 x 61,
private collection (Read Lloyd 2009: 25).

River Scene (figure3), one of the works mentioned above, depicts a strange mass of brown rocks daubed against a lavender middle ground and mountainous background. It lacks figures, trees or a metaphorical protagonist, except for the rocks themselves which are craftily and purposefully painted, and altogether offers an almost disquieting emptiness. Like Friedrich’s seminal *Monk by the Sea*, one might say: “[T]he picture is daringly empty, devoid of objects, devoid of the narrative incident that might perhaps qualify it as a genre painting” (Rosenblum 1977: 13). Especially in the South African context, Michael Godby explains (2011: 77), human activity and deprivation “become one with the expression of desolation of the Landscape”. Qualities of nature are used either narratively, or as an existential condition to show some social turmoil, often finding expression in storms, fire, floods or other disasters for example. This ‘hostility’ is based on the premise that the landscape, and nature in general, is “alien and essentially unknowable”, an important appeal to South Africa’s history of agricultural and social control (Godby 2011: 62).

Moments of seriousness in Tladi’s representation of the landscape counters the pastoral sentimentalism of especially the later Romantics. Vaughan recounts how it was easy to upset the “delicate balance between observation and expression” on which landscape painting relied

(1978: 182). In *The Iconography of Landscape*, John Lucas writes that the 'picturesque' is characteristic of artworks that aim at pathos but have a distanced viewpoint and offer vague emotions (1988:83). The anti-picturesque, instead, offers a more original concern with place, more detail, has a gravity of vision and interpretation, and is known by human association with place (1988: 83-84). Tladi's depictions of his surroundings are always very particular. *River scene* speaks of a geographical setting that would barely incite the imagination unless painted *in situ*. Perhaps the artist "fell in love with certain aspects of Nature" as Newman describes in *The Romantic Rebellion* (1962: 100). Tladi's *River Scene* might contemplate the Ngwaritsi River flowing through Tladi's ancestral Ga Phaala, or the Jukskei River near Kensington, which is now sadly polluted and unappealing.

Expression is power

The slightly exaggerated emphasis on the inner life and experience of the artist genius is typical of the somewhat controversial view of the Romantic subject. In its philosophic origins, the increased importance of human will manifests in the Romantic Movement most significantly through its focus on artistic expression. In most of Western history, Isaiah Berlin explains, critics and artists alike would agree that the value of the work lies in its properties; for being beautiful, shapely or symmetrical (1999: 58). For Romantic scholars like Hamann and Herder this was not the case; they believed that the artwork, in essence, is always an expression of someone, "a voice speaking," a manifestation of its maker's attitude to life (Berlin 1999: 59). Romantics tended to loath art that was mimetic, that was a 'scientific copy' achieved through observation. Instead they proposed that the same qualities perceived in nature, namely energy, force, vitality and life, should be present in art (Berlin 1999: 98) to the extent that such a work captures something as dynamic as the inner life of the person who created it. For the Romantic genius, this often leads to a kind of agonizing paradox. Berlin explains this conflict: "To express your nature is to express your relation to the universe. Your relation to the universe is inexpressive but you must nevertheless express it. This is the agony, this is the problem. This is the unending Sehnsucht" (1999: 105).

Tladi's character seemed typical of this sentiment. The Allen brothers were children when Tladi still worked for the Reads and he is remembered as an 'exploring' artist, "always striving for something" (Read Lloyd 2009: 153). Keith Allen remembers that "[i]n personality he was very quiet, humble and reticent", "[h]e had no confidence, he couldn't measure himself." Mahlako, Tladi's younger sister, remembers that he liked solitude when he painted: "once he had started work, and to paint, he didn't want anyone around, no animals, no people" (Read Lloyd 2009: 236). He used to draw the mountains, she explains, as well as small bushes and flowers, but was sure to be careful and very precise when painting. Keith explains, "[h]e was very quiet, and dignified. He had a quiet poise. And a sense about him that he was unique. Even as a child, I recognised this drive in him. To do something higher. I instinctively respected him" (Read Lloyd 2009: 78). Although controversial, I find these mythologies around the artist genius valuable, both in the discussion and formation of the artist's subjectivity.

An artist such as Moses Tladi raises interesting questions on subjectivity and the incentive for self-expression. And although the discussion of early South African painting has made space for more contemporary concerns, his heritage remains a rich source of historical and social exploration. For me, questions of landscape painting and Romantic philosophy in South Africa remain unsolved although much has been written about the genre: If the focus of Romantic painting falls largely on the contemplation of nature, is the act of landscape painting then not

itself a romantic act, or conversely, from a cultural studies approach, always a political one? In which ways do African ‘traditional’ beliefs or religion change the appropriation and effect of Romanticism as a series of beliefs or values? Rosenblum describes the Romantic artist as “in search of overwhelming and fear-inspiring experiences” (1977: 17) How would the involuntary confrontation with these experiences (as in the case of the disadvantaged or destitute) affect the artist’s interpretation of these experiences? Especially since there is little literature on Romanticism that deals specifically with the political, and even less with the South African context, a more investigative venture into these questions would be insightful; exploring the notion of ‘African Romanticism’ and how Western art-historical concepts compare to notions and beliefs originating in Africa. These are some of the questions explored in my current Masters project.

Starting with artists such as Moses Tladi, we see the Romantic and political function together in a poignant way. I believe the strong sense of connection between Tladi’s personhood and his paintings of nature, combined with an aesthetic language that affects the viewer, makes a powerful political statement about reclaimed subjectivity. And his re-enchantment of a very particular landscape renewed insight into the intricate character of this genre in South Africa; it is not Romantic because of the ‘emotiveness’ contained in the subject matter itself, as Eric Newman points out, but rather on the premise that the artist transcends the thing which it portrays; it is “the finite standing for the infinite”, as Isaiah Berlin explains, “the material standing for the immaterial” (1999: 104). In romanticising the landscape around him, Tladi translated his finite environment into a symbol of himself and his empowered selfhood.

Notes

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| 1 | Tladi exhibited for the first time in 1929 at the Tenth Annual Exhibition of the Johannesburg Academy. He was the only non-white exhibitor in the catalogue. He also showed works in 1931 at the ‘First annual exhibition of contemporary national art’ at the National Gallery (Read Lloyd 2009:65), in March 1939 at the South African Academy for the Twentieth Annual Exhibition of the Academy, and in May of the same year at the Gainsborough Galleries in Johannesburg. (Lloyd 2009:202). | | |
| 2 | Discussing Moses Tladi’s work within a Western framework is in itself a political act, and further explored in my current research; | 3 | Jeanne van Eeden’s research done on Martin du Toit and the 1930’s Pretoria art collection (published 2008) could potentially be helpful in such a venture. |
| | | 4 | Schelling believed that volcanic eruptions and phenomenon such as magnetism and electricity could be interpreted as a struggle between the same mysterious forces that also manifest in our inner struggles as humans (Berlin 1999:59). |

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