



VINTAGE

THE VOICE
OF THE THUNDER
LAURENS VAN DER POST

Contents

About the Book

About the Author

Also by Laurens van der Post

Dedication

Title Page

Epigraph

The Other Journey

The Little Memory

The Great Memory

Copyright

About the Book

From the beginning, Laurens van der Post has been aware of a dimension in life far longer and more significant than the outer eventfulness of everyday living. His perception of life's mysterious power began with the Bushman, the first people of his native Africa, and grew in the universal imagery of dreams, the fertile legends and stories of ancient civilization, the intuitive teaching of prophets, poets and other pioneers of human awareness. In this book he has brought together two of his most deeply felt and far reaching essays, and has extended their message with great imaginative insight, exploring the potential in all men and women to acquire self-knowledge and to live life according to its fundamental precepts.

About the Author

Laurens van der Post was born in South Africa in 1906, the thirteenth of fifteen children in a family of Dutch and French Hugenot origins. Most of his adult life was spent with one foot in Africa and one in England. His professions of writer and farmer were interrupted by ten years of soldiering in the British army, serving with distinction in the Western Desert, Abyssinia, Burma and the Far East. Taken prisoner by the Japanese, he was held in captivity for three years before returning to active service as a member of Lord Mountbatten's staff in Indonesia and, later, as Military Attache to the British Minister in Java.

After 1949 he undertook several official missions exploring little-known parts of Africa, and his journey in search of the Bushmen in 1957 formed the basis of his famous documentary film *The Lost World of the Kalahari*. Other television films include *All Africa Within Us* and *The Story of Carl Gustav Jung*, whom he met after the war and grew to know as a personal friend. In 1934 he wrote *In a Province*, the first book by a South African to expose the horrors of racism. Other books include *Venture to the Interior* (1952), *The Heart of the Hunter* (1961), and *A Walk with a White Bushman* (1986). *The Seed and the Sower* was made into a film under the title *Merry Christmas, Mr Lawrence*, and, more recently, *A Story Like the Wind* and *A Far-Off Place* were combined and made into the film *A Far-Off Place*.

Sir Laurens van der Post was awarded the CBE in 1947 and received his knighthood in 1981. He died in 1996.

Also by Laurens van der Post

IN A PROVINCE
VENTURE TO THE INTERIOR
THE FACE BESIDE THE FIRE
A BAR OF SHADOW
FLAMINGO FEATHER
THE DARK EYE IN AFRICA
THE LOST WORLD OF THE KALAHARI
THE HEART OF THE HUNTER
THE SEED AND THE SOWER
JOURNEY INTO RUSSIA
THE HUNTER AND THE WHALE
THE NIGHT OF THE NEW MOON
A STORY LIKE THE WIND
A FAR-OFF PLACE
A MANTIS CAROL
JUNG AND THE STORY OF OUR TIME
FIRST CATCH YOUR ELAND
YET BEING SOMEONE OTHER
ABOUT BLADY: A PATTERN OUT OF TIME

With Jane Taylor

TESTAMENT TO THE BUSHMEN

With photographs by Burt Glinn

A PORTRAIT OF JAPAN
A PORTRAIT OF ALL THE RUSSIAS

With photographs by David Coulson

THE LOST WORLD OF THE KALAHARI

In conversation with Jean-Marc Pottiez

A WALK WITH A WHITE BUSHMAN

To
Maria Magdalena,
my mother

The Voice of the Thunder

Laurens van der Post

Chatto & Windus
London

'In that timeless moment there was a flash of the long lightning of Africa and I heard the voice of the thunder that followed and, hard on that, one of those dear Griqua-Hottentot voices, also a fragment of one of the most ancient races of Africa, commanding his fellows to listen, because it was the voice of their God.'

From *'The Other Journey'*

The Other Journey

'Make haste back to the light . . .'

HOMER, *The Odyssey* (Anticleia to
her son, Odysseus, in Hades)

THE PATTERN OF the little memory and the great memory has been with me all my life. In an African sense I have taken it, with what I have written here, perhaps as far as it can be taken. I say 'perhaps' because I am acutely aware of how little I have done, in one way, to record the outer eventfulnesses of my life. These have been many and varied and, I am constantly told, unusual. Friends, publishers and a vast correspondence from readers all over the world have not ceased to ask me for more.

One special, lovable biographer, who among his other books has written the official life of Eugene O'Neill, pressed me so hard to collaborate with him on a biography that our friendship was stressed almost to a breaking point and would have been broken if he had not been a person also of singular understanding and worth. Although I steadfastly declined, and said that I did not have the space of mind or time to collaborate with him, he insisted on proceeding without my help. I told him over and over again I found there was something indecent about recording a person's life before he had lived the full circle of his own ration of time. I emphasized that, as far as there was any objective interest which could be of importance to a larger world and had a special meaning not only for me but for the time in which I lived, I had done all I could do to honour that feeling. Nonetheless, he pursued me from the west coast of America where he lived, and where I thought I had delivered a final and unmistakable 'no' in person, to England and appeared one afternoon without warning at the door of my home in Chelsea.

I was glad to see him in a way, but felt acutely embarrassed and almost angry that I would have to refuse a guest in my house and a friend of long standing the thing he had come to ask me, and a complex of other feelings made normal hospitality seem a poor compensation to offer him.

Yet, despite this final refusal, he went on to see friends of mine in London, to none of whom had I introduced him, travelled to Africa and I do not know where else, returned to his home in California to write the biography, and eventually sent me a copy which I have not read and shall never read.

I do not know if this little happening reflects merit on either of us. I fear it may suggest a certain hardheartedness and lack of feeling on my part, yet I cannot force myself to read the book, because in a sense that would make me what is called in law an accessory after a fact that I had done all I could to prevent. I refer to it here only because it illustrates how wrong I still feel it would be for me to engage in a process of looking back over my shoulder instead of watching my step in the here and now towards what lies unfinished and un-lived ahead. The sombre warnings against looking back in all mythologies, from the most primitive stories to the more advanced ones like Lot's wife and Orpheus and Eurydice, never seemed to me fanciful or vain, but warnings which the human spirit and imagination ignored at their peril.

Here I must hasten to add, lest the literal-minded accuse me of flagrant self-contradiction, that there is a vast difference between looking back and remembering. Memory, particularly the memory with which I am concerned, plays an immense, indescribable role in human life, and without it we would have nothing to give life the continuity it needs, and the spirit a container for all that it has experienced of value. It is, in fact, a form of making the past a forever present element of human imagination and being and doing, and is in no sense related to the indulgence of nostalgia and a still unappeased longing to return to things that have vanished forever. It would not be an over-simplification to say that looking back tends to make the present a past, whereas remembering makes what is valid in the past part of the present.

My own predisposition of nature was, I believe, on the whole free in this regard, and made me less interested in the instant sensation values and drama of events than in the 'something else' for which the event was, as it were, a proxy. What became most significant for me was the realization that that 'something' was not of one's own timing but at the disposal of an imponderable which grew of its own accord in one's imagination until in some far-off, unforeseen day it would flower and daze one's senses with its beauty and import and light of meaning, and all that there is of arrogance and presumption in this slanted consciousness of our day would be humbled in a heightened perception of the abuse of its own natural proportions. Or, to use a metaphor which I have orchestrated elsewhere in my writing, the meaning of the event then enters one whole, like the light of those stars to which astronomy so often directs us these days, and amazes our senses centuries of light years after the stars themselves have been born, and on occasion after they themselves have vanished into the outer darkness again.

As a result, the more experienced I became in watching this night sky of my awareness, the more it seemed as if there were a great acausal something intruding between the cause and the effect of events, between two great ends that appear so firmly and blindly shut, linked to the 'becoming' that was the continuity of all creation; and as if, finally, when one moved into what is called the effect, the event was transformed into something more than mere causality could have achieved. From that 'something else' we derived our sense of meaning and direction.

I found myself as a consequence increasingly concerned with the sort of personal astronomy and the quintessence of experience surrounding the sense of meaning held in the trust of what I have called here a little memory, bonded to a greater and indescribable memory before individual time, if not before time itself, and which, known or unknown, seen

or unseen, recognized or unrecognized, appeared to be the real plenipotentiary of creation. If this were not so, how could I possibly have been so stirred by the great preliminary of all the stories I ever heard as a child, from the moment my nurse dropped, like a pebble into a very still and clear pond sending ripples outwards and on to all the translucent sensations without shape or name which surrounded one's bed at evening, the phrase 'Once upon a time . . .'

Yes! Oh yes, the feeling was inescapable: 'Once upon a time . . .'

one had been somewhere else and been equipped with experience and foreknowledge of what was to come in this awesome dimension and ante-room of space and time one had just entered. As I grew older, proof that I was not alone in this rippling perception came in the testimony of poets, artists and seers, as for instance the Wordsworth who wrote in his ode on immortality:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar;
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home.

Yet even this inspired statement was not without flaw in the context of all that crowded in on me. In particular the line 'Not in entire forgetfulness' seemed almost a shocking understatement for the wordless feelings of a positive remembrance which came over me. It was to prove enough to involve me for the rest of my life in a process of wondering as much about the 'before' and 'after' as the 'now', and more about the unknown spread out like the night sky above one's imprisonment in a cell of the known. I

would look at newborn children, for instance, and think not of how young and vulnerable they were, but how old. And from my own experience of living I came to realize that, even if one accomplished the full round of one's allocated span, the best of us would have added little to what life and creation had already invested within us as children.

Paradoxically the adolescent, facing consciously and ill-prepared his own personal birth into life where he would have to assume responsibility for his own nature and be charged henceforth to live it out without deviation and as fully as he could, seemed young and poignantly defenceless, were it not that the remembrances which are automatic in the child insisted on a kind of sleeping partnership with him as he grew older. This kind of sleeping is perhaps what Shakespeare had in mind when, at the end of his own great journey in *The Tempest*, he concluded: 'We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep'. It is also perhaps this sleep to which another great Elizabethan poet and contemporary of Shakespeare, the inspired healer and physician of Norwich, Sir Thomas Browne, was referring when he declared: 'My body sleeps and my soul awakes'.

This affirmation was of the utmost importance to me, because it caused me to read on and on in that magnificently symphonic essay, *Urn Burial*, which led to discovery of the lines in *Religio Medici*: 'We carry within us the wonders we seek without us: there is all Africa and her prodigies in us.' Thus, from then on, although I did not know it at the time, I was engaged increasingly one way or another in a life that was as much an act of remembrance as of discovery, as much a 'Once upon a time . . .' as it was a 'now', as much and even more than both the 'being' and the 'doing' in the now, obedient to a 'to come' greater than their sum.

And in this regard fate seemed to have singularly blessed me from the moment of birth, surrounding me with living

examples of perhaps the oldest forms of human life to which we still have access in the world, and moreover, in the context of that other Africa to which Thomas Browne referred, still charged with the natural wonder and prodigiousness that the Elizabethan healer found within himself.

I have often thought in this connection of something Jung once told me, and which he subsequently expanded at great length in his writing, that all human beings have a two-million-year-old person within themselves, for I seemed to be accompanied in my most impressionable years by a great variety of neighbours in real life of this ancient of ancients which Jung saw lodged in all life. The consequences were immediate and unending. There was, for instance, the way in which I came to look at birth. I accepted, of course, that birth for everyone born is special, and differs from all other forms of birth. Yet those differences are not competitive, and without fear or favour they remain equal in the order of dignity of creation. This dignity does not preclude that all are different. Here in the preamble of life on earth there is the immutable provision that creation is not a programme in conformity but rather is committed to diversity and to an increase through diversity of new and more and more options and revelations of areas of creation to swell the great flow of becoming to which the stars, the nebulae and the foam and spray of the Milky Way bear witness and quicken the sense of unclaimed realities beyond.

I could not ever therefore ignore the fact that, however inexpressible all this was, the beginning had to have a human face. It was personified in an image of the warmest flesh and blood of a human being, and that human being had a 'Once upon a time . . .' face and a 'Once upon a time . . .' spirit. It was the face of my nurse Klara, to whom I have so often referred in my writing. It was she who was a precious one-some of the last remnants of the first people of

Africa, perhaps the oldest form of human life to which we still had access in my day. Had I been born in Australia, perhaps I would have called it by the moving Australian recognition of memory at the beginning, the aborigines' 'dreamtime'. It would be part of the reality which many years later in the Kalahari Desert made a Bushman hunter, when I was questioning him about the stories of their own beginnings, shake his head with passion and say that it was all too difficult to express because 'there is a dream dreaming us'. I obviously must have known my mother's face long before I knew Klara's; yet it was not that of my mother, with whom I had such a long, unique and precious relationship, but Klara's that came first, since my mother's face was more of the 'now' but Klara's of the 'Once upon a time . . .' that was also bonded to a 'Once upon a time . . .' to come.

Pressed recently in the course of a dialogue over many years with a close friend to tell him what final conclusions and feelings I had come to as I approached the end of my life, I found no conclusions that were not as provisional as the others which had preceded them. There were none that could be put into concepts or even the most eloquent of definitions. There were only vast feelings without shape or name, aglow in the rainbow colours, each in its own right, massed after refraction for the great moment of metamorphosis when they could flame into one another and fulfil, out of chaos and old night, that radiance of my first days. With this evocation, even to think of this moment always as a beginning, or a return, seemed to be meaningless. I had always thought of departure and return as the deepest pattern of human life. I had always thought of them in terms of an origin and a destination, and yet in the emotions of this image, which still arises as clear and undimmed as it seemed when it first came into my awareness, beginning and end, origin and destination, had all along been one.

So there it was, irrevocable and unalterable, the deepest pattern in the human spirit was precisely this sort of moon-bonded departure and return that made origin and destination one and is only fulfilled since it no longer excludes what is to come from the heart of the 'now'. T. S. Eliot, in 'Little Gidding', has said it perhaps better than any other poet in his great pledge to life:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

Yet as the echo of this exhortation fades behind us from wall to wall down the Grand Canyon of time, is this really all that there is to be said about this pattern? Is this really all that Eliot meant to convey? The echo may well vanish but the question remains: is the spirit, left at this final point of return, not inflicted perhaps with a new unease? Is the moment perhaps not implicit still with a 'something else', another call on the human being, however full of the knowledge gathered in the long years of travel and separation behind it, which cannot be left with the experience as mere knowledge but demands something more?

I have always had a feeling, and now more than ever before, that it is not enough just to know. Somehow, somewhere before the last call for the curtain, before the enlarged recognition of all the knowledge earned in exile and confirmed in reunion not dreamt of at the beginning, something new seems to have crossed the horizon of awareness and inflicted a feeling of a vital 'something missing' on the human scene.

There seemed to be no neat answer or any purely rational way of dealing with this kind of wondering. There was only the ancient and proven way of returning to the symbols and

images which rise of their own accord in the imagination, and flower and bear fruit in the myths and legends and stories that have accompanied us from the moment of our separation from that which created us, on and up to this desperate and confused moment where we stand today.

So I found myself at this point over and over again returning to Homer's *Odyssey*, and in particular to the reunion at Ithaca when Odysseus and Penelope make themselves known to each other at last, when departure and return, destination and origin, have most clearly become one, and the moon of the masculine and feminine in life is full again and overflowing. There, I was shocked into remembering, the story is not ended; the journey is not over. What could possibly be the 'more' that life is asking of this flesh and blood? They had both lived and endured all that fate had inflicted upon them, without diminishing the meaning and significance of their spirit, and so wholly qualified themselves for the readiness of Eliot's recognition of the places of departure in the human pilgrimage as if for the first time. If they were not ready for ceasing from exploration, what then?

I could only look again at the moment in that strange visit to Hades which Odysseus had been compelled to make and thus to break away from his main reach for home. It is a point where, however much without size or substance, Odysseus's life and the journey ahead must be repositioned, so that the greatest story, in which the story of himself and Penelope is included, can be brought to its proper end. The blind seer Teiresias sets out the course that he is to follow, plain as an Admiralty chart. He described in detail Odysseus's journey to come, and all that has to be done before he can rejoin Penelope and bring law and order back to the disintegrating Ithaca. It is all there in awesome and dramatic detail, but this 'end beyond the end' may strike the imagination of Homer's listeners as still too remote and indefinite to be of immediate consequence. It may appear

that after leaving Hades Odysseus sails on to the most exciting and dangerous part of his journey, because more than ever he is now alone. All his ships have been shattered and wrecked by storms, almost all caused by his sins against the gods and their laws of proportion. Odysseus's fate has never been more properly and heavily unloaded onto himself and his own indomitable spirit and behaviour, and what with the drama of this and the other great eventfulnesses which preceded this sombre meeting in Hades, Teiresias's prophecy fades in the recesses of the reader's memory, but it is never lost. It is lodged deep in the mind of Odysseus, not inert but like lava of a volcano asleep. In the moment when he and Penelope have made themselves known to each other, and accepted what they have always been to each other since the beginning, the memory erupts and Odysseus is compelled to tell her at once about the prophecy of this other journey.

But before he completes the account it is almost as if he is appalled by what he is doing, that he appears to have come home only to tell Penelope that he has got to go away again. Perhaps aware how unfeeling and insensitive all this must seem, he interrupts himself and says that the detail can be left until later. Penelope refuses to accept that, and insists that he should finish the tale. Both these things are told in simple sentences without any rhetoric or licence, and their very simplicity and starkness make them all the more impressive, because nothing reveals more clearly how deep is the need for the truth, and how nothing now but the truth can be food for two such spirits purified in the fire of their purgatorial years of suffering and separation.

And so, for an instant, one is compelled to contrast what is happening with something that took place long before the union we are now witnessing, something inconceivable before the descent into Hades, the extreme layer of the collective unconscious of man as a modern interpretation would have it, the dimension where all life's greatest

energies are stored and where, quite apart from making a dutiful return to the spirits of the ancestors, Odysseus turns to his mother, the abiding image of the element in the human spirit which bears and brings forth and never fails life's need of recreation. This is the way of last and first resort, and if it does not succeed, nothing else will restore in him the will and direction to get home again. So much has gone wrong before. There is still so much in front to go wrong, and the odds against his survival appear as insurmountable as ever.

All this comes at one as a fleeting sense of the apparent enormity of what Odysseus is doing to Penelope. One almost turns against this man who has suffered so much, because of this ostensible brutal insensitivity. How could he - one is tempted to join in the process of censure which Odysseus himself had to overcome - come home to say, without preamble or apology to his woman, who has suffered as much in her own lonely way as he in his, that he has just come home to go away again? The temptation vanishes almost as soon as it comes, and with it all traces of censure.

They vanish because what all the imagery and myth and legends and most inspired visions of life have taught us is that the height to which the spirit can rise is matched only by the depth to which it has descended into the darkness within itself. Though the longing in the listener and hearer for some euphemism of all this imagery of return could not be greater or more compelling, and the Siren voices within the human heart still suggest that by now men must have learnt how to improve upon the truth, the symbol and images do not yield or fail. The temptation is, for those who listen truly, just another example of the rationalism and intellectualism of our time, wherein reasons for supporting a subversive underground evasion of the truth are among the most inventive, plausible and tempting to which the spirit of the day is inclined. Deep in life there is a code of grace that truth cannot do without; there are moments when

compassion calls for a certain diplomacy of truth before the whole can be exposed, naked and unashamed. But this is not such a moment. This truth, this kind of right of the truth, which this man and woman have earned on the long journey and separation behind them, has no need of any graces, has no need for being slowly unfolded and retarded for some sentimental moment for its delivery. It is a truth which is inseparable from its illumination, and it would be as vain to try to separate thunder and lightning, because in it life has been made immediate. It is an immediacy in which nothing false can enter, and in its coming there in Ithaca the only words that can serve it strike as pure as lightning and as a direct descendant of 'the word that was in the beginning', as clear and commanding as thunder.

It has to be so because this is the point of no return, the only position feasible if the pattern of creation is to be truly fulfilled. Up to now, all the separation and suffering that had been imposed on Odysseus and Penelope had, as it were, been shown in terms of outer eventfulnesses and circumstances and their duty to communion and neighbouring of humanity and perceptions of their future. All they had to endure was part of them which belonged to the common lot of a man and woman of a specific moment of that time, and which had to be undertaken with untried and partial selves not yet knowing in full what they were doing. But here, before the curtain on the last act is lifted, one knows that, whatever is to come, they are to be pledged with all and more of themselves. The moment is here, to put it in the language of contemporary philosophy, the moment when what has been unconsciously lived is made conscious, when the collective is about to be made specific, the universal become individual and re-neighboured, and flesh and blood enabled to rise in dignity and commitment to the highest estate of life, and discover the emancipation and the freedom which are only to be found when with all their

heart and mind they embrace and surrender themselves with love to the will of creation.

This then is the significance and testimony of the new and final urgency of those long years of suffering and separation. Their account is about to be rendered, a great debt to life discharged, and the book closed. So, despite the turmoil and battles that await Odysseus only a few unforgiving hours away, however plausible the voices may have been in him to postpone the rest of the account of his meeting in Hades, he accepts that he has to tell Penelope he has another journey to make. So, brief and stark, he tells her what Teiresias has told him, and she without a moment's hesitation accepts that what has been decreed by the gods must be fulfilled, and that no doubt the gods who decreed it will take care of them, as they have taken care of them up to now.

It is, for me, one of the most moving moments in *The Odyssey*. Like the descent into Hades and the meeting with Nausicaa, the image of his own feminine soul in its purest, unblurred and most evocative form, here, with the truth in himself in command, it is as if the feminine which was so implicit and pure in Nausicaa faces him in Penelope in its mature form, as if she had just stepped from her flame on the mountain of the purgatory which those twenty-one years behind her must now appear to have been. Indeed, as one listens again to this great song, reverberating with undiminished power over those long millennia, one walks with Homer on this immense search for wholeness and meaning.

And if one still has any inclination to think of this as exaggerated, one has just to imagine what would have happened if Odysseus had withheld this element of his return from the woman Penelope had become, and waited for some ostensibly more appropriate moment, possibly weeks after his return, to tell her. A new golden thread would have snapped and been withdrawn from the pattern