

"BITTEN-OFF THINGS PROTRUDING":

THE LIMITATIONS OF SOUTH AFRICAN
ENGLISH POETRY POST-1948

by STEPHEN WATSON

Submitted in accordance with the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN ENGLISH

at the

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

SUPERVISOR: ASSOC. PROFESSOR I.E. GLENN

MARCH, 1993.

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, the discussion of South African English poetry is undertaken in terms of critical questions to which the body of work, to date, has not been subjected. In the nineteen-seventies and -eighties, several anthologies of South African English poetry were published which, despite their differing foci, attested to the strength, innovation, and international stature of the work. Their editors made claims which emphasised both the importance of Sowetan poetry and the emancipation of white poetry, particularly in the last three decades, from the legacy of a stultifying colonial past. This thesis sets out to examine the validity of these critical evaluations. The impetus for such an examination is threefold. Firstly, in comparison with a world literature, South African English poetry has had little impact on the kinds of aesthetic questions which have led to the radical work of international figures like Milosz, Walcott, Neruda. Secondly, South African English poetry tends to be bifurcated by critical analysis, both locally and internationally, into the work of black poets and the work of white poets. Despite the realities of social history which have indeed dichotomised the human experience of South Africa in racial terms, this dichotomy does not seem the most fertile assumption from which to approach the achievement of a nation's poetry. Thirdly, as a poet himself, the writer of this thesis embarked upon the scholarly analysis of a poetic ancestry to which his own work looked in

vain for location. The re-examination of the roots and value of South African English poetry begins in the thesis with the dilemmas posed by a legacy of romanticism in its displaced relation to a British colony. From this point the discussion argues that this legacy is visible in the unsatisfactory work of liberal poets in the nineteen-seventies and eighties, and argues that such choices cannot be nourishing to a South African cultural originality. Turning to the work most forcefully emphasised as culturally original -- i.e. the work of the Soweto poets in the nineteen-seventies and after -- the thesis explores this poetry's claims to stylistic and conceptual innovation. The poetry of the late eighties is then examined in relation to its desire to support, and even to drive, anti-apartheid philosophy and practice. The conclusions of the final chapter, presaged throughout the entire argument, suggest that earlier critical estimations of South African English poetry ignore crucial aspects of what has usually been meant by a fully achieved poetic tradition and that such neglect amounts to the betrayal of the very meaning of the term "poem".

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I should like to thank Ian Glenn for his supervision and support throughout this project. Reggie Heuschneider did all the typing and Jane Bennett much invaluable editing. To both of them I owe a debt of gratitude.

What was his business, the business of a writer? Was there any such business in this century? Was there anyone, for example, whose deeds and sufferings cried out not only to be recorded, catalogued, and publicized in history books but also to be handed down in the form of an epic or perhaps only a little song? To what god was it still possible to intone a hymn of praise? (And who could still summon up the strength to lament the absence of a god?) What mass murderers of this century, instead of rising from the pit with each new justification, might be sent back to their hell forever with a single tercet? And how, on the other hand, since the end of the world is no mere fancy but a distinct possibility at any moment, can one just praise the beloved objects of this planet with a stanza or a paragraph about a tree, a country-side, a season? Where, today, was one to look for the "aspect of eternity"? And in view of all this, who could claim to be an artist and to have made a place for himself in the world?

- Peter Handke, The Afternoon
of a Writer (1989)

INTRODUCTION

In 1980 I completed an MA thesis entitled "The Liberal Ideology and Some English South African novelists." In its pages I argued that the poverty evident in much South African English-language literature could be understood as a direct consequence of the poverty of an ideology, specifically the South African version of liberalism which informed a great deal of it. I concluded the study by holding to the belief that a more radicalised literature, one in which the liberal tradition was supplanted by one or other version of Marxism, was the only way out of the series of impasses, stylistic and thematic, which this literature seemed unable to avoid.

The superficiality of this belief (that a writer's political persuasion can make the difference between poor and rich art), can perhaps be explained by the historical moment in which that thesis was written. The outset of the last and perhaps most terrible of the apartheid decades in South Africa's history prompted many a writer and critic to embrace ideas which were either desperate or superficial. By now all that survives of that unwieldy thesis of mine is my initial suspicion that something or other was radically deficient in almost all the South African English-language literature which I had encountered. I believe that I was neither blind nor hallucinating in discerning a poverty in most of it; nor has my initial dismay at its failure to show a genuine rawness of spirit or fullness of life lessened with time.

This thesis, while focussing solely on several aspects of South African English poetry, is in many ways a further exploration of this initial impression of poverty and failure.

But the terms of my discussion have changed, indeed broadened, considerably. In time it has become and more apparent to me that the problem of the poet in the modern world, and specifically in South Africa, goes way beyond those political conundrums (those questions of commitment, for instance) which have been mentioned time and again in almost all recent critical discussion of South African literature.¹ It seemed to me that the obsession with political life widespread in South Africa, and the overwhelming dominance of the kind of 'mindset' which such obsession tends to create in both life and letters, had mostly served to obscure many another problem no less significant. The real alienation of South African writers, I became more and more convinced, lay not just in their exclusion from political power in a country in which for many decades the Nationalist Party had made the parliamentary game unwinnable for its opponents, but in other areas as well; if these less obvious sources of paralysis were not given greater recognition both poets and their critics would remain creatures of the void, as it were, without knowing it. Even less could the character of South African English poetry be understood.

It was something like this that I was trying to suggest, albeit in a fairly schematic way, in an earlier essay of mine, "Poetry and Politicisation", first published in 1986 and reprinted in my Selected Essays 1980-1990 (1990). There I was concerned to argue that in an age of politicisation such as South Africa had experienced in recent decades as a result of both the technology of apartheid and the struggles against it, there had been a tendency to forget that there could be terms other than the political in which people could make meaning in their lives.

This applied to the art of poetry not least. If I have further emphasised these other terms -- broadly speaking, all that can be designated by the word "metaphysical" -- it is not because this thesis has a hidden (or not so hidden) religious agenda. Rather, it is to draw attention to the fact that in a time in which, as has been pointed out in numerous ways,² people are ever more inclined to see any possibility of transcendence in their lives in terms of political triumph, there has been a tendency to forget certain things. This is not to say that exclusively political terms of reference are weak per se; but it is to bear in mind that they are not the only possible terms. Literature must, in my conviction, answer to the age in which it is produced. But this means something quite distinct from the demand that it parrot the terms in which the political wars of the age are waged.

Throughout this thesis I try also to bear in mind the kind of warning that Osip Mandelstam was concerned to underline in his famous essay "On The Nature of the Word": "Literary forms change, some forms give way to others. But every change, every such innovation, is accompanied by bereavement, by a loss."³ It may be that this loss, particularly when one's subject is poetry, may be as significant, if not more so, than all that has been gained. So, at any rate, I have been inclined to believe on the evidence of South African English poetry in recent years. The survival of certain other terms of reference, including that strange fate of the religious imagination which has been inextricably bound up with poetry since the nineteenth century,⁴ might be more than a kind of backwardness or nostalgia. Perhaps when one's subject is poetry there are questions of greater intrinsic interest -- in

fact questions which are much more far-reaching even in the broadest political sense -- than Jacques Alvarez-Pereyre's in his The Poetry of Commitment in South Africa, a study which he concludes by asking: "What can poetry do against apartheid?"⁵

A word should be said at the outset as to what this thesis is not. It is not a history of South African English poetry; even less does it contain a theory of this poetry. To do the former job properly would be to produce a work too unbelievably boring to be endured; even a study as selective as Michael Chapman's South African English Poetry: A Modern Perspective (1984) suffers as much from the relatively poor quality of the material to which his project commits him than from any particular critical failing on his part. Rather, my argument tries to identify certain problem areas, certain gaps or lacunae in South African English poetry's own self-awareness and in the criticism of this poetry, particularly in the period after 1948.

In Chapter 1, "South African English Poetry: The Origins of a Problem", I deal first with the kinds of valuation that critics have placed on this poetry and suggest that, often enough, this has tended towards over-valuation. I then argue that the history of South African English poetry is rather the narrative of a series of challenges to which the poetry has seldom been equal, in the past as in the present. As my first exemplification of this line of argument, I turn to the dilemmas that the legacy of romanticism has created for many a South African poet since the colonial period in the nineteenth century, and particularly with the way in which the romantic tradition has continued to influence, and limit, the work of a poet like Sydney Clouts who only came to prominence much later, after the Second World War.

Lest it be thought that my bias is insistently against the political, I point out that Clouts' own tendency in the opposite direction weakens his poetry quite as much as a poetry exclusively directed to political ends might be limited by its single obsession.

In Chapter 2, "The Problem Unsolved: White South African Poets of the Seventies", I am concerned to extend my basic thesis by showing that a later generation of white English-speaking poets -- broadly speaking those associated with liberalism in the seventies -- could not escape producing a similarly, if differently, limited kind of poetry. Far from arguing that this generation registers some kind of advance over the previous ones, I show that what I call the language of liberalism has actually prevented the poetry of writers like Stephen Gray and Chris Mann from achieving a real degree of poetic power.

In Chapter 3, "The Search for a Solution: The Myths of South African English Poetry", I examine first of all the ways in which an effect of thinness permeates the language of this poetry as a result of the particular historical processes in which the English language has been implicated in South Africa. I then turn to an examination of the kinds of myths most often used by the poets to inform their work and bring to it that substance which would give it a unique identity and artistic resonance. I then discuss the ways in which these myths might not have been adequate to the creative task set for them. In particular, I question whether the identification of apartheid, and the poetry's stance against it, has produced much work of significance.

As a number of critics have concurred in the belief that Soweto poetry has been the literary-sociological phenomenon of the last few decades, bringing into existence at last a truly indigenous English-language poetry, I turn next in Chapter 4, "The Search for a Solution II: The Soweto Poets and After", to a closer evaluation of the achievement of this poetry. In particular, I look at the myths which are central to Black Consciousness. Once again, I argue that rather than representing a major creative revival, this Soweto Poetry has been marked and marred by a number of deformations, both technical and ideological. In short, I question whether the emergence of this new poetry in the nineteen-seventies amounts to the kind of renaissance it is often claimed to be.

This only underlines the argument which is central to my thesis as a whole: namely, that it is difficult, if not impossible, to find a kind of triumphalist story in South African English poetry after 1948, each successive generation of poets building more successfully on the foundations laid by the previous one. If the cultural situation of the colonial period presented the early South African English poets with a number of virtually insoluble problems, so more recent periods, specifically the apartheid era, have only produced a further set of problems which have proved no less easy for poets to deal with.

The penultimate chapter of my thesis is a further illustration of this line of argument. Chapter 5, "The Legacy of A Struggle: The Rhetoric of Violence in South African English Poetry" argues that the political struggle against apartheid, often taken as the raison d'être of much poetry in recent years,

has led poets into a kind of tragedy of the intelligence, compromising their language in a rhetoric of hate and violence directed towards political ends. Ironically, I argue, their work might be more responsible for the climate of violence in contemporary South Africa than for whatever assistance poetry might usually afford in creating a humane social order.

In Chapter 6, "A Problem Reconsidered: The Lost Transcendence", I come to the heart of my argument. Here I argue that the relative stylistic conservatism of the poetry has made it incapable of dealing with modern experience (including South African experience) in an artistically persuasive way. Through comparison with a number of examples from other world poetries and traditions of thought, I am concerned to point out the imaginative and metaphysical deficiencies of South African English poetry throughout the period under discussion. As I do at one or other point in all the preceding chapters, I focus on questions of language. In particular, I demonstrate that there is evident in the very language of the majority of South African English poets a "forgetting of being", in Heidegger's sense of that phrase. It is in this respect, perhaps, that the poetry is most deficient -- and this even though it might not be aware of it.

Finally, in my Conclusion I once again place South African English poetry in a context in which, I believe, a more just measure of its achievement to date can be gauged. I also point to some hopeful, if uncertain, signs that have emerged in the most recent years, particularly the significant new departures evident in the poetry of Jeremy Cronin and others like Peter Sacks and Ingrid de Kok. Nevertheless, I conclude that the achievement of South African English poetry is indeed a modest

one. In fact, it may be more interesting for what it does not say (is incapable of saying) than for what it does. I reiterate my conviction that neither this poetry nor individual poets can benefit much from critical over-inflation. Recognising the ways in which this poetry might be said to fail is not simply my way of trying to emphasise that the small emperor which is South African English poetry is a naked emperor as well. In the end, this would be a futile task. Rather, in its concern to illuminate some of the major limitations of South African English poetry, this thesis also hopes to highlight some of the more significant aspects of the culture and historical period which was this poetry's matrix.

In almost all of these chapters the reader will observe certain themes to which I return over and over. The very persistence with which they appear and re-appear perhaps requires further explanation and justification. Towards the end of his essay "On the Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetry", Jung sums up his understanding of the function of all art as follows:

The creative process, so far as we are able to follow it at all, consists in the unconscious activation of an archetypal image, and in elaborating and shaping this image into the finished work. By giving it shape, the artist translates it into the language of the present, and so makes it possible for us to find our way back to the deepest springs of life. Therein lies the social significance of art: it is constantly at work educating the spirit of the age, conjuring up the forms in which the age is most lacking.

And he concludes: "The unsatisfied yearning of the artist reaches back to the primordial image in the unconscious which is best fitted to compensate the inadequacy and one-sidedness of the present."⁶

While not myself a Jungian (or anything else in particular), Jung's words have a certain relevance to both the form and substance of this thesis. Behind its repeated motifs lies my more or less instinctive effort to seek out and perceive the imbalances in the psychic situation of our time and place and to produce the sort of criticism which, if it cannot rectify the situation, can at least perform a function which is analagous to that which Jung finds in the work of the artist or writer.

This is not, of course, the only function which literary criticism can fulfil. But perhaps it is one which presents itself with a certain insistence in a time of great social unrest or upheaval. To live in South Africa throughout the nineteen-eighties, as the present writer did, was to be aware of a nation veering dangerously out of control. Not surprisingly, it was also to discover those impulses in oneself, arising more or less involuntarily, which sought to restore some kind of balance -- in the psyche as much as the world. It hardly needs saying that the goal of psychic wholeness (and its extension in the notion of holiness) might not only be unattainable but also impossible to define. One person's notion of balance or wholeness might well be another's idea of imbalance, and the notion of a balance itself might hardly be a 'failsafe' criterion either in life or in literary criticism. Nevertheless, to retain even the idea of such a goal still seems to me one of the ways in which the health of both literature and criticism might be ensured. My insistent

awareness of the ways in which South African cultural life was deficient, of the real sense in which South Africa as a nation in the nineteen-eighties could even be said to be collectively ill, has found its reflection, perhaps even before I was fully aware of it, in the types of concern that appear and re-appear in this thesis.

With hindsight I can see more clearly that I myself did not always keep my own balance. During the period in which this thesis was being prepared, largely the late nineteen-eighties, the idea of culture and literature to which, broadly-speaking, I adhere (it is distinct from the conception which holds literature to be only another form of power-struggle, a sort of warfare by other means) was so repeatedly under attack that I found myself compensating -- sometimes over-compensating -- in the opposite direction. In response to what seemed to me to be a tragedy of the intelligence rampant in the society as a whole, expressed particularly in the often unthinking politicisation of literature and culture, I inclined towards a polemicism, some traces of which are no doubt still evident in this workk, albeit revised and rethought. In the last decade in South Africa there were indeed very few figures in the literary world who kept their balance; they remain the real élite. I would not claim to be part of it.

There are, nevertheless, certain advantages in living and writing about the literature of an unquiet country. The very conditions of life can lead the critic to make certain demands of literature; they can also serve to judge it. Writing of Eastern Bloc intellectuals during the Stalinist period after the Second

World War, Czeslaw Milosz, the Polish poet and essayist, observes:

The work of human thought should withstand the test of brutal, naked reality. If it cannot it is worthless. Probably only those things are worthwhile which can preserve their validity in the eyes of a man threatened with instant death.

A man is lying under machine-gun fire on a street in an embattled city. He looks at the pavement and sees a very amusing sight: the cobblestones are standing upright like the quills of a porcupine. The bullets hitting against their edges displace and tilt them.

Such moments in the consciousness of a man judge all poets and philosophers.⁷

While it would be an exaggeration to say that I myself have encountered anything like the example which Milosz gives here, I am certain in my own mind that a combination of South Africa's cultural isolation and the barrage of events, both murderous and cynical, which its daily life brings relentlessly to the attention of its citizens, not only served to make a reader like myself judge all South African literature, but also to make me demand from this literature certain authentic kinds of consolation, of creative and spiritual succour.

No doubt this was something the literature was ill-equipped to provide in the first place; indeed, part of this thesis draws attention to what be called the spiritual poverty historically present throughout South African English poetry. All the same,

the hardly benign climate of the South African nineteen-eighties, now persisting into the nineteen-nineties, did serve to bring back, to re-emphasise, certain questions no less elemental, in their way, than that test of reality of which Milosz writes. Such was one's need that one was inclined to make fairly basic demands of poems. One was more readily aware, perhaps, whether a poem or novel -- even by crude analogy with the human body -- was lacking an eye, a leg, a heart, or some other vital organ. In South African circumstances one knew more acutely, such was one's hunger, what food fed and what failed to nourish, or caused an active dyspepsia.

As regards matters of style, I have tried throughout to avoid that academicism, that ponderousness, which is as prevalent in the contemporary world as it was among, say, the German academic class between 1870 and the First World War. This thesis is not an instance of Randall Jarrell's "almost autononmous criticism" -- a mode which has, since his death, become entirely autonomous. Above all, I have tried to bear in mind the kind of responsibility that Václav Havel, in his essay "Politics and Conscience", suggests is the duty of all people, whatever the contexts of their lives, in the contemporary world:

It seems to me that all of us, East and West, face one fundamental task from which all else should follow. That task is one of resisting vigilantly, thoughtfully and attentively, but at the same time with total dedication, at every step, and everywhere, the irrational momentum of anonymous, impersonal and inhuman power . . .

Among the agents of this type of power he lists "ideologies, systems, apparatus, bureaucracy, artificial languages and political slogans."⁸ He might well have also listed many of the jargons of contemporary criticism. These I have tried to avoid precisely because I believe that often enough they contribute as much to the momentum of that "anonymous, impersonal and inhuman power" as they might to human enlightenment and enrichment.

In his Introduction to his edition of the Literary Essays of Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, qualifying the kind of literary criticism which Pound practised, reminded us that "it is an illusion fostered by academic authorities on literature, that there is only one kind of criticism, the kind that is delivered on academic foundations, to be printed afterwards in the 'proceedings' or as a brochure in a series."⁹ The reader of this thesis will see almost immediately that it has more in common with Pound's criticism (which was, more often than not, elicited by some immediate occasion and designed to rectify what he perceived to be one or other aesthetic or social ill) than it has with the more formal sort. A further quotation from Eliot points to something else that I should emphasise at the outset. This is the thesis, in its individual parts as in its whole, of someone who is himself a writer of poetry as much as a critic. The criticism that appears in these pages is, accordingly, that of a practitioner even more than a scholar. "It is," to repeat the well-known words Eliot used in describing his own criticism, "a by-product of my private poetry-workshop; or a prolongation of the thinking that went into the formation of my own verse."¹⁰ Inevitably, it bears the traces of someone who approaches literature as much from the point of view of a writer (in the

light of his particular requirements for his own poetry) as it does from the perspective of the academic. This will be evident even in the kinds of analysis I employ in speaking of individual poems. In the spirit of the writer rather than the critic, I have tried to amplify the general experience of the work under discussion rather than giving an extended exegesis; the latter is often something the reader can do for himself and herself. I have attempted this work of amplification more often than not through a principle of juxtaposition: quoting a poem or stanza and then bringing it into relation (sometimes collision) with a quotation from a writer or a poetry elsewhere in the world. Of course, I am not the first to believe that, finally, the only response to a poem is another poem -- that only a poem can combat a poem. But it is through means like these that I believe the deficiencies in South African English poetry may be better highlighted and therefore more easily apprehended.

It may be objected at the outset that this thesis, even more in matters of substance than style, makes extensive use of European and other overseas frames of reference in criticising what is, after all, an African literature. As such, the objection might run, it is implicitly Eurocentric in its methodological bias and warrants the kind of scorn with which the "post-colonial" critic has tended to regard the Western-oriented critic. The Nigerian authors of Toward the Decolonisation of African Literature (1985), for example, waste no time in telling such critics to mind their own ethical and ethnic business:

Neither European praise nor European blame should matter to a liberated African consciousness [which] will do and judge

things entirely on its own grounds. . . . If Europeans are pleased, it doesn't matter; if they are not, it doesn't matter.¹¹

Nevertheless, there is an obvious flaw in this line of argument. If it matters materially very much indeed whether a person is condemned to live in a Third-world economy -- something any citizen in such a country would attest to at once -- so it matters spiritually whether anyone has to make do with a third-rate culture. If it is, for instance, the sad fate of a second- or third-rate country to have to subsist almost entirely on secondhand ideas, to generate ideas which are secondhand even when they appear to be original -- this is surely worth knowing. But it (and much else) can only be known if the critic drops the often hypocritical and self-deluded cultural protectionism of a Chinweizu and is prepared to countenance the idea that the West, besides its history of imperialism (which includes the history of those who fought against it), provides at least some of the yardsticks against whose measure the worth of the local product can be more clearly seen. This is all the the more the case when one is dealing with a literature written in English. The prototypes are, in the nature of things, mostly to be found overseas.¹² At one or other point one cannot help referring back to these prototypes; perhaps all the more so when, as in this thesis, one is concerned to write of South African literature not as if it were part of a ghetto, a limbo all its own, but a literature which has its place -- small but nevertheless alive -- in the greater world. There has long been a kind of critical double standard in parts of South African English literary

criticism, using one criterion for the overseas product, and a much more indulgent one for the homegrown. Above all, I have wanted to avoid the species of condescension implicit in this type of positive discrimination. I have been concerned that South African English literature, after a decade of enforced isolation, should regain its place in the world. This can surely only occur if it is prepared to enter a literary marketplace whose values might be more stringent -- certainly somewhat different -- from its own.

There is another sense in which this is really a very old-fashioned thesis indeed. It is not averse to making discriminations and judgements of value. At the same time the contemporary intellectual climate is hardly hospitable to such an inclination. The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman in his Legislators and Interpreters: On Modernity, Post-Modernity and Intellectuals (1987) provides a telling outline of that context of relativism, or scepticism, which undoubtedly defines the contemporary post-modern cultural condition:

Scepticism (or, as it is dubbed today, relativism) is a frame of mind reflecting a world in which no version of the truth or the supreme values of goodness or beauty enjoys the support of a power so evidently superior to any rival power that it may credibly claim its own superiority over alternative versions. We live in such a world today. . . . 'Obviousness' may only be a function of the monopoly of power. In the absence of such a monopoly, the resistance of rival versions of equally 'self-evident' truths becomes too obstinate and immune an argument to offer hope for an

unambiguous resolution of controversy. All truths, including one's own, appear to be tied to 'the time and the place'; all truths, including one's own, seem to make sense only inside the boundary of a country, the realm of a reign, the tradition of a nation, according to the principle *cuius regio, eius regio*.¹³

Such is indeed the broader cultural condition in which, perforce, all critics operate today, even if they do not necessarily accept all of the implications that have been said to flow from it. The latter include quite specific consequences for the criticism of all and any of the arts. Bauman quotes Peter Burger on what is probably the most far-reaching of these: namely, "the destruction of the possibility of positing aesthetic norms as valid ones."¹⁴ (Presumably, any aesthetic norms at all.)

This thesis is, in a sense, a rejoinder to such a position of extreme cultural relativism or pluralism. It is not shy of evaluative judgements. While it does not presume to pronounce on the absolutely right or the absolutely wrong, whether in aesthetic or other terms, while it makes much use of the word "relatively", it is one of its underlying premises throughout that one explanation for the relative (that word again) backwardness of parts of South African literature lies precisely in the refusal of its critics to be prepared to make value-judgements.

Besides, if it has become more and more difficult to establish convincing hierarchies of value, in whatever sphere of life; if in recent years the conspicuous consumption and equally

rapid obsolescence of literary systems has grown apace, one paradigm crumbling after another, there is still a certain repository of values to be found in past examples. I turn to these repeatedly for my precedents and touchstones -- in short, my basic critical tools.

This might well add a further degree of old-fashionedness to the thesis. The writers I refer to repeatedly -- Czeslaw Milosz, Octavio Paz, Eugenio Montale, T. S. Eliot, George Steiner, Erich Heller, Joseph Brodsky, Albert Camus, for instance -- are all figures who might be considered, by today's standards, conservative (some of them extremely so). Nevertheless, their constant presence in these pages defines my interests; that I often turn to them also indicates, I hope, something of my sense of what life is really like and what literature I consider to answer most fully to it.

These writers and critics also manage to state, and re-state, many old truths which tend to have been mislaid in the South African cultural context. Often, as I hope the following pages will demonstrate, a mere quotation from one of them is enough to reveal an absence, a lack, a loss, in some area of South African English poetry. Sometimes, what these quotations highlight is a kind of deficiency which is also present in South African culture as a whole.

The writers upon whom I most rely have an additional advantage which is germane to my critical purposes. They reveal that what might appear to be a conservative critique (or certainly not absolutely contemporary) can at times be more radical than the radical, precisely because it retains the memory of certain values through which people might orient themselves in

the world and, not least, disengage from the meanness of the here and now.

In South Africa this has been, and no doubt will continue to be, something of which people stand deeply in need. The past history of the nation has been volatile and destructive enough; recent novels like J. M. Coetzee's Age of Iron (1990) are graphic illustrations of the time of amorality, of unthinking nihilism, which defines much of the present. At the time of this writing, after a decade of cultural isolation, sanctions, and internecine warfare, the general condition of South Africa may well be worse off than ever before. Only recently, Hermann Giliomee and Lawrence Schlemmer in their Apartheid to Nation-Building: Contemporary South African Debates (1990) have argued powerfully that South Africa still lacks almost all the preconditions -- high rates of industrialisation, urbanisation, an advanced development of voluntary organisations, widespread literacy, and so forth -- which are normally needed to make a social democracy work. The sheer scope of the inequality in the country, the power of ethnicity and the clash of aspirations and interests, makes authoritarian and anti-democratic political management virtually an inevitability.¹⁵

Even if such predictions turn out to be quite wrong, it is almost certain that South Africa will take years to recover from the apartheid era. For the majority of its citizens there are no happy endings, no Ithakas, remotely in sight. Nor will politics, in whatever manifestation, provide much consolation. In such a context, the kind of search to be found in this thesis -- a search, in a word, for ways of defining the malaise of a literature, the misfortune of a culture; and, moreover, for

values which might make manifest this malaise, this misfortune -- might not be obsolete. It might assist in giving definition to something other than that mixture of brutality and vacancy which has long characterised South African life. The evidence, at any rate, is in the pages that follow.

Notes and References

1. Jane Watts, Black Writers from South Africa: Towards a Discourse of Liberation (London: St Anthony's/MacMillan, 1989) or Malvern van Wyk Smith's Grounds of Contest: A Survey of South African English Literature (Kenwyn: Jutalit, 1990) for two recent examples. The latter study, however, is far more balanced than the former.
2. See, for example, Kenneth Minogue's Alien Powers: The Pure Theory of Ideology (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1985).
3. Osip Mandelstam, "On The Nature of the Word," The Complete Critical Prose and Letters (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1979) 119.
4. See Czeslaw Milosz, The Witness of Poetry (Cambridge: Harvard U, 1983) 5.
5. Jacques Alvarez-Pereyre, The Poetry of Commitment in South Africa (London: Heinemann, 1984) 264.
6. C. J. Jung, "On the Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetry," The Spirit in Man, Art, and Literature (1966; Bollingen/Princeton: Princeton U, 1971) 82-83.
7. Czeslaw Milosz, The Captive Mind (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980) 41-2.
8. Jan Vladislav, ed., Václav Havel or Living in Truth (London: Faber and Faber, 1987) 153.
9. T. S. Eliot, ed., Literary Essays of Ezra Pound (London: Faber and Faber, 1954) xiv.
10. T. S. Eliot, "The Frontiers of Criticism," On Poetry and Poets (London: Faber and Faber, 1957) 106.

11. Chinweizu et al., Toward the Decolonisation of African Literature (London: KPI, 1985) 203; 237.

12. There is, in another context, a sane acknowledgement of a related point by Robert Hughes, the Australian art critic:
 " . . . the artist's need to relate his work to prototypes cannot, as Ernst Gombrich demonstrated in Art and Illusion, ever be dispensed with: for development is impossible without it."
The Art of Australia (Ringwood: Penguin, 1970) 313.

13. Zygmunt Bauman, Legislators and Interpreters: On Modernity, Post-Modernity and Intellectuals (Ithaca: Cornell U, 1987) 84-85.

14. Bauman 131.

15. See Hermann Giliomee and Lawrence Schlemmer, eds., Apartheid to Nation-Building: Contemporary South African Debates (Cape Town: Oxford U, 1990) 161ff.

CHAPTER 1**SOUTH AFRICAN ENGLISH POETRY:****THE ORIGINS OF A PROBLEM**

I

Late in 1984, more than one hundred and fifty years after Thomas Pringle first set foot in the Cape Colony, an anonymous reviewer in The Cape Times remarked on the "plethora of poets" included in an anthology of South African English poetry published that same year. This plethora, found in Stephen Gray's Modern South African Poetry, suggested to him or her that questions of quality in poetry were seldom addressed in this country:

In times of great political moment -- and this is how many South African poets have seen their times for at least one hundred years -- it is tempting to toss questions of quality out of the window, as so much elitist baggage. Nowadays, it is done in the name of ethnicity, anti-colonialism or because poets believe that their times are unique and thus established standards are misleading, if not irrelevant and if not merely stuffy. The need for critics is fundamental, not because criticism employs professors nor as a form of consumer guidance for lay readers, though both of those have merit. The need cries out in the poetry; much of our poetry suffers from historical amnesia. It tends to be occasional because it does not connect with the past; it lacks gravity.¹

Even allowing for the fact that anthologies often include a great deal of dross, this particular reviewer's conclusions -- "the work en masse seems occasional, improvised and a little thin" -- are bleak ones, especially for those who might have expected the

poetry to have developed in quality and depth since the time when Pringle first wrote his South African poems.

These conclusions would seem to be substantiated elsewhere. Today the international status enjoyed by South African English poetry is perhaps fairly indicated by the fact that not one of its poets, living or dead, was included in D. J. Enright's The Oxford Book of Contemporary Verse (1980). Admittedly, this anthology, being an Oxford book, was inclined to favour poets from the British Isles, but Enright did see fit to include half a dozen Americans, two Australians, A. D. Hope and the expatriate Peter Porter, a Canadian in Earle Birney and a New Zealander in James K. Baxter. From South Africa, however, there was not a single inclusion, not even Douglas Livingstone, probably its most well-known, if hardly most celebrated, contemporary English-language poet.

Despite a recent critical interest in black poetry,² it would be not unjust to conclude that, as far as the rest of the world is concerned, South African English poetry (of whatever complexion) does not really exist. It would long since seem to have slipped below the horizon of the world's attention. The neglect it suffers probably does reflect some sort of implicit consensus that the poetry, as poetry, has next to nothing to add to world poetry as a whole and to the world-wide body of English poetry specifically. Earlier poets like Roy Campbell or William Plomer might still be sufficiently well remembered or of enough historical interest to be included in an earlier Oxford anthology like Philip Larkin's The Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century English Verse (1973), but in none of the more recently published overseas collections is there even a token appearance of a Ruth Miller, a Sydney Clouts or a Mongane Wally Serote. Not since the single

figure of Roy Campbell has there been any English-language South African poet who has won an international reputation. And implicit in this fact is the belief, justified or not, that all other South African poets, whether of the past or present, are not only not in the mainstream, but that the backwater where they languish is not even on the map. The other, harsher one is that South African English poets, one and all, are simply not good enough.

Either of these implications might have its historical reasons. In the first place, South Africa's severing of its British connection in 1961, as well as its growing international isolation, meant that, in recent decades, most of its poets and artists were no longer in any international arena: they had, as it were, slipped out of the competition. Secondly, the more recent cultural boycott of the country had the further effect of isolating South Africa's poets and depriving them of many kinds of attention. But this is not, in the end, an adequate explanation. To travel through any anthology of South African English poetry, whether this be Alexander Wilmot's The Poetry of South Africa (1887), or Michael Chapman's more recent A Century of South African Poetry (1981), is to be reminded, more or less painfully, of a passing remark that Lionel Trilling once made about the most common, if never most popular, type of art or literature: "No-one has yet paid attention to the anti-catharsis, the generally anti-hygienic effect of bad serious art, the stimulation it gives to all one's neurotic tendencies, the literal, physically-felt depression it induces."³ No one, it would seem, who encounters much South African English poetry can come away without an unslaked thirst for a poetry which possesses greater emotional resonance and range, which incorporates more of

Marianne Moore's "imaginary gardens with real toads in them" (a phrase from her famous "Poetry") rather than so many real-life zebras and giraffes. And such discomfoting effects are, sad to say, usually worse should a return trip through this poetry be undertaken.

Indeed the habit of perfection is not a characteristically South African vice, not least in an art of such passionate finesse as poetry. In fact it is the overriding argument of this initial chapter that the anonymous Cape Times reviewer quoted above was not wrong in his or her estimation of the anthology in question, and that his or her general criticisms are, among others, pertinent in one or other degree to the entire history of the poetry. No critic here can do without terms as basic as "boring" or "thin" or "inept". Indeed, any approach to or discussion of South African English poetry which is inclined to discount its overseas neglect as "elitism" or "cultural imperialism" (among other things), which forgets, wittingly or unwittingly, that the achievement of this poetry as a whole is an altogether modest one (even when judged by the most indulgent of standards), that proceeds, as Michael Chapman does in much of his South African English Poetry: A Modern Perspective (1984), as if this were a literature comparable with any in the modern world, and that forgets (conveniently or otherwise) how hard it is to find more than a hundred successful poems in its entire history, is almost fated to place a false valuation on the object of its attention and to deal in fake hyperbole.

Thus when André P. Brink wrote in his Introduction to an anthology of a "new explosion of vigour and talent" that had occurred in the nineteen-seventies, his words cannot, unfortunately, be taken at face value.⁴ Similarly, to speak of a

black literary renaissance (as many critics have done) simply because a lot of people who happen to be black are writing, performing, and publishing poetry, is to misunderstand the meaning of the word "renaissance". Still more dubious, if not meaningless, are summaries like Michael Chapman's of the supposed successes of South African English poetry:

The poetry . . . has successfully adopted both public and private voices, the familiar and the surreal, the traditional and the avant-garde. It has at different times absorbed the spirit of English Romanticism and the Victorian music-hall, the Great Tradition and modernist experimentation, Afro-American militancy and post-1945 European anti-poetry. It has unselfconsciously assumed an international recognisability while its peculiar strength continues to be drawn from its own backyard -- from the veld, white suburbia and the black township streets.⁵

Such sentiments, as will be seen, belong to the history of publicity rather than the history of poetry. In any case, they beg the question -- or, rather, a whole series of questions, chief amongst them being the literature's supposed emancipation, however gradual, from that species of literary colonialism long seen as its central fault. Criticism of this sort consists of imposing a false, even sentimental, narrative on the history of this poetry, assuming its central story to be the triumphalist one of progressive liberation from past constraints, forgetting all the while that there is often a chasm between such preferred narratives and the evidence of the poetry itself, one in which the poetry tends to disappear.

The only way to appreciate the stature of a literature is, of course, to place it in its relevant context. In the case of this chapter, the most appropriate one is not simply that of nineteenth- or twentieth-century southern Africa, but also of poetry in the rest of the world during this same historical period. If the immediate effect of doing this is that of a rigorous cutting down to size, it is not intended to reinforce that "cultural cringe" (the phrase is of Australian provenance) which so often produces a crippling series of inferiority complexes in a former colony's relations with the metropolitan centre. It is, rather, to gain a perspective which neither underestimates nor yet overestimates. Given the looseness with which words like "great" and "greatness" tend to be bandied about in certain countries conspicuously lacking in great traditions of high culture, the Australian art critic Robert Hughes is being far from condescending when, in his now classic study The Art of Australia (1970), he asks:

What does the word "great" mean in the context of Australian art? We say that Giotto is a great painter partly because he changed the history of Western painting by introducing a fresh set of conventions by which one's experience of space and form could be expressed. If you grant such terms of reference, it must be admitted immediately that Australia has never produced a great painter; indeed, that it has not even had the honour of harbouring one for a time, as Algiers did with Delacroix.⁶

By the same token we may well ask what meaning attaches to the epithet when the editors of the 1985 reprint of the first

three numbers of Voorslag, Colin Gardner and Michael Chapman, speak in their Introduction of William Plomer's late poem, "The Taste of the Fruit," as a "great poem".⁷ Though the latter is a dignified and moving salute to Nat Nakasa and Ingrid Jonker, it is hardly distinguished by that verbal energy or aesthetic inventiveness which might justify the terms in which these critics praise it. Their evaluation is little more than that species of over-valuation which is one of the common symptoms of provincialism.

South Africa certainly has had the brief distinction of being visited by poets like Baudelaire and T. S. Eliot.⁸ But like Australia, it has neither produced an English-language poet widely recognized to be great nor is it different from that other, former colony Australia in its failure to produce an avant-garde responsible for a revolution in aesthetics and a major shift in sensibility.⁹ Not Roy Campbell, not Ruth Miller, the Veldsingers nor Soweto poets fit any such bill, except in the most provincial, local sense.

All the evidence so far suggests that there is no South African English poet, living or dead, who can, quite simply, compete on an international level. The revolutions here, such as they have been, have remained of a largely rhetorical sort, and whether modernist or surrealist they have always washed up on these shores years after their hey-day elsewhere, when their revolutionary impact has altered profoundly and when, strictly speaking, they can no longer be called modernism or surrealism at all.

From one point of view such considerations of greatness, or lack of greatness, might be dismissed as superfluous. After all, the retort might be, a Dante, a Baudelaire, an Ezra Pound do not

appear very frequently even when the time-scale is one of centuries, and such figures seem even less likely to emerge and flourish in a place like South Africa which has largely remained a provincial backwater, a cultural cul-de-sac. Isn't it beside the point to expect from any poetry or literature that kind of distinction to which its conditions of production have hardly been conducive, both in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? And perhaps the use of such an expectation as a critical criterion is to engage in a literary-critical neocolonialism in which, as so often in the past, a very young child is judged according to the stature of a long- and well-established adult and, not surprisingly, is found wanting in anything but such things as undisciplined energy.

My response to these kinds of demur would suggest that remembering the limitations of a literature as limitations is also to take that literature with a seriousness which is quite the opposite of patronising. If South African English poetry has any importance at all, it is because it is literature and not because it is South African as such. What Carlos Fuentes, the contemporary Mexican novelist, wrote recently in connection with his own literary education in Mexico is not without pertinence to this country:

To be a writer in Mexico in the fifties, you had to join Alfonso Reyes and Octavio Paz in the assertion that Mexico was not an isolated, virginal province but very much part of the human race and its cultural tradition; we were all, for good and evil, contemporary with all men and women.¹⁰

Not to see any literature here as similarly contemporaneous is, no matter how sophisticated one's critical apparatus, to succumb at once to provincialism. In short, the only way of not condescending to this poetry is to place it in relation to world literature, to see it as contemporary with it, shaped and most certainly deformed by the local conditions in which it has been and continues to be produced, but nevertheless having to take its place in a context which has, in this century at least, been established by the poetry of Ezra Pound, Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, T. S. Eliot, Sylvia Plath -- to name only a few of the dominating figures in the English-language tradition.

What then do we get? In the first place, it might seem, nothing other than an underscoring of that conclusion which Philip Segal came to in 1970 in a well-known essay of his in which he discusses whether or not South African literature should be included in university syllabi:

Can we find time to study books which (chosen not mainly because of their literary value but for some foreground interest of local subject or setting) will make it necessary to drop out of our course a play of Ben Jonson's, a novel of Jane Austen's, a major work of modern criticism or poetry? Certainly the local flavour may be very exciting, and it is delightful to recognise a familiar landscape in a work, or to see "ourselves" in a well-known social situation; and no one can deny that enjoying this flavour may encourage wider reading. But what if, when its taste fades from our memory, we are left with little or nothing comparable to what remains in our minds after reading a great work of

literature, no permanent disturbance of the spirit, no unforgettable intensity of art?¹¹

This chapter does not wish to dismiss or relegate in Segal's manner. But particularly in a contemporary critical climate which tends to ignore all evaluative questions¹² in favour of a more or less elaborate sociological explication and ideological fiat, it is not necessarily to pre-judge the issue to begin by asking a few relatively simple, even brutal questions. As I suggest in my Introduction, it is still possible that what can be called the broadly ethical question -- of what benefit is this literature to man, woman, society? -- might be more radical than any amount of critical theory. "Always historicize!" Frederic Jameson has written, claiming this to be "the one absolute and we may even say 'transhistorical' imperative of all dialectical thought."¹³ But it is perhaps worth recalling that certain undeniably "transhistorical" figures, most notably Jesus of Nazareth, had a habit of not historicising and that much of their radical force lay in their refusal to make any concessions to this. It also tends to be forgotten that there are certain contexts in which to ask the ethical question is to call more radically into question than any amount of persistence in those modes of thought which current fashion declares to be the most penetrating. Precisely because, over the last decade or so, this type of question has seldom been posed -- it is one which belongs to that tradition of literary criticism which shades into the humanist critique of culture and whose exponents have ranged from Matthew Arnold to Lionel Trilling, among others -- it might be illuminating to ask at this juncture: what does South African English poetry amount to after more than one hundred and fifty

years of existence? What does it tell us, in however complex, mediated a fashion, about the society which is its matrix? What generalisations does it permit us to make about this society, the nature of its culture and the nature of its evolution? What testimony does it give us as to the dominant, habitual 'ways of seeing' of certain South African sub-cultures? What does it reveal about the possibilities for poetry in South Africa and also, over time, the meaning(s) of the word "poetry" and the "poetic" in this particular place? And, lastly, assuming that people go to literature as a result of genuine needs and hungers, desiring bread and not stones, what sort of nourishment does it provide for those who must live in an environment long recognised to be a cultural desert? In a world which has been granted a Sappho, a Shakespeare, figures like Dante, Whitman, Yeats, not to mention a Rushdie, a Senghor, a Soyinka, is it finally, seriously, worth reading?

No doubt such questions would never have asserted themselves had it not been for the present writer's prior, personal sense of dissatisfaction with almost all of the South African English poetry published to date, an initial impression which has not been moderated by a long acquaintance with this poetry in all its varieties. Words like "bloodless", "lifeless", "soulless", "thin", however impressionistic, even commonplace in themselves, have a habit of rising to the surface of my mind whenever large portions of this poetry have to be digested. In order to understand why this should be so, one must begin by regarding South African English poetry in its relationship of dependency to its parent tradition in England and other parts of the British Isles. For this poetry had its beginnings, specifically, as a colonial literature, and it was to remain such even decades after

the Cape Colony and other parts of the country were incorporated into present-day South Africa through the Act of Union; the second part of this chapter takes on the details of this legacy.¹⁴

But if the relation of dependence is the most obvious general explanation for the sense of inadequacy that pervades the literature, there are other reasons which go beyond the unhospitable cultural conditions of colonial society, its damagingly provincial beginnings in the nineteenth century and earlier, and the South African diseases, as usual, of imprecision and dullness.

Earlier studies of South African English poetry such as G. M. Miller and Howard Sergeant's A Critical Survey of South African Poetry in English (1957), Jacques Alvarez-Pereyre's The Poetry of Commitment in South Africa (1979; 1984), Michael Chapman's South African English Poetry: A Modern Perspective (1984) and those sections in Stephen Gray's Southern African Literature: An Introduction (1979) and Malvern van Wyk Smith's Grounds of Contest: A Survey of South African English Literature (1990) which deal exclusively with poetry, still seem to me to leave open the explanation of why no South African English poem or poet can survive scrutiny in even the briefly-sketched terms of the touchstone given by George Steiner in a recent review of his:

The definition of what constitutes a great poet will include several components. However secular in reference and context (major poetry in a rigorously secular vein is, in fact, rare), the work of a great poet will point to the first and last things. It will engage the radical

commonplaces of human life and death, of the commerce of love and sorrow between human beings, it will set memory against time.

Secondly, great poetry will establish the need of its own expressive form. Ideally, the major poem is so wedded to its linguistic-metrical totality that paraphrase or translation are, at their best, a kind of exegesis, of unfolding commentary on their source. A poem which could be otherwise is not a great poem.¹⁵

Similarly, it remains to be understood (outside questions of historical specificity) why it is hard to find a single poem in this poetry that comes close to that "interdependence of the imagination and reality as equals"¹⁶ which Wallace Stevens defined as the central poetic ideal of that tradition, descending from Coleridge, which he was to extend into the twentieth century in his own unique blend of romantic modernism. That difficult balance between the world as it is and the mind's pressing back against reality (which was one of Stevens' definitions of the imagination and which he himself was to embody in his best poems) is one seldom struck in South African English poetry.¹⁷

Perhaps most poetry anywhere in the world, at any time, is unwittingly, damagingly, about itself -- that is to say, about its own unintended mediocrity -- but the over-all evidence of South African English poetry suggests something further. When one adduces some of the more obvious failures which it displays, and which will be enlarged on below -- its denatured empiricism, its historical amnesia, its political simplifications as well as the number of poets its tradition who lack a formed style and have never succeeded in discovering a voice that is truly their

own -- it is hard not to come to the conclusion that the sub-cultures from which it comes, have been, and still are, very far from any meaningful sense of the word "healthy".

If one's "plane of regard"¹⁸ is sufficiently demanding, sufficiently international, South African English poetry appears not so much to bear witness to a history of social injustice since colonial times -- Michael Chapman, again, has written of a tradition of "exciting literary radicalism"¹⁹ -- but rather, self-referentially, to an unintended poverty, but one not less conspicuous for that. As one proceeds through the poetry from past to present, this impression accumulates with a force which at times seems to suggest a profound, enduring spiritual malaise. No doubt much twentieth-century literature can be regarded as a confession of spiritual poverty, but South African English poetry would appear to be doubly naked and poverty-stricken in its failures of self-consciousness, its failure to note its own wretchedness. If my focus is upon these failures, again my explorations are not prompted by negativism, nor by any memory of Bertrand Russell's statement to the effect that anyone who is a pessimist is bound to be right ninety percent of the time. Rather, they are prompted by a desire to begin at the beginning: to suggest what this literature is not, what it has failed to achieve, and from this excavation to imply what remains to be done.

II

"My secret flaw is just not being very good, like everyone else," the English poet Philip Larkin once said in an interview.²⁰ In

any attempt to account for the relative failure of South African English poetry, such an explanation might be repeatedly invoked. For there is no doubt that a scarcity of that most precious of commodities, sheer talent, goes far in explaining why much of this poetry is like it is. At the outset it is worth recalling that the majority of poets have been -- perhaps without exception in the nineteenth century -- minor talents. Nor is it possible to avoid drawing attention to a comprehensive range of technical faults, in any period of the nineteenth or twentieth centuries, from the numbing "tum-ti-tum" of Perceval Gibbons' "The Veld" to any of James Matthews' "anti-poems" such as "The day I was taken from my office,"²¹ in which latter the low level of verbal energy is more indicative of its author's banality and unintended bathos than any particularly forceful protest against detention without trial. Any survey of the full range of this poetry cannot help being struck, if not afflicted, by the terrifying lack of sophistication so often evident. Again and again, one comes across poems as desiccated as the droughts they so manfully try to water with their tears; poems lurid with the African sunsets by which they are inflated and with the lyricised nature-study in which they indulge; poems in imitation of modernism, years after its emergence as a philosophical radicalism, all a deliberate mangling of verbal limbs; poems of a political simplism fetched up in some Marx for Beginners handbook; poems of non-existent archetypes, artificially manufactured myths, of Sunday-afternoon poetasters -- and all in a language which exhibits a kind of unwitting verbal indeterminacy.

All this has quite obviously been compounded, in the latter part of the twentieth century especially, by the breakdown of the old absolute or categorical distinctions between the literary

genres. In the process the rigorous distinction between verse and prose has also fallen by the wayside. While this has been put to good use by the more technically competent poets, it has also meant an enormous increase in a country like South Africa in a kind of poetry which consists of essentially prose and prosaic statements devoid of all elements of prosody, chopped into lengths of supposed line for no apparent or compelling reason -- except that it is easy. Within this enfeebled tradition of prose free-association broken into rat-bag line lengths there is a forgetting of those more enduring principles which constitute the the residual laws of poetry: the endowing of language, or the flow of language, with original emotional connotations, with rhythm, with an awareness of the sound-values of individual words and the possible kinds of energy generated by the relations between one word and another, one line and another. Most of all, perhaps, it has been forgotten that poetry is impossible without artifice: the shaping of verbal material into a certain sign, or what T. S. Eliot called an "objective correlative".

But manifest incompetence is, in a way, its own defence; mediocrity tends to require no further comment. For a great proportion of South African English poetry it is enough to quote, whether as epigraph or epitaph, Eliot's summary, memorable lines from "The Hollow Man" -- "Shape without form, shade without colour, / Paralyzed force, gesture without motion"²² -- and to pass on to other things, having been reminded that most poetry, anywhere, is neither about matters of life nor matters of death -- is a kind of news that was never news in the first place.

Nevertheless, more light can be thrown on the question of mediocrity of this poetry when, as pointed out in section I of this chapter, some of the conditions in which it has been

produced are recalled. Some of these conditions are limiting factors with which poets world-wide have had to contend; they have been admirably defined in works of criticism as various as Frank Kermode's The Romantic Image (1957), Erich Heller's The Disinherited Mind (1952), Octavio Paz's Children of the Mire (1974) and Czeslaw Milosz's The Witness of Poetry (1983). If each of these has, albeit in its individual way, only underlined the multiple and often exhausting difficulties faced by the poet and the very possibility of poetry in the modern era -- Heller, for instance, has written persuasively on "the difficulty of translating spiritual convictions into living convictions" in the poetry of our time²³ -- then it is probably no over-exaggeration to say that South African English poetry has had an additional burden of problems with which to cope, whilst having no ready access to any solutions or even consolations. What is more, the kinds of problem confronting someone like Thomas Pringle, so often taken to be the founding father of English-language poetry in South Africa, have not shown many signs of abating, even at the time of this writing.

Like the French historian Michelet, who used to begin his lectures on British history with the words, "Messieurs, L'Angleterre est une île," no attempt to grasp the situation of the poet in South Africa can proceed without remembering that the country itself has been largely the creation of an age of colonialism and empire-building and that its cultural history has borne all the traits of a dependency whose conditions, social, economic, climatic, linguistic, and demographic, have in no way resembled those of the mother country. As a result, any poet of the colonial period was faced with a particular constellation of

problems which, understandably, none of them can be said to have solved -- except through a retreat to the mother country herself.

This constellation underlines the chief disadvantage faced by the literature from the very start:

South African English literature suffers, I think, from an even more considerable drawback -- that of being the slender off-shoot of a mighty and well-established tree, of continually having had to play colonial second fiddle to what appears to be at the heart of the theme.²⁴

This, it hardly needs saying, is to suffer Harold Bloom's "anxiety of influence" with a vengeance. For "what happens," he has written elsewhere,

if one tries to write, or to teach, or to think, or even to read without the sense of tradition? -- Why, nothing at all happens, just nothing. You cannot write or teach or think or even read without imitation, and what you imitate is what another person has done, that person's writing or teaching or thinking or reading.²⁵

And this necessity, no less imperative in nineteenth-century South Africa than anywhere else, had a number of inevitable, unavoidable consequences.

In the first place poets were so placed that they could do little but imitate various British poetic traditions, whether this be the eighteenth-century tradition of neo-classicism, the more private and subjective concerns of romanticism, or the folk tradition of the ballad. Inevitable as this was, it was also

fateful. For to produce such imitations in a colony roughly six-thousand miles away from its parent society, was to be defined, at the outset, as provincial. In the absence of any well-established local literary traditions, the work of English-language poets in South Africa in the nineteenth century could not but be crippled by its geographical displacement from a culture or civilisation whose superiority it never ceased to acknowledge. Moreover, the literary trappings of this parent culture were often borrowed and incorporated in the most haphazard and unreflective of fashions, culminating at worst in a stylistic incoherence which, to this day, is still to be found in certain parts of South African English poetry.²⁶ Consequently, poetry as a genre seems to have been very slow to put down roots and really engage with the local environment, whether human or natural. Almost irrespective of the individual merit of the poem concerned, any quotation from this period reinforces the point, as does this one from a not uncommon South African theme, Herbert Tucker's "A Prayer for Rain":

O, come! reluctant rain,
 For whose approach parched veld and failing spring
 And every living thing
 How long have looked in vain!

The farmer day by day
 With darker brow watches his dying crops:
 The burnt and barren slopes
 Where his starved cattle stray.

The maiden in her bower

Wishes the quick, compassionate tears that spring
 From her soft heart might bring
 Help to each pining flower.²⁷

Tucker's verses may invoke the natural forces which propel earlier romantics like Coleridge and Wordsworth, but his diction and almost mediaeval gestures towards the maiden's grief are solace against (African) climatic conditions betray every desire for vision in the romantic eye.

III

Although a species of romanticism is evident in the works of early travellers in South Africa like François le Vaillant,²⁸ it began its life in this country chiefly as one of the imports of British colonialism during the first half of the nineteenth century. Colonisation abruptly precipitated the coloniser into a land which had not yet undergone a process of literary domestication. As a result, the writer was invariably faced with the particular difficulty of having to learn, in Olive Schreiner's well-known words, that "those brilliant phases and shapes which the imagination sees in far-off lands [were] not for him to portray." He had to learn to "squeeze the colour from his brush and dip it into the grey pigments around him . . . [to] paint what lies before him."²⁹ This was made more difficult in that his or her perceptions were inevitably informed, at the very deepest level, by the cultural preconceptions exported from the mother country and embedded in the foreign language that English became in this milieu. It was equally inevitable, perhaps, that

English poets in South Africa should reproduce in their work the incongruous trappings of a derivative romantic primitivism and sentimentalism, this being the literary baggage predominant at that time. They could hardly have been expected to avoid seeing Africa through the peculiarly distorting lenses of English romantic spectacles. After all, they had no others.

What R. F. Curry has called "exotic abominations"³⁰ produced by a European literary tradition being suddenly plunged into an entirely foreign context, are littered throughout the history of South African English poetry in the nineteenth century. Even in the work of Thomas Pringle, usually taken to be the founding father of English poetry in this country, it is easy to see, as Clouts himself pointed out in his unpublished MA thesis, "how inadequate [his] style is"³¹ in its treatment of the African landscape, and how easily its final effect becomes one of unintentional comedy:

Afar in the Desert I love to ride,
 With the silent Bush-boy alone by my side:
 Away, away, from the dwellings of men,
 By the wild deer's haunt, by the buffalo's glen;
 By valleys remote where oribi plays,
 Where the gnu, the gazelle, and the hartebeest graze,
 And the kùdù and eland unhunted recline
 By the skirts of grey forests o'erhung with wild vine;
 Where the elephant browses at peace in his wood,
 And the river-horse gambols unscared in the flood,
 And the mighty rhinoceros wallows at will
 In the fen where the wild ass is drinking his fill.³²

A poem like this is not, of course, simply an aspect of a desire for the primal in its flight from urban life in favour of the pastoral. Despite its comic effect, a perfectly serious intent is already apparent in it. The poem's purpose is literally to colonise South Africa, to overrule indigenous facts and to see the local scene as an appendix to the upper hemisphere. South African nature, in the view of the colonising eye, could only be comprehended by being classified as a version of European scenery. Even the metaphors of this poem seek benediction for a world unknown and therefore unhallowed. Only in this way could South African 'space' be turned into 'place'.

On the evidence of an anthology such as Francis Carey Slater's The Centenary Book of South African Verse (1820-1925) (1925), it would be easy to argue that early literary romanticism in South Africa was largely a kind of spiritual adventuring which, if it did not seem to be in collusion with the other, more prosaic sort typical of the colony, was not altogether divorced from it. Much of the literature produced in this tradition is characterised by a rugged, determined optimism and a celebration in the high romantic manner of the natural wonders of a sparsely populated land which had not yet been ravaged by industrialisation. In it Africa figures as an exotic Eden in which Western man (I use the word deliberately) could be freed of the burdens of his flawed civilisation and refresh himself through an act of identification with the natural world, whether animal, vegetable or human. As in the early United States, this highly romanticised image of the land acted as a kind of objective correlative which, in the apt words of Henry James in his study of Nathaniel Hawthorne, "would help one to take a picturesque view of one's internal possibilities, and . . . find

in the landscape of the soul all sorts of fine sunrise and moonlight effects."³³ Needless to say, this form of inner tourism had very little to do with the actualities of Africa itself.

Anomalies like these are, of course, to be expected; they are as prevalent in the Australian literature of the same period.³⁴ The indigenes as 'Noble Savages', 'Nature as a balm for inner turmoil', 'the mother country as paradise lost', 'the poem as hymn to motionless space' -- these are the clichés of many a nineteenth-century colonial literature. Numerous examples can be cited of the readiness of early South African English poets to insert artificial and obfuscatory literary survivals between themselves and the South African environment. Of far greater consequence, however, was that in its severance from the historical developments to which European romanticism was a response -- urbanisation, industrialism, the increased division of labour, the apparent triumph of utilitarian and positivist modes of thought -- the romantic tradition in South Africa went even more astray. It lost its original purpose -- the criticism of society, and a burgeoning capitalist society specifically -- and became divorced from everything except its tenuous literary heritage. If, as Anthony Easthope has argued, romantic ideology is "a polarizing structure" in terms of which people pursue "a subjective intensity and wholeness"³⁵ in opposition to just those social and economic forces which make the achievement of their goal so very difficult, then in South Africa one of the poles defining this structure -- the social -- was all too inclined to disappear, leaving the individual's pursuit of his or her own subjectivity without any apparent, coherent foundation.

This goes a long way towards explaining why the kind of literary romanticism in a nineteenth-century British colony like the Cape was far more damagingly romantic than almost anything in the mother country herself. It explains why so much of the early poetry in this country is little more than what A. C. Partridge has called "the effusions of Signal Hill poetasters, with plentiful attention to landscape and flora, but little feeling and no horizon of experience beyond the vineyards of the Western Cape."³⁶ But it would be a mistake to believe that this ideology was merely the only available channel for so much sweet emotive gush. In reality it had a far more serious function, one not to be found in a critique of that industrialisation which, in any case, did not exist in comparable form in nineteenth-century South Africa.

Put simply, this romanticism was a literary ideology by means of which those who were exotics, colonisers, attempted to make themselves indigenous, or, this failing, to obscure from themselves the fact of their continuing foreign-ness. If the ideology did not operate as a form of social critique, it nevertheless served to draw what was African into a European mental orbit and domesticate it there. It established its hold on the minds of any number of writers, not as a response to anything like a new mode of production, but to a peculiarly colonial experience of alienation. Characteristically, it strove to overcome this by means of a "projection of consciousness into the alien: into the African himself, into the African fauna or landscape."³⁷ All its various efforts to establish a subjective intensity and wholeness, to attain that internal paradise in which the distinction between internal and external, subject and object, mind and world is momentarily elided, may be read as the

efforts of aliens to overcome the other that rendered them alien. But whatever the precise form its literary expression took, implicit throughout the tradition of literary romanticism in South Africa, in the twentieth as well as the nineteenth century, was something quite often obscured in the moment of sympathetic identification or fusion between mind and world which defined the endeavour itself: namely, that the colonisers found themselves in a place where they did not belong, where continuities became discontinuities, certainties anxieties, the familiar eccentric, their own selves strangely other.

The obscuring of this central fact is evident not only in that nineteenth-century romantic literature, which was merely a means of varnishing a reality so that "Actualities," in Nathaniel Hawthorne's words, "would not be so terribly insisted on as they are."³⁸ It is also conspicuous in the latter, far more genuine attempt "to leave the gap that isolates us all" which Guy Butler writes of in his poem "Livingstone Crosses Africa".³⁹ It is effaced even more completely when Sydney Clouts himself speaks of a hunger for what his poem "Intimate Lightning" calls the "full penetrant / eye, and more, much more."⁴⁰ In fact, if the constitutive project of the tradition of literary romanticism in South Africa was that poetic moment which would act as intermediary between cultural worlds which appeared to have nothing in common, then the very terms through which their union was to be achieved, initially forestalled and then effectively ruled out the consummation generations of poets devoutly desired. Romanticism, the ideology by means of which the coloniser poet hoped to connect Europe and Africa in a complementary, harmonious relationship, integrating the best of each in a new indigenous culture, became a way of ensuring his or her estrangement for the

simple reason that it excluded those very terms -- society, politics, history -- whose recognition was essential if the romantic project itself was to meet with any chance of success. Instead of defining itself through its opposition to a greedy, fraudulent form of social organisation, it became a form of refuge from society and, more than anything else, a way of not "being present where you are".⁴¹ It became an almost entirely imaginary construct, promising redemption not through a state of society but through a state of mind which specifically excluded social concerns. In the context of a society whose attitude to culture could be compared, not unjustly, as William Plomer once wrote, "with that of a dog to a lamp-post",⁴² it enshrined the imagination and its spontaneous productions, holding to the belief that the individual poetic act was sufficient redemption from all that this society denied.

It is not surprising, then, that this romanticism should appear increasingly insubstantial, hollowing out the very poetry which it informed. For all its extroversion and self-confidence, the exclusion of any mediating social terms renders much of the African poetry of Thomas Pringle no more than a series of projections, a European fantasy of Africa in which the latter continent features more as a psychological tool than a place on a map. Much the same can be said of the poetry of a later figure like Roy Campbell. Whatever its contempt for colonial poetasters and their soulful notions of landscape, it is no less romantic in its efforts to save the self, bypassing all social considerations and finding in Africa those untrammelled energies, that vitalism, which was so much more to Campbell's taste than Western rationalism. At few points in his work are there any indications of how his feverish desire for life -- for so many zebras "volted

with delight" -- could sting the "rotted wastes" of colonial society into flower.⁴³ Nor is there any self-awareness that vitalism as such is not necessarily a sign of health, but can also spring from deep uncertainty, even neurosis. As with many other nineteenth-century South African English poets, his poetic intercourse with Africa is really a monologue spoken from the heights of that personal isolation that drove him into exile and egocentricity. It is never a dialogue, but only a means of serving his own therapeutic purposes.

Much of the poetry and criticism of Clouts' contemporary, Guy Butler, is marked by similar contradictions. It is the latter who has held to the hope, first articulated in his "The Republic of the Arts" address in 1964, that "the opposition, and ultimate collaboration, to each other's mutual glory of Apollo [Europe] and Dionysus [Africa]"⁴⁴ could be repeated in South Africa. Yet he has had greater difficulty in suggesting how this myth, derived from Nietzsche's reading of Greek tragedy, could serve to create the desired "saving dialogue." As he formulates the dichotomy and the possible means to overcome it, it is finally the poetic act itself -- or leap of the imagination -- which appears to be the sole means capable of bridging the social and cultural divide between the various races and classes in South Africa. It is this alone which allows that perception of the essential unity of Europe and Africa which is also the culminating moment in Butler's own "Myths", probably the most famous of the poems from his Stranger to Europe collection:

One winter dusk when livid snow
On Swaershoek Pass went dull and the grey
Ash-bushes grew dim in smudges of smoke,

I stopped at the outspan place to watch,
 Intenser as the purple shades drew down,
 A little fire leaping near a wagon,
 Sending its acrid smoke into the homeless night.
 Patient as despair, eyes closed, ugly,
 The woman stretched small hands towards the flames;
 But the man, back to an indigo boulder,
 Face thrown up to the sky, was striking
 Rivers of sorrow into the arid darkness
 From the throat of a battered, cheap guitar.

It seemed that in an empty hell
 Of darkness, cold and hunger, I had stumbled on
 Eurydice, ragged, deaf forever,
 Orpheus playing to beasts that would or could not hear,
 Both eternally lost to news or rumours of spring.⁴⁵

Even though the generosity of spirit that animates this poem is undeniable, it is hard not to find the analogy it creates factitious. A reconciliation between Africa and Europe might be desired, even envisioned, but the Orpheus and Eurydice myth remains strangely artificial. The destitute characters in this poem hang like a pair of marionettes from strings which are still too obviously controlled by European hands.

As recently as 1956, Butler could be moved to ask why his fellow white English-speaking poets should still be looking for words for the African landscape and climate when it seems reasonable to expect that these would have long since been found. Writing even then of a continuing need "to explore, to measure

and to name the Africa of the senses and the mind," he answered his own question by adding:

the reason [for this need] lies, in part at least, in the romantic sensibility of our predecessors. The wide open spaces, whether here, or in America, or Australia, provided an excellent 'objective correlative' for the romantic love of the wild and the strange, of the receding horizon. 'Vague', 'dim', 'strange', 'vast', 'mystic', 'boundless', are favourite adjectives in much early South African poetry.⁴⁶

But as Butler himself admits, this answer is only a partial one. Accurate as it is, an additional reason lies in the increasingly introverted character that literary romanticism assumed in South Africa with the turn of events in 1948 and after.

In an essay published in 1976, "On Being Present Where You Are: Some Observations on South African Poetry, 1930-1960," Butler again accurately describes the reaction of his generation of white English-speaking poets, returning to South Africa after the end of World War II and suffering the disillusionment of the Nationalist victory at the polls in 1948: "The result was that, within a decade, we felt like exiles in our own country. Many of us still do."⁴⁷ As a further result, the specifically romantic endeavour to bridge, if only imaginatively, the distance between the familiar and the unknown, self and others, one continent and another, became that much more difficult. The initial homelessness of being a coloniser in South Africa had now, through the turn of events, been compounded by a sense of internal exile. Since there was no possibility that the poetic

act, a purely mental operation, could conceivably overcome the very real barriers erected by apartheid (or, for that matter, suggest a model for its dismantling) the tradition of romantic poetry in South Africa came to provide the means through which, wittingly or unwittingly, the writer could retreat from such a responsibility. Though the poets concerned could hardly be called inner émigrés, nonetheless their poetry became the vehicle for a form of inner emigration. The goal of uniting all that Africa and Europe respectively symbolised, as well as the search for a re-made language which could express this, was reduced to a merely internal possibility, to be forged by the poet almost entirely within the confines of his or her singular consciousness.

Romanticism, then, became a refuge. It lost its role as a builder of bridges and became little more than a means to the preservation of an inner freedom. The scope and confidence that Campbell had exhibited in his African work gradually withered, so much so that, by the time Sydney Clouts reached his poetic maturity in the fifties, it would seem that the only possible realm of freedom left was in language itself. Nor is this actually contradicted when Clouts himself speaks of poetry as "really a wing and a light, floating with as much of that freedom which spirit can find, which soars upwards and feels itself rapt in its transcendence."⁴⁸ In the absence of tangible freedoms, it is perhaps understandable that certain kinds of poetry should become synonymous with an act of levitation, a search for a new spontaneity, innocence and primitivism, and that it should aspire to the celebration of such universals as the holiness of all being, so many people in South Africa lacking the barest particulars of freedom. But for all the ambition of Clouts'

definition of poetry, it reflects, in its avoidance of the stresses of history and ignoring of the rag-and-bone shop of the heart, a distinct narrowing of focus.

For none of these things can Clouts himself be blamed, and even less so when one aspect of the cultural climate in South Africa in the fifties and later is recalled. His cast of mind, meditative at the best of times, can only have been confirmed in its character by what Eric Harber has called "the intellectual and spiritual moat" that surrounded the white English-speaking sub-culture at that time. Whatever the interlocking causes of this isolation -- and the romanticism which Harber mentions is only one factor -- it fostered a critical climate which led much of the English intelligentsia "to be concerned with 'states of mind' and 'moral consciousness' rather than achievements or events, with 'values' rather than virtues. It created a 'state of suspended animation' in the minds of those who were aware of the multiple choices before them, but availed themselves of none."⁴⁹ As a result, there reigned in small but influential measure in this sub-culture something akin to that tradition of inwardness (or *Innerlichkeit*) which, according to Thomas Mann in his famous essay on "Germany and the Germans," was the reason why Germany's cultured bourgeoisie failed to forestall or resist the rise of Nazism. In his view, this class raised an artificial barrier between the "spiritual-artistic world" on the one hand, and the "political-social" on the other. It supposed, wrongly, that the inner, spiritual freedom of culture could be divorced from outer, political freedom, and in so doing, neglected the essential, outward and in the largest sense "political" obligations of true *Humanität* -- of being fully human.

No doubt nothing quite like what Mann called "musical-German inwardness and unworldliness" has ever existed in the English-speaking sub-culture in South Africa. But even if it can be argued that a separation of culture and politics best allows for the development of the former, it can still be asked how the "spiritual-artistic" world is to influence the "political-social" if a separation between the two is maintained. Judging by the critical and other writings of the time, to this there was no answer. Clouts certainly could not provide one. When he speaks of a poem of his, "Future Power," as a "kind of spell,"⁵⁰ he might be quite right. But with society an excluded term, the more sceptical reader might well question who or what the poem was supposed to bewitch.

With this barrier between art and politics firmly maintained, the former being privileged at the expense of the latter, it was probably inevitable that the role of the poet working in the romantic tradition should grow ever more circumscribed. Clouts himself provides a graphic example of this. By the time he reached maturity, his role as a poet had narrowed to such a degree that it seemed scarcely to constitute a role at all. The only way out was to return to England. While there were definite personal and political reasons for Clouts' emigration there in 1961,⁵¹ it is not simply conjectural to see in his move an implicit acknowledgement that his poetry's function in South Africa had become increasingly tenuous. At the same time this did not mean that he himself forfeited all possibility of a role. However much he might have disliked this, he was increasingly idolised by a small coterie in South Africa as "the most original poet South Africa has ever produced."⁵² In his absence, he was converted into that archetypally romantic

figure, the culture-hero, someone nowhere more popular than in a colonial society in which, as Robert Hughes has remarked, these figures provide "a tradition-substitute for a society isolated from European tradition."⁵³

Sydney Clouts is not necessarily South Africa's most original poet -- though he is certainly one of the more eccentric. Any reader coming for the first time to the only volume of poetry he published during his lifetime, One Life (1966), may be excused for experiencing a bafflement bordering on exasperation. The opening poem in the volume is the curiously titled "Of Thomas Traherne and the Pebble Outside":

Guests of the sun race on the approaching sea.

In the air Traherne's Contentments shine.

A jewelled garden gazed at him.

What shall be said of Paradise?

Obscure vermilion heats the dim pebble I hold.

The long rock-sheltered surges flash with spume.

I have read firm poems of God.

Good friend, you perceived bright angels.

This heathen bit of the world lies warm in my palm.⁵⁴

This is a poem in which physical sensation is cauterised, as it were, by another type of sensation that could be called metaphysical. On examination, however, it is by no means impenetrable. The poem is clearly a part of poetic modernity in its efforts to liberate the object from traditional rhetoric. No less modern is its rejection of the conventional coordinates of space and time. In these end-stopped lines, separated by double-spacing, Clouts is evidently bracketing perceptions in the manner of the phenomenologists. Thus he contrasts an earthy, African world with the more rarefied, spiritual universe of Traherne and the European tradition that the latter represents. As in another piece like "Salute,"⁵⁵ the poem finally declares itself in favour of the African rather than the European world. Its last line is a kind of homecoming, establishing that sense of identification with Africa which, as has been argued, is so central a part of the tradition of literary romanticism in South Africa. Clouts' own comment, in his series of conversations with Guy Butler in 1975, underlines this: "the steady luminescence of Thomas Traherne's vision is contrasted with the dynamic movement and heat of nature. The pebble is unbaptised as is Africa."⁵⁶

Yet the effect of eccentricity is not diminished by any amount of explication, in this or in almost any of his other poems. Nor can it be attributed to the temperament of the man himself. In any case, it may still be asked how it is that a writer like Clouts could have produced a body of work whose oddity is no less marked today than it must have been when his poems first appeared in print in various little magazines some four decades ago. The major reason for this is precisely that romanticism which I have been discussing, but in Clouts

articulated in a form more extreme than that to be found in the poems of any of his forebears.

IV

If it is impossible to imagine a place or time today in which the poet, living in an age of prose, would not be faced with Hegel's "manifold difficulties," then there are additional hazards attached to the vocation of poetry in South Africa. "Form," Czeslaw Milosz has written in Native Realm, "is achieved in stable societies."⁵⁷ From a certain point of view Clouts' poetry provides only another example of a body of work in which there often seems to be a near fatal lack of form, both inner and outer, an inability to absorb and order contradictory influences, and a corresponding imbalance between the "I" and the world external to it. In good part, its oddity may be the result of this. Although J. M. Coetzee has called Clouts "our purest poetic talent,"⁵⁸ his work is frequently little more than an alloy in which influences as various as Blake, Wallace Stevens and Mallarmé can be discerned. Nor can it be forgotten that his originality is often merely the idiosyncrasy of an individual talent producing in relative isolation -- an isolation, moreover, which leads to that vertigo, that vein of pseudo-philosophising and vatic uplift which can perpetrate lines as awful as "Sing out, bright beaks, into the airy gaunt" in his early poem, "Different Song".⁵⁹

But it was more than this that made Clouts a lover of the orotund abstraction. The sense of strain and idiosyncrasy in even his best work is due more than anything else to his

determined struggle to create and preserve a particular romantic vision in a time and place in which the initial justification for that vision appears to have been forgotten. In South Africa by the nineteen-fifties, the romantic project had long since lost its origins and justification in the criticism of a specific type of social order. With this project now anchored in nothing but the individual consciousness of the poet, it is not surprising that Clouts' work seems to float beyond any point of attachment to his own culture, that his poetry becomes a mysticism of a decidedly vague, even mystifying, sort.

The goals of the poetry itself can be variously defined, but in each case their overwhelmingly romantic resonance is at once apparent. One of these is embodied in the much-anthologised "Animal Kingdom," particularly its last stanza:

I want I have I give I love
 I answer the senior core of the sun
 I speed the body of the warm gazelle
 I lift the elephant high in my thought
 like a cloud of heaven that moves so slow,
 and the fly I follow, the dustheap find
 my plumtree grows from a clod of sleep.
 Locust locust leap with me
 water flow and mirror me.⁶⁰

Here the interconnectedness of all things and a sense of increasing at-oneness between perceiving mind and animal world gives substance to the goal of unity announced in the very title of Clouts' collection, One Life. Like Nietzsche, it would seem that Clouts believes that "only the particular in its

separateness is objectionable, and that in the wholeness of life everything is affirmed in its holiness."⁶¹ Like Coleridge, he would affirm that the "Beautiful is that in which the many still seen as many becomes one." Whether this is successfully embodied in the poem itself -- and I personally find the concluding couplet too close to a jingle, inviting parody -- the belief itself is borne out by a comment Clouts made during the course of a BBC broadcast of his poems in 1969, when he spoke of that "striving for a unity which seems impossible but is the only really desirable end beyond art."⁶²

The goal of unity itself, to be achieved in the moment of fusion between self and other, mind and world, is served in Clouts' poetry by a vocabulary and conception of language which are also romantic in the highest degree. His poems not only display a great fondness for the Blakean words "sweet" and "bright", they also include many others like "earth", "sky", "wind", "cloud" and "stone", which in their elemental character seem to have the force of essences. As Ian Glenn has remarked, "cars, garbage trucks, telephone wires, trains, newspapers, schools, rugby matches, and the social and mechanical world"⁶³ -- all the features of a specifically social world -- rarely appear in his work. His favoured vocabulary implicitly declares that such a world is tainted, empty of meaning, and therefore no fit vehicle for poetry. Only a language carefully washed clean of the stigma of the social and historical can enable that moment of union which his poetry seeks. If it can be achieved in relation to a stone or pebble, then it is resisted by such man-made, mass-produced objects as a brick.

In choosing such a limited and limiting vocabulary, Clouts was clearly reacting to a problem that has confronted generations

of white English-speaking writers. When he spoke of his ambition "to create a South African poetry and a new language for it -- an aboriginal language which fulfils not the present but future aspirations,"⁶⁴ he was, however, not simply responding to a need to shape an English which would be historically rooted in Africa, capable of expressing a reality which hardly resembled an English one. This had been a common enough ambition. More important to him was the ambition to redeem the all-too-prosaic South African reality from its prosaicness and he searched for a language of Arcadian freshness for his purpose.

As several commentators have mentioned, the function of English in South Africa has commonly been seen as utilitarian⁶⁵ -- a feature of sufficient importance to require further discussion in Chapter 2. No doubt in keeping with its status as colonial import and with the predominantly mercantile, pragmatic nature of the colonising process itself, it was inevitable that English should assume a primarily instrumental role in this country, becoming nothing so much as the mother tongue of the cash nexus, thinly one-dimensional in its exclusion of those "landscapes of experience" and "fields of idiomatic, symbolic communal reference which give to the language its specific gravity."⁶⁶ The vocabulary which Clouts chose was designed to create an alternative language which would restore those mythic, symbolic, epiphanic qualities which had been emptied out of the language during the course of its history in South Africa.

This language, so at odds with the usual character of South African English, also points to a further reason for the extreme peculiarity of Clouts' work. Reading through his Collected Poems, one is reminded of Heidegger's notions of language and poetry. This is not because there is any evidence that Clouts

had read Heidegger, or because both were known to be admirers of pre-Socratic philosophers like Democritus and Heraclitus.

Rather, it is because Clouts' language, as it operates in poem after poem, clearly does not have a utilitarian function, whether this be moral, political or social. When in an early poem like "The Beginning" we find a stanza like the following -- and there are many such throughout Clouts' works -- the very language and its rhythms are constructed as an invitation 'to let Being be', while, correspondingly, the poet's function becomes one of 'custodian' of this Being:

Softly you attend.

Tenderly you awaken.

Stand still when the warm wind passes,
the breath of the sea.⁶⁷

Needless to say, to hold to this conception of language outside his own small literary circle, particularly in the thoroughly utilitarian context of the South Africa fifties, was to invite incomprehension, neglect and intellectual embarrassment.

Nevertheless, it is a conception which emerges time and again in Clouts' work. The following description of poetic language from an essay by the contemporary French poet, Yves Bonnefoy, can be read almost as a commentary on the function of language itself in Clouts' own "Firebowl":

Poetry is not a 'use' language. Perhaps a madness in language: but one which can only be understood in this case through its own irrational eyes -- through its own individual way of understanding and appropriating words.

This is what I believe to be the origins of poetry. When I say 'fire'. . . what this word evokes for me, poetically, is not only fire in its nature as fire -- not only what the concept of fire can suggest: it is the presence of fire, within the horizons of my experience, and not at all as an analysable and utilisable object (one which is, consequently, finite and replaceable) but as a god, active and invested with power.⁶⁸

Clouts, no less than Bonnefoy, is concerned to find those words which are "active and invested with power" to restore a quality of presence, or being, to an historical reality which could not be more resistant to such effort. As much as anything else, this marks him as a late romantic.

If, however, his poetry seeks a unity and a language appropriate to the visionary core of experience to be found in its realisation, it may still be asked what ends it is finally designed to serve. Guy Butler has correctly pointed out, in an early review of One Life, that Clouts "rejects great public processes and abstract systems (the arithmetical, geometrical, political, theological, etc.)." The message of Clouts' poetry, he goes on to say, is that "Life is present. One should cultivate a mystical-sensual receptiveness, bringing the whole sentient being into contact with the particular or (accidental?) event."⁶⁹ It is a message which can have only a romantic meaning.

For the only goal of a "mystical-sensual receptiveness", the only object of a cultivated abstention from public processes, is as an antidote to the getting and spending, that increase in what Shelley called "the calculating spirit" which was for him, as for

other early romantic poets, so depressing a feature of nineteenth-century capitalism. Intrinsic to that cultivation of awareness which Clouts' poetry celebrates and repeatedly calls for is the belief that any increase in the power to use, to manipulate objects or other people, involves a corresponding decrease in the power to relate. Thus his work seeks a reciprocity not tainted by causality.

In this aspect he puts one in mind of Heidegger's contemporary, Martin Buber. In a very definite sense Clouts seeks not what Buber, in I and Thou, calls the "It-world" (which coheres in space and time) but that "You-world" (which does not cohere in either).⁷⁰ He privileges those encounters, necessarily transient, in which he discovers what Blake finds in a grain of sand or in a wild flower: infinity and eternity -- here and now. These, as Buber would say, might not help him to survive; they only help him to have those "intimations of eternity",⁷¹ which overthrow his estrangement in the African context and quicken his spirit in a way which the poem-manifesto, "Residuum", demonstrates:

Listen, listen amongst the particles.

A vigil of the land as it appears.

Open. Open.

Enter the quick grain: everything is first.

I am in the dewfall
anthole

searock flintlock killed blesbok by lion, and in lion.

I am the method of the speck and the fleck.

Dew-on-a-shrub is the name no one shall refuse.⁷²

Here, as in so much of his other poetry, simultaneity replaces sequence; presence is more important than cause and effect; ubiquity takes precedence over identity. In this forgetting of the temporal and celebration of the spatial, there is, to alter some other words of Buber, salvation but "no solution".⁷³ The poem offers itself as an image of all that is spontaneous, organic, truly creative.

This, it might be argued, is precisely its glory. After all, the argument might continue, images of this sort are entirely functional in that they provide what someone like Terry Eagleton has called "a living criticism of those rationalist or empiricist ideologies enslaved to 'fact'".⁷⁴ Besides which, a need for that which escapes time, which is mysteriously spared by time, may well be built into the needs of the human psyche; in this sense, Clouts' poem might be seen as answering to a genuine spiritual hunger. The criticism of society contained in the very structure of a poem like "Residuum" is no less present for being merely implied. In an era in which language is manipulated as a calculus, a poetry like Clouts' reveals a more fundamental dimension which words can possess. Thus its purpose is not less social than that to be found in a poem based on anti-romantic premises. Such might be the justification for it.

Arguments of this sort cannot easily be sustained. In the first place, it has to be recognised that the transcendental

impulse in Clouts' poetry can only be achieved in relation to the natural world -- not in society, and certainly not in anything like a recognisably South African version of it. There is a real sense in which the moments outside time, the moments of fusion which his poetry celebrates, are possible only as a result of an absence of society; as in the tradition of American romanticism, his vision expands as it does because it is situated in a space where society cannot impinge.⁷⁵ Transcendence there might be, but there are no trans-individual values. Indeed the essential quality was that it confined itself to nature and those objects -- a sleeping woman, for instance -- which raised no historical, social or psychological barrier to the miraculous merging of mind and world, or to the fantasy of such a union. As soon as such an eye was brought to bear upon history and society, its vision faltered and grew blind. It could neither alter, subvert, nor surmount these. In the interests of its own survival it could do little more than retreat to a point in time and distance where it could declare, as Clouts does in "Residuum", the irrelevance of history and society and, by implication, the superiority of a certain mode of romantic vision to the many difficulties that these might present:

The pressure of silence is about me.

A commotion.

'History

surprise us!' is one petition.

'Society

save us!' is one petition.

Speeding the lizard.⁷⁶

Personally courageous though these words might be, they are nonetheless blind to the confession of failure implicit in them.

The precise nature of this failure can be seen for what it is in one of Clouts' best poems, "I breathed the first shivers of daylight", unpublished during his own lifetime:

I breathed the first shivers of daylight
 on lowtide lagoonbed grasses,
 shallow ledges of slime in the seawind.
 I went between spouting crabholes,
 tottering oilgreen spindles that roved on the waterfilm;
 over systems of sharp red,
 mauve and brightblue
 speckles of aragonite, like blown seeds:
 Shelley's dome transformed into fertile splinters.
 Life breaks life and stores the concise fragments.

And I found one mauve-swirled form,
 hollow, with delicate sutures,
 coils, apex
 and thumbsized aperture opening
 to the east its savage roundness,
 primitive majesty,
 ordinance of perfection.

Although it best matters who gathers, who fails,

whose mastery falters,
 whose heart questions the accepted laws,
 whose blood beads the grasses,
 whose love combines with mourning,
 who interprets the shadows in the stars,
 who consents, shatters, toils, breeds,
 endures, acts,

out of the sandbits
 and coloured sections of lime,
 I have taken this one shell;
 I have laid it moist and round in the midst of life,
 there it remains, containing nothing but itself,
 convex mother-of-pearl,
 seahorn messiah of the gathering currents.⁷⁷

He wrote nothing lovelier than this last stanza. Yet the limitation of the poem as a whole, quite apart from the echoes of Hugh MacDairmid, Roethke and Stevens, is as manifest as its success. At the centre of it, as at the centre of his poetic universe as a whole, there is not that historical suffering which even he admits "best matters", but a single natural object, a seashell invested with such sacralising powers that it inhabits "the midst of life" and presumably displaces all else -- history, society, the group, the individual, and finally even the poet himself.

Now this does not necessarily mean that Clouts himself had no sense of history or that he was inclined to retreat into an illusory past. It was much more characteristic of him to retreat into a stone or shell, into that moment of fusion with the

symbolic piece of Africa, the pebble in his hand. But this is an inclination which is hardly without its problematic side. One of the recurring features of twentieth-century poetry is to be found in many a poet's tendency to invest all his or her attention and love in something very far from the human image, identifying in an object, a plant, an animal, that sense of reality, morality or the self that William Carlos Williams perceived in a cyclamen, Marianne Moore in a nautilus, Eugenio Montale in an eel. Whether this act of sympathetic identification can provide anything like an adequate metaphor for life in society, in history, is debatable, but the attempt to do so is common enough to form something like a global tradition.

In poems like "I breathed the first shivers of daylight" and many others like "The Radish",⁷⁸ Clouts is a successful exponent of this tradition. He is less assured, though, in dealing with the contradictions it involves. This is because he never succeeds in showing how those moments of illumination, or "spots of time", of being, are to be related to society itself. The function of his shell is not to provide anything like a model in terms of which we, the readers, could reject or question a certain form of social organisation or set of historical circumstances. The function of the shell is simply to displace and then efface all social considerations. Nothing is left but the pure being of the shell, expanding hugely to fill the social vacuum that it has shut out. And it is just this that enfeebles the poem as a whole, rendering it evasive, even escapist. It is also this that renders Clouts' romanticism so deficient, its apparent extremism almost entirely a function of what it leaves out. Even worse, this is what reduces those moments of union which his poetry desires to celebrate, above all, to so much

poetic dust, oddly flimsy, all but weightless. Lacking all ballast in society itself, the visionary moment, at least as it is expressed in the poems, becomes incoherent, an act of levitation in a realm where the laws of gravity do not operate in the first place. And the reader, if he or she really desires these, will return to someone like T. S. Eliot or Rilke, in whose work the visionary moment is more obviously grounded.

It is the same limitation -- the erasure of all social and historical considerations -- that is responsible for undermining the power of another poem like "Within", one in which Clouts would appear to be questioning just that romantic myth of penetration into the unknown interior or interior unknown on which so much of his work is dependent:

You look long about you
 intent on the world
 on a midsummer day;
 the sea flames hard
 it is rumpled like tin,
 the sun is burning
 dimension away.
 If you cast a pebble down
 it will clatter on the waves,
 your eye can not go in.
 And it cannot find a tree
 standing generous and full
 or a house or flower
 with individual power;
 and it must not look within,
 hardness afflicts you,

flat is the world you'd find:
 a row of wooden rooftops
 that can easily topple
 and bring the heart down
 and bring down the mind.⁷⁹

This might register a voice profoundly disturbed by that which alienates the human from the natural, and the human from itself, but the absence of any wider context reduces the sense of disturbance to a purely cognitive problem. The drama, so to speak, is all ontological. If we read the poem as an attempt to give the lie to any notion that the internalisation of an external reality is an easy task, without spiritual and other mental dangers and risks, then no possible reasons for this are suggested. Is this a difficulty and danger specific to Africa, and, what is more, to the perception of the coloniser rather than the colonised? What possible reason can there be for the implicit hunger of an eye that can "go in"? Is it simply another instance of the alien trying to penetrate the unknown and thereby naturalise himself? In the absence of any mediating social terms, none of these questions can find a definite answer. The poem excludes the reader just as the sea is implacably opaque to the perceiving eye. In this, as with so many other Clouts poems, one is finally reduced to a game of guess-work which, one suspects, is not demanded by the inherent difficulties of the subject-matter itself but by the inadequacies in its presentation.

Difficulties of this sort are exacerbated by the lyric mode which Clouts favours to the exclusion of all others. As has often been pointed out, the pre-eminence of this mode in the

twentieth century underlines the retreat of poetry from its more public role in the nineteenth century, and before. "The archetype of poetry," as Graham Hough has suggested, "is no longer to be found in drama and heroic narrative, but in the lyric."⁸⁰ This retreat was so widespread as to suggest that it was largely a self-protective device, but it had one consequence that was additionally limiting. It indicates, in the poetry of Clouts as in many others, a serious lack of interest in action and the possibilities of action. For it is in narrative, not lyric poetry, that such possibilities have traditionally been presented. As the American poet Wendell Berry has said:

Narrative poetry records, contemplates, hands down the actions of the past. Poetry has a responsibility to remember and preserve and reveal the truth about these actions. But it also has a complementary responsibility that is equally public: to help to preserve and to clarify the *possibility* of responsible action.⁸¹

The absence of narrative in Clouts' work only renders its relation to the social world -- any social world -- that much more tenuous, compounding the many difficulties and limitations so far discussed.

In a sense all these come to a head in those handful of "Hotknife" poems which form such a marked contrast to the general character and tenor of his poetry.⁸² It seems ironic that it is in these poems above all that the limitations of his romanticism, and of the tradition in which he worked, should be so prominently revealed. But perhaps the irony is less sharp when one remembers that it is in this work, as nowhere else, that Clouts shows

himself concerned to overcome all difficulties consequent upon his being a white English-speaking poet in South Africa. To the most important of these difficulties, a sense of alienation, he responds by using all those means which the rest of his poetry eschews. Instead of his usual vocabulary with its metaphysical eeriness, he makes use of a recognisably South African dialect of English, rooted in one of Cape Town's cultures. Instead of the lyric, he turns to narrative. His focus is specifically social, dealing with the lives of men and women in a certain society at a particular time. In all this he goes against the character of most of his work. And a poem like "Nellie" is what results:

Where you Nellie
 blerrie mischiff.
 Ten years is not a fency fawtnight.
 God is my fa'rer Nellie
 an he won' make it bad for me.
 He know my tennencies is honorabll
 but excep' sometimes I blow up.

Dey tol' me you were dead, Nellie
 but Daantjie say you ony living somewhere else.
 I don' forget I don' forget nutting.
 Where you living, hey?
 Where you O Marie Biskit?
 God is my own fa'rer
 and he giff me clearance, usstrue,
 he giff me clearance.
 An Hotknife is Hotknife still an he newwe cut nutting
 wort' a damn excep' baaipasses since August' 1952.

Come come sof' chicken
 come ladybird.
 Hotknife is Hotknife stll
 by nummer 3a
 Wil'flower Avenue.⁸³

One's argument with this is not necessarily that it is patronising, unduly sentimental, or even that from the vantage of a much more politicised society it seems dated, part of an era that is over. It is that in the one or two instances -- the "Hotknife" poems -- in which he addresses himself to the recognisably local, the specifically social, all he is able to produce is a species of comic folklore. Few things could underline more harshly the inability of his romanticism to come to terms with that which exists in time and place, not outside of them, than the fact that in the context of the rest of his work a poem like "Nellie" reads rather like one of those "exotic abominations" that populate South African English poetry in the nineteenth century. For all the pathos of pieces like these, his work stands emptyhanded when confronted by history and that sense of the tragic which is only born of historical experience.

In the light of this it is perhaps no wonder that Clouts' goal of unity, both in a personal and universal sense, should remain so elusive however much his poetry reaches after it. Even if momentarily achieved in a lyrical poem, it remains one of the more fragile myths, difficult to sustain, particularly when its achievement is based on an act of exclusion rather than inclusion. In Clouts' One Life there is no one life precisely because the very means through which the coherence (and co-

inherence) of an existence is achieved -- society and its historical character -- is censored rather than confronted. In this sense, the myth of essential unity, of union, operates as a smokescreen, probably unintended, behind which the many lives of a country like South Africa continue as before -- divided, fragmentary, licensing anything but an organicist myth.

Nor, perhaps, is it inexplicable that Clouts himself should have fallen silent during the last decade or so of his life. Whilst there is evidence that he did do a little writing during this period, he published no poems in the twelve years before his death. What writing there was became a trickle, and both in form and substance it gives the impression of increasing fragmentation, as if Clouts were reaching after something now clean beyond the grasp of his aesthetic. No doubt the pressure of expatriation and other personal factors played their part in this. But it may well be that a major cause of his drying up was the increasing obsolescence of the romantic tenets that he clung to throughout the course of his career. To the historical developments occurring in South Africa (something of which he can hardly have been unaware throughout the sixties and seventies; he visited South Africa on several occasions during this period and was a research fellow at Grahamstown in 1969-71), he had neither a solution nor, even, a response. Commenting on some lines in his "Residuum" during a poetry-reading in South Africa in 1980, he said:

We want answers, we ask either for revelation, or we ask for leadership, or 'the message'. We are so feeble we look to sociologists to solve our problems, so feeble that we want historians to tell us the meaning of culture. Seriously, I

don't mean in the least to reject the great disciplines of our academic and intellectual knowledge . . . but I think that the anxieties which come to societies are anxieties for which there doesn't seem to be any collective answer at all.⁸⁴

This may be honest; it may even be courageous. But there is a confession of defeat in it which seems symptomatic of something larger than Clouts himself: the failure of the aesthetic tradition to which he belonged.

During the latter part of his life, the affirmations towards which his poetry characteristically reached sound increasingly willed, as does its governing myth. There is no mistaking the undertone of desperation in a late fragment such as "No, it is possible":

No, it is possible . . . Such wholeness, our
nature's warrant, which is in darkness, I
cling to as dust clings and suns, millions, cling to
millions, cling to, flying and crumbling . . .
our atoms, our few words. Who speaks for us?

Here on this open ground archaic lightning,
here groan the classic roots clinching
impossible abundance. All are coming. I
see blossoming the faces and I hear the tongues
intruding blessedness.⁸⁵

Here, even the language of revelation, all along his forte,
brings no wholeness, no blessedness. All remains as contorted

and a-rhythmical as the syntax of both stanzas. One is reminded of two of Ezra Pound's lines in "Canto CVVI": "it coheres all right / even if my notes do not cohere"⁸⁶ -- an assertion that only draws attention, however sadly, to a predominant incoherence, an evident lack of wholeness as well as a personal inability to do anything whatsoever about it.

Notes and References

1. Anon., "Plethora of Poets," Cape Times 1 Dec. 1984: 10.
2. For example, Jacques Alvarez-Pereyre, The Poetry of Commitment in South Africa (London: Heinemann, 1984) and Barbara Harlow, Resistance Literature (London: Methuen, 1987).
3. Lionel Trilling, A Gathering of Fugitives (Boston: Beacon, 1956) 93.
4. Stephen Gray, ed., A World of Their Own: Southern African Poets of the Seventies (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1976) 9.
5. Michael Chapman, Introduction, A Century of South African Poetry (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1981) 14-15.
6. Robert Hughes, The Art of Australia (Ringwood: Penguin, 1970) 287-288.
7. Introduction, Voorslag: A Magazine of South African Life and Art (Facsimile Reprint of Numbers 1, 2 and 3) (Pietermaritzburg-Durban: U of Natal/Killie Campbell Africana Library, 1985) 13.
8. The former is almost certain to have spent a while in Cape Town around the end of 1841 and beginning of 1842, en route back to France from Mauritius, while Eliot was a much-feted holiday-maker in the Cape Peninsula for a fortnight early in 1950. Almost certainly the greatest, internationally-recognized poet the country has seen for any length of time would be George Seferis during World War II, not forgetting the presence of Fernando Pessoa (before he became Fernando Pessoa) during his childhood in Durban.

9. See Robert Hughes, The Art of Australia 313. "In the strict sense, the words avant-garde have no aesthetic meaning in Australia, since no revolutionary style has ever been initiated there."

10. Carlos Fuentes, "How I Started To Write," Myself with Others: Selected Essays (London: Deutsch, 1988) 23.

11. Philip Segal, "The Place of South African Writing in the University," English Studies in Africa 13.1 (March 1970): 177-8.

12. Much of sociological, materialist criticism (or "critical practise") might be said, unkindly, to have enjoyed its recent vogue in South Africa precisely because it has licenced an avoidance of evaluative, normative questions and thus made possible an evasion of some possibly awkward doubts as to the value of what is being studied or read.

13. Quoted by Howard Felperin, Beyond Deconstruction: The Uses and Abuses of Literary Theory (Oxford: Oxford U, 1985) 50.

14. G. M. Miller and Howard Sergeant rightly point out in their Critical Survey of South African Poetry in English (Cape Town/Amsterdam: Balkema, 1957) that this poetry was to remain coloured, if not tainted, by its colonial beginnings much later than might have been expected. "If the corresponding developments in Australia or New Zealand are any guide," they write, "it would normally have been at this stage [around the turn of the century] that the poets would have been laying the foundations of an authentic South African culture; as it was they made no progress at all in that direction and their work was as derivative and colonial in spirit as that of the previous generation." (60)

15. George Steiner, "Songs of a Torn Tongue," Times Literary Supplement 28 Sep. (1984): 1093.
16. Wallace Stevens, The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination (New York: Knopf, 1951) 29.
17. Stevens 129-130.
18. The phrase is Joseph Brodsky's, see Less than One: Selected Essays (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986) 150.
19. Michael Chapman, Introduction, A Century of South African Poetry 18.
20. Philip Larkin, Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982 (London: Faber and Faber, 1983) 74.
21. The poems are to found in John Purves, ed., The South African Book of English Verse (1915; London: Longmans, 1920) 283-284, and Stephen Gray, ed., Modern South African Poetry (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1984) 147-148.
22. T. S. Eliot, Collected Poems 1909-1962 (1963; London: Faber and Faber, 1970) 89.
23. Erich Heller, The Disinherited Mind (1952; London: Bowes and Bowes, 1975) 155.
24. D. R. Beeton, "The Achievements of South African English Literature," New Nation Oct. 1968: 4.
25. Harold Bloom, A Map of Mis-reading (New Haven: Yale U, 1972) 32.
26. See Chapter 4 for a further elaboration of this point.
27. John Purves, ed., The South African Book of English Verse 279.
28. In this connection, see Patrick Cullinan's "1818. M. François le Vaillant Recalls His Travels to The Interior Parts of Africa 1780-1785," Today Is Not Different (Claremont: David Philip, 1978) 43-46.

29. Olive Schreiner, Preface, The Story of An African Farm (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971) 24.

30. The phrase appears in R. F. Curry's essay "English in the National Life," Coming of Age: Studies in South African Citizenship and Politics, eds. Edgar N. Brookes, et al. (Cape Town: Maskew Miller, 1930) 78.

31. Sydney Clouts, "The Violent Arcadia," (MA Diss, Rhodes U, 1971) 11.

32. "Afar in the Desert," African Poems of Thomas Pringle, eds. Ernest Pereira and Michael Chapman (Durban/Pietermaritzburg: U of Natal/Killie Campbell Africana Library, 1989) 9.

33. Henry James, Hawthorne (London: MacMillan, 1967) 88.

34. See, for example, Judith Wright, ed., A Book of Australian Verse (Melbourne: Oxford U, 1968) 13-25.

35. Anthony Easthope, Poetry as Discourse (London: Methuen, 1983) 122.

36. A. C. Partridge, "Poets and Humanitarians in the Wilderness," English Studies in Africa 4.2 (1956): 203.

37. J. M. Coetzee, "Sydney Clouts," English in Africa 11.2 (Oct 1984): 74.

38. Quoted by Henry James, Hawthorne 23.

39. Guy Butler, Stranger to Europe with Additional Poems (Cape Town/Amsterdam: Balkema, 1960) 64.

40. CP 69.

41. The phrase is Guy Butler's. See his essay "On Being Present Where You Are: Some Observations on South African Poetry, 1930-1960," in Peter Wilhelm and James Polley, eds., Poetry South Africa (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1976) 82-101.

42. William Plomer, Preface, I Speak of Africa (London: Hogarth, 1927) v.

43. The phrases are from Campbell's "The Zebras" and "To A Pet Cobra" respectively. Selected Poems 19; 15.
44. Guy Butler, "The Republic and the Arts" (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand U, 1964) 8.
45. Stranger to Europe 45.
46. Guy Butler, "The English Poet in South Africa," The Listener 24 May 1956: 681.
47. "On Being Present Where You Are" 91.
48. "Sydney Clouts Poetry Reading," English in Africa 11.2 (Oct 1984): 29.
49. Eric Harber, "South Africa: The White English-Speaking Sensibility," Journal of Commonwealth Literature 11.1: 58.
50. "Sydney Clouts Poetry Reading": 32.
51. See Ian Glenn's comments on this in "Sydney Clouts -- Our Pen-Insular Poet," English Academy Review 3 (1985): 133.
52. A. R. Delius, "The Secret of the Man in Klapmuts," English in Africa 11.2 (Oct 1984): 62.
53. Robert Hughes, The Art of Australia (Ringwood: Penguin, 1970) 183.
54. CP 65.
55. CP 93.
56. Butler transcripts quoted by Robert Nixon, "Tense with Dew: The Land, The Poet and the Language in Sydney Clouts' One Life" (Hons Diss, Rhodes U, 1977) 61.
57. Czeslaw Milosz, Native Realm (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1981) 67.
58. J. M. Coetzee, "Sydney Clouts: Purest Poetic Talent in South Africa," Rapport 14 May 1985: 31.
59. CP 14.
60. CP 76.

61. Quoted by Erich Heller, The Disinherited Mind (1952; London: Bowes and Bowes, 1975) 109.
62. "BBC Broadcast 1969: Transcript," CP 142.
63. Ian Glenn, "Sydney Clouts -- Our Pen-Insular Poet": 129.
64. Quoted by Nixon 60-1.
65. See, for example, Marshall Walker, "Ennobling Exchange: Some Thoughts on English in South Africa," Malvern Van Wyk Smith and Don MacLennan, eds., Olive Schreiner and After: Essays on Southern African Literature in Honour of Guy Butler (Claremont: David Philip, 1983) 206-207.
66. The phrases are George Steiner's in George Steiner: A Reader (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984) 422.
67. CP 2.
68. Yves Bonnefoy, "French Poetry and the Principle of Identity," Michael Edwards, ed., French Poetry Now (Skye: Prospice/Aquila, 1975) 31.
69. Guy Butler, "Time Will Preserve: Review," English in Africa 11.2 (Oct. 1984): 69.
70. Martin Buber, I and Thou (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1970) 61.
71. Buber 84.
72. CP 78-79.
73. Buber 159.
74. Terry Eagleton, Literary Theory: An Introduction (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983) 19.
75. In this sense it is reminiscent of the distinction drawn by Tony Tanner in his essay on the difference between American and European romanticism: "Where the European Romantic, used to the 'traces of men', might look forward to an imagined

millennium for human society, the American was very aware of increasing depredations of the precious wilderness. He might cling to images of pastoral domesticity, or indulge in pieties about manifest destiny or the melting-pot, but his strategy on the whole was to seek out that solitude, those unpeopled landscapes, prescribed by Emerson -- in reality, in art. That is why while European Romanticism characteristically looks to the past and to the future, American Romanticism seeks to move out of time altogether, out of time and into some sort of space. For time means history, and history means 'traces of men' and society, and society means not only the loss of 'that wilder image' but also the spaces it provided and the limitless freedom to sport in air." "Notes for a Comparison between American and European Romanticism," Scenes of Nature, Signs of Men (Cambridge: Cambridge U, 1987) 40.

76. CP 78.

77. CP 124.

78. CP 114.

79. CP 80.

80. Graham Hough, "The Modernist Lyric," Modernism 1890-1930 (Sussex: Harvester, 1978) 313.

81. Wendell Berry, "The Specialisation of Poetry," Reginald Gibbons, ed., The Poet's Work (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979) 38.

82. Inexplicably, there are several more published in New Coin Poetry 20.1 (June 1984), but these are not included in Clouts' Collected Poems. For a useful discussion of the editing of the Collected Poems, see Ian Glenn, "Sydney Clouts -- Our Pen-Insular Poet": 127.

83. CP 108.

84. "Sydney Clouts Speaking about his Poetry, 2," English in Africa 11.2 (Oct. 1984): 20.
85. CP 136.
86. Ezra Pound, The Cantos (London: Faber and Faber, 1981)
797.

CHAPTER 2

THE PROBLEM UNSOLVED: WHITE SOUTH AFRICAN ENGLISH POETS OF THE SEVENTIES

I

Perhaps, despite the disappointments afforded to the reader of their work, there is no purpose to criticising the initial English-language South African poets themselves for failing to find a language more congruent with the land. If history is their judge, it may also provide their pardon. In any case, the remark made by the critic Vivian Smith at the outset of his chapter on Australian poetry in The Oxford History of Australian Literature -- "the derivativeness of Australian culture is a fact to take for granted from the beginning and not a conclusion to work towards"¹ -- applies as surely to South Africa as well. Given its colonial origins, South African English poetry could never have been expected to flourish in the notably shallow soil and with the altogether tenuous sense of history that defined the milieu in which it was first produced. This cultural impoverishment was only exacerbated by the tendency (inherent in all colonising processes) to denigrate, to suppress or to destroy indigenous traditions, those "other" voices, which might provide the coloniser writer with precisely the means to forging an original literature. Even to this day the traditions of song and story-telling among the Bushman groups in southern Africa -- to cite just one instance -- have hardly been used, let alone incorporated, in South African English poetry.² Until very recently, the same could be said for the other oral traditions. Throughout his shortlived editorship of Voorslag in the nineteen-twenties, Roy Campbell was to call attention, derisively, to "that mental obesity for which we [white South Africans] are

already world-famous"³ and to "that moronism which has come to be associated with the name of South Africa".⁴ Both "mental obesity" and "moronism" are easily predicted from the context in which the colonial imagination had to operate.

To make matters worse, from the time of Olive Schreiner and after, colonial writers, both novelists and poets, have had to withstand the kind of personal isolation inevitable in such mentally degrading surroundings, one which is perhaps nowhere more hauntingly captured than in a stanza from Campbell's own "Tristan da Cunha", its last two lines as fine as any he ever wrote:

My pride has sunk, like your grey fissured crags,
By its own strength o'ertoppled and betrayed:
I, too, have burned the wind with fiery flags
Who now am but a roost for empty words,
An island of the sea whose only trade
Is in the voyages of its wandering birds.⁵

There is, in a sense, no lonelier poetry than South African English poetry. To a unique degree its poets have been forced to work in various combinations of silence, isolation, and exile, wresting what poetry they can from a situation which has never been without the twin temptations provoked by cultural isolation: self-pity on the one hand, self-aggrandisement on the other.

No doubt this silence was partly a function of the lack of an audience. By no stretch of the imagination is it possible to envisage the fulfilment, in South Africa, of Whitman's dictum to

the effect that great poetry is possible only if there are great readers. The chief characteristics of what audience there has been, at least in the white sub-culture, are bluntly implied in the opening lines of Francis Carey Slater's "The Songless Land":

How oft 'tis said, "this is a songless Land."
 Song is not lacking -- though blind and deaf neglect
 And dumb indifference serve to stifle it.⁶

When such additional features of colonial society as those pointed out by Dan Jacobson in his Introduction to the Penguin edition of Olive Schreiner's The Story of an African Farm, the evidence seems conclusive:

A colonial country is one which has no memory. The discontinuities of colonial experience make it almost inevitable that this should be so. A political entity which has been brought into existence by the actions of an external power; a population consisting of conquerors, of slaves and of indentured labourers, and of dispossessed aboriginals; a language in the courts and schools which has been imported like an item of heavy machinery; a prolonged economic and psychological subservience to a metropolitan centre a great distance away . . . One hardly needs to labour the point that such conditions make it extremely difficult for any section of the population to develop a vital, effective belief in the past as a present concern, and in the present as a consequence of the past's concern.⁷

In a land without a past such as the one Jacobson describes, in which not even the colonists' imported traditions are quite able to survive the change of climate, and where the uprooting of human communities is more the rule than the exception, it is no cause for wonder that we should find reviewers, as in the quotation from The Cape Times in Chapter 1, speaking of a poetry of "historical amnesia and repeated 'instant beginnings'".

The contextualisation of a poor English poetry in colonial South Africa will obviously help to obviate questions concerning that poverty. What is surprising, though, is that a critic could be drawing attention to this deficiency in a literature as recently as 1984. For if one surveys any other national literature that has had its beginnings in British colonialism and imperialism -- Australia probably provides the best point of comparison -- it does, broadly speaking, tend to display a movement away from the debilitating aspects of its original dependent status, and specifically from the initial drawbacks of provincialism. Geoffrey Thurley has neatly summarised three general stages that are likely to occur in this progressive emancipation, especially when a process of decolonisation is under way at the same time:

There seem to me to be three broad stages in the evolution of cultural provincialism. First, there is the stage of primary provincialism, in which the provincial society behaves with regard to the parent society rather as Congreve's country bumpkins behaved with regard to London: it gives a crude imitation of its manners. At the second stage the provincial society makes a conscious effort to

establish an autonomous culture of its own: in this stage, the provincial society is sure enough of itself to be proud of its own accent. . . . But at the second stage, which we could call the stage of proud provincialism, the provincial society still, deep down, acknowledges the spiritual and cultural superiority of the parent culture. Only at the third stage does the provincial society acquire its own centre of gravity -- a gravitational mass which may well indeed begin to attract the old parent society. In art, the first stage of provincialism is marked by facile copies of metropolitan originals; the second by the emergence of a certain homespun originality, but also by a significant eclecticism, as the more exalted creative spirits look round for adequate instruments; the third by new forms and contents which are not only unique to that society (its provincialism had been in its own way unique) but which compare in depth and wholeness with the best of the parent society.⁸

One may voice reservations about the inevitability of a threefold evolution,⁹ but to expect evolution seems reasonable enough. It is, however, almost impossible to talk about South African English poetry, as if it had escaped its inauspicious origins and achieved anything like the depth and wholeness of which Thurley speaks in his discussion of American poetry. To be sure, some traits of colonial cognition have disappeared in modern work (Pringle's poetic diction is nowhere in Mtshali or Clouts; the huge imago of "Africa" has become something more various, more interesting in the work of poets like Patrick

Cullinan or Sydney Clouts). But if the poetry is read in its entirety, one will be struck by the fact that what were nineteenth-century colonial deformations have only been supplanted in more recent times by other, equally perverse cultural problems, whose combined effects have been far from comic. While the two chief English-language poets of the South African nineteen-twenties, undoubtedly Roy Campbell and William Plomer, were, in terms of Thurley's three stages, exhibiting in their work an originality more than just "homespun", the position of the English-language poet in South Africa, along with the lives of the majority of the country's inhabitants, was being more than complicated by the steady emergence and consolidation of what was to be the future apartheid state. The task of forging a uniquely South African idiom -- an ambition, as pointed out in Chapter 1, long entertained by many, amongst them Sydney Clouts and Guy Butler -- became that much more difficult, if not plain impossible. In striving to produce a specifically South African English poetry, poets had of necessity to struggle (even if indirectly) against a South African state that had rendered meaningless any notion of a common South African culture, enforcing only another variety of cultural provincialism through the policy of "separate development". Far from disappearing, then, the first moment of colonisation (with its attendant provincialism) was followed not by political and cultural emancipation, but rather by the second great moment of colonisation in South Africa's history -- the internal colonisation that was and is apartheid, afflicting South African writers of all descriptions with a further set of problems.¹⁰

As far as these writers and poets were concerned, the consequences of this second colonial moment were immediate. No survey or history of South African English literature can escape awareness of the number of writers who have either expatriated themselves or been forced into exile both before and after the Afrikaner Nationalist victory at the polls in 1948. In the pre-apartheid era, the names range from Pringle himself to other important figures like F. T. Prince, Roy Campbell, William Plomer and David Wright; after 1948, they became a veritable roll-call, including Sydney Clouts, Arthur Nortje, Dennis Brutus, and many others. The writer who perhaps represents the most considerable poetic talent to have been produced by South Africa in recent years, Peter Sacks, has long since made his home in the United States of America and, particularly with the publication of his second volume of poems Promised Lands (1990), may be seen to have become a distinguished member of the American tradition.

This drain has meant that local traditions, whether in poetry or other spheres of cultural activity, were either destroyed or arrested before having had a real chance to consolidate themselves. That communion with the sensibilities of the past which is essential to the poet's self-location (and which may serve as a source of reassurance as much as of anxiety) was made impossibly difficult. The corollary of the absence of a past has been the absence of continuities, a reinforcement of that lack of memory noted by Dan Jacobson, and, perhaps worst of all, the more or less permanent infantilisation of a culture.¹¹ In much of South African English poetry it is evident again and again that writers have had to begin, as it were, from scratch, attempting the plainly impossible task of fathering (and

mothering) themselves in the absence of any assured sense of tradition, often enough having to infer one from the few broken shards left them by deported or long-departed writers.

It is hardly necessary to go further and list all those other factors -- censorship, banning of writers and so forth -- which have been additional obstacles in the way of the development of South African English poetry as a whole.¹² But it is essential to the general argument of this thesis to point out that what has become a personal and indeed general imperative for many a South African writer since the implementation of the apartheid state after 1948 -- namely, a witness to and revelation of the injustices of racial and other forms of discrimination -- whilst it might appear to have created a more recognisably indigenous South African literature, has not necessarily been a great boon to creativity either. "The tragedy of South Africa," James Olney was to write in his Tell Me Africa: An Approach to African Literature, "is that everyone, but most especially the black man, is caught in a dance where no one is free to act but only react, and in this dance of death there is no creation but only destruction."¹³

As the apartheid state itself, with its messianic pretensions, demanded an extension of politics into more and more areas of life, so the destruction of civil society proceeded, and along with it the narrowing of many possible areas of personal and artistic freedom. Whereas the poet in the colonial period had to labour beneath the particular burdens of an ubiquitous "cultural cringe", and while those in the aftermath of World War II might have had the uneasy task of melding their idea of Africa with their largely European cultural inheritance, the

writer of the sixties and seventies was to be faced with an equally burdensome, corrosive sense of political responsibility.¹⁴

"Politics is not a religion, or, if it is, then it is nothing but the Inquisition",¹⁵ Albert Camus had once warned. South African English poetry itself bears witness to the more general truth contained in Camus' statement. If a particular type of British colonial freight had inhibited local poetry of an earlier period, the freight of political imperatives (including those of liberalism) was to cramp the imaginations of later poets, particularly after the nineteen-sixties. The effects of this have not been hard to observe in the poetry itself. The pressures of maintaining, in print, a stance against the State, often produced a verse in which the baleful effects of a dutiful sincerity were most apparent. Creative energies that might have gone into the consideration of various aesthetic problems were often expended (and wasted) by writers in positioning themselves in politically acceptable ways.¹⁶ Instead of developing new angles of vision from which trees could be perceived, it became more important to a number of poets to consider whether it was politically legitimate to write about trees at all. South African poets, English or Afrikaans, might have been as much aware as poets elsewhere in the world that revolutions in sensibility are never won at the barricades, but the pressures of the moment were such that it was evident that quite a few had succumbed to the delusion that they could. As one immediate consequence, there emerged a considerable volume of that essentially decadent art which, instead of standing on its own merits as a work of personal creation, exhibiting the writer's

preparedness to express himself or herself regardless of consequences, appealed to a prejudice or predilection held mutually with an audience.

South Africa, Christopher Hope was to write in 1988 in his travelogue White Boy Running, is a place "so absurd, so incredible, so terrifyingly funny,"¹⁷ a country combining horror and laughter in measures so seldom cathartic, that few South African writers were to feel free to be disinterested or merely playful in their work, embodying that celebratory element in literature in the absence of which it is all too likely to become something other than literature. What was once the cultural isolation of colonialism was became that no less insidious form of isolation imposed by sanctions and the international community's cultural and academic boycotts of South Africa in the nineteen-eighties.

The work of the years 1976-1983 are a case in point (and section II illustrates this in detail). In fact, throughout the apartheid era numerous articles, poems and other documents have attested to a series of further deformations. In a well-known critical essay published in the nineteen-sixties, Lewis Nkosi registers a complaint that is not only applicable to the black novelists whom he is discussing:

What we do get from South Africa therefore -- and what we get most frequently -- is the journalistic fact parading outrageously as imaginative literature. We find here a type of fiction which exploits the ready-made plots of racial violence, social apartheid, interracial love affairs.¹⁸

In a similar vein, T. T. Mayana writes:

Above all, both black and white literature in South Africa, is one-eyed literature; concentrating on one section of the racial spectrum. The artist has no choice. He knows his clan or tribe more than he will ever know the others. The state presents him with a racial referent with which to interpret what he sees, hears, thinks.¹⁹

Even as late as 1987, we find Njabulo S. Ndebele having to warn against the proliferation of a South African-style "agitprop", that type of pamphlet literature which (among other things) deforms through over-simplification:

We must not pamphleteer the future. Nor shall we pamphleteer the past. To pamphleteer the future is to reduce complex issues to simple formulations such that understanding is prevented, or at best, clouded.

Pamphleteering the future means writing that establishes its case without the onus of proof; writing that challenges without educating, that is heroic without being too convinced of its heroism.²⁰

In sum, then, it would seem that there is considerable justice in Martin Seymour-Smith's estimation of the general situation of the South African writer in his massive survey of world literatures, published in 1985:

The constraints [in South Africa] are Soviet in style, but may be even worse in their effect. . . . The fact is that writers there, of all cultures, are probably the worst off of any writers in the entire world.²¹

Even granting that such estimations can never be more than opinions, the evidence is overwhelming whether one looks at the Cape Colony in the nineteenth century, Natal in the nineteen-twenties or Soweto in the nineteen-seventies. Almost all of those social conditions which have defined South African life do nothing so much as foretell exactly that which the reader in fact gets: a dearth of creativity and the impossibility of a literature that rises much above the second-rate.²² In almost all cases the sociological explanation seems sufficient: if the critic seeks an explanation for the felt poverty of a literature, he or she need go no further. J. M. Coetzee implies as much in his consideration of whether the "Great South African Novel" is ever likely to appear in this country:.

In what sense is South Africa a single society, to what degree merely an agglomeration of people within a more or less unitary economic organization, belonging in part to a single mass culture, for the rest involved in one or other moribund ethnic (African, Afrikaans) or anachronistic provincial (English) culture, held together in various degrees of unwillingness by laws imposed from above? Is it possible to write a great novel which will characterize more or less the whole of a national society at a certain time in history, in terms accessible to a national reading public,

when that society is marked by disunity, fragmentation, internal antagonisms, anomie, and above all by a multiplicity of languages?²³

The association Coetzee makes between his description of a fractured and fracturing South African society and his insistence on the fact that South Africans are far from bound by any one shared linguistic heritage offers entrance into an essential discussion of South African English as the resource of its poets in the seventies.

II

The curious linguistic deadness, the entropy, which pervades much English literature in South Africa has often been attributed to the fact that the English language soon established itself as a "bourgeois language" on the subcontinent. As a result, it failed for a long time to adapt itself to Africa (as exemplified by the colonial poets' paralysis in the face of an African landscape).²⁴ But if we focus more specifically on the period of the nineteen-sixties and seventies, we can see that the role usually assigned to English has been equally responsible for the enervation of the language. Guy Butler, for one, has written that "the role of English -- caught between two increasingly violent and exclusive nationalisms -- is to keep on stating with patience and courage, that our common humanity can unite us."²⁵ And in an article published in 1973, and significantly entitled "Instrument of Reason," Mario Schiess argued:

English in South Africa is, by the turn of events, suddenly cast in a role of extreme importance. It will have to be the upholder of human dignity and the tool of communication of reality as it is, untouched by wilful manipulation or wishful thinking. English will have to be the instrument of rational, analytical thought in this time of increasing hysteria that will accompany the demise of nationalism as we have known it.²⁶

Common to both these articles (as well as others of the same period which consider the role of the English language in South Africa today) is the repeated claim that English is more neutral, rational and civilising than any other of the available languages; that, somehow, it occupies a position at some remove from the internecine conflicts of the country and thus is blessed with a more objective, considered view of things; that, in short, it is the prime tool of clarity and reason amidst the barbaric Babel that surrounds it here. English is thus assigned a role which is the linguistic analogue of liberal politics; like the latter, its primary function is considered to be that of mediator and conciliator. These claims dovetail perfectly with the imperatives of liberalism, with its emphasis on such values as reasonableness, toleration, and its abhorrence of all forms of absolutism.

This connection between a language and a political ideology is writ large in any number of poems published in the last decade or so. Guy Butler's "Soweto" is a perfect example of this influence of the latter on the former:

In years of ease

We took Soweto for granted; but

Through hurricane weeks like these

What should we do? Bang, bang shut

Our doors, our hearts, clench our fists and faces?

In secret collapse on unaccustomed knees?

Or let a wild scream from the gut

Climb the concrete of our public places?

. . . .

In hours like these

Let's take no child for granted; let's curse

Those treacherous years; grasp at, seize

Each small chance for good, tenderly nurse

Each just seed, rejoice in smallest traces

Of mercy; open our heart, hand, door and purse.

Dear Law-makers, dear Law-breakers, may it please

The Gods to give us the needful insights and graces.²⁷

Here, despite the beseeching tone, language is being used as mediator and conciliator. But its apparent neutrality and objectivity, that even-handedness expressed in the phrase "Dear Law-makers, dear Law-breakers", is also an index to its estranged, arbitrating role. No doubt being at some remove from the vortex of an historical conflict might be beneficial, even necessary, when actual political analysis is required, but such a stance is more dubious when it is carried over into poetry and begins to permeate the language itself. As a poem like Butler's shows, poetry has little room to move when the English it uses is

conceived primarily as an instrument of reason. As is apparent in much of the actual practice of liberal politics in South Africa, a devotion to 'neutrality' and 'objectivity' can often lead to a position of estrangement, apathy and impotence -- both on the part of the speaker of such 'neutrality' and, more powerfully, upon those to whom such speech is directed.

One must remark upon another feature which contributes to the linguistic deadness of South African English poetry. This is its ineptitude concerning of the rich potentialities of myth and symbol, and the relative absence of that kind of imagery which connects a person's conscious life with the deepest spiritual potentials within himself or herself. A myth itself, at its most vital, is visionary: it is a system of signs or symbols which evokes and directs psychic energies. But in the degree that the white English-speaking sub-culture in South Africa might be said to represent an extreme of 'desacralisation', so the language of its poets tends to be purged of anything which might elicit such energies. This is a point to which I return, in full, in Chapter 3. But the slenderness of an English bereft of myth is exemplified by the opening stanzas of Stephen Grey's "In Memoriam"; it is as if the words themselves had been dieted:

The farm in the foothills
I reached in a storm so potent
it seemed the whole Atlantic
was running overhead

the kindly boerevrou
led me down mudslides

where for that night I had
one rondavel and one candle

she was very possessive
she insisted they grew the best rooibos
(I'd tasted it and boerewors and her eggs)
that I would see in the morning

as she flagged down her doek
her skull caught in that light
accusingly at my khakiness
she said you wrote Oktobermaand there.²⁸

Stanzas like these might have had an effect of resonance if Gray and his fellow-poets were writing in a conspicuous reaction against the Romantic-Symbolist tradition, but perhaps with the exception of Wopko Jensma and Peter Horn, there is no evidence to suggest that they are trying to produce a kind of anti-poetry like that of Rosewicz, Parra and others elsewhere in the world. Like the Sowetan poets dealt with in Chapter 4 of this thesis, the anti-poetic nature of their work is largely faute de mieux.

Their poetry bears all the signs of an entrapment within a cultural prison devoid of the myths nourished by a sense of historical importance. The poems are repressed, even costive, and there are almost no truly naked lines in them. In the work of Christopher Hope, for instance, there is a craftsmanship which is almost always evident. But, as Stanley Kunitz insists, "craft can point the way, it can hone an instrument to a fine cutting

edge, but it's not to be confused with an art of transformation, that magical performance.²⁹

As conspicuous, perhaps, is the fact that, despite the inevitable spate of love poems through the years down to the present, there is scarcely anything like a tradition of eroticism in this poetry. If it is accepted that relations between the conscious and unconscious minds have constituted one of the great problems of civilisation -- one of the more constant discontents, moreover, in a country like South Africa with its notoriously conservative mores -- it has found noticeably scant treatment in this poetry and cannot be said to have gone much beyond a Lawrentian excursion (with, perhaps, certain Yeatsian undertones) like Roy Campbell's "The Sisters", written in 1926:

After hot loveless nights, when cold winds stream
 Sprinkling the frost and dew, before the light,
 Bored with the foolish things that girls must dream
 Because their beds are empty of delight.

Two sisters rise and strip. Out from the night
 Their horses run to their low-whistled pleas --
 Vast phantom shapes with eyeballs rolling white
 That sneeze a fiery steam about their knees:

Through the crisp manes their stealthy prowling hands,
 Stronger than curbs, in slow caresses rove,
 They gallop down across the milk-white sands
 And wade far out into the sleeping cove:

The frost stings sweetly with a burning kiss
 As intimate as love, as cold as death:
 Their lips, whereon delicious tremors hiss,
 Fume with the ghostly pollen of their breath.

Far out on the grey silence of the flood
 They watch the dawn in smouldering gyres expand
 Beyond them: and the day burns through their blood
 Like a white candle through a shuttered hand.³⁰

Only in the case of Douglas Livingstone's persona poems (using the figure of "Giovanni Jacopo") is there any later glimmerings of that eroticism and verbal wit which, as Shakespeare knew and demonstrated so abundantly, is one of the chief agencies for the manifestation and aggravation of desire. But besides the work collected in his collection of love poems A Rosary of Bone (1975, rev. 1983), the human propensity to transform the biologically-based sexual drives through imaginative and other means -- this being the basis of eroticism and, the evidence would suggest, one of the shaping forces in any tradition of lyric poetry world-wide -- appears with little imperative force in white South African English poetry.

In dealing with the poetry of the seventies one is, of course, also dealing with the product of a culture more Protestant than pagan. It has been a culture, moreover, which has had its own long history of codifying sexuality and the unconscious desires in an over-dogmatic way. No doubt this feature of it, along with liberalism's frequent bias towards an enervated and enervating rationalism, has made it more difficult

for the culture's poets to achieve that species of intuition-powered consciousness without which a poem is seldom successful. Poetry, whatever else might serve as its catalyst, whatever subjects it might consciously address, has its origins in desire and those pre-conscious and perhaps pre-verbal constellations of memory and desire which only later find a more conscious form in the verbal artefact.

That this culture has perhaps cauterised, even mutilated, its own access to such constellations is reflected, significantly, in the fact that all that has been expressly embodied in a movement like Surrealism in the twentieth century -- a celebration of the the world of the dream, the Id, the anarchic return of all that is repressed -- could not be more alien to it. It has yet to produce a poet in which the power of dream, of Robert Bly's 'given image', is manifest. "He who loses his dreaming is lost," the Australian Aborigines are reported to believe.³¹

Anything poetically vital comes from that deepest part of ourselves -- that uncertain centre of yearning, acceptance and rebellion, simultaneous despair and aspiration -- which is the centre that any spiritually vital religion also addresses. If that centre has not been touched, if the constraints of a certain society inhibit its expression, the poetry will almost certainly ring hollow as well. The American philosopher George Santayana was to imply as much in his essay "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy", underlining the way in which a repression of certain emotions can inhibit the development of a literature, and particularly a poetry:

Serious poetry, profound religion . . . are the joys of an unhappiness that confesses itself; but when a genteel tradition forbids people to confess that they are unhappy, serious poetry and profound religion are closed to them by that.³²

Santayana's complaint, it is worth adding, was simply an earlier, American formulation of an unhappiness with that specifically English culture of "gentility, decency, politeness" which Alvarez also saw as the death of significant poetry in his Introduction to his anthology The New Poetry.³³

In the case of Douglas Livingstone once more, we can see with particular clarity the force of Santayana's and Alvarez's critique. This is all the more so because of his often virtuoso technical skills. His "Steel Giraffe's" is a poem which is no mean achievement, particularly for one which has the word "goodbye" at its heart:

There are, probably, somewhere
arms as petal-slight as hers;
there are probably somewhere,
wrists as slim;
quite probably, someone has
hands as slender-leafed as hers;
the fingers, probably
bare of rings, as thin.

Certainly, there is nowhere
such a dolour

of funnels, mastings, yards,
 filaments of dusk ringing shrouds
 woven through the word goodbye,
 riveted steel giraffes
 tactfully looking elsewhere,
 necks very still to the sky.³⁴

One finds here, as one does in almost any Livingstone poem, the signs of some fine and lucky verbal playing. The central metaphor of the poem enables the poet to negotiate that emotional quicksand which is, evidently, inside him; and the poem itself does the same with absolute (and tactful) technical poise. But this is also a poem of lost love, of saying goodbye, of (perhaps) having to say goodbye. Significantly, it is also as close as Douglas Livingstone, often the most acclaimed poet of his generation, comes to 'confessing' himself in his entire oeuvre. To reveal such poetry in all its limitations one can bring to mind an incidental remark made about the Russian poet Alexander Blok: "He knew, as so few know today, that only the poetry of suffering -- whether it is a poetry of joy or not -- can be great. His own poetry, for which he burnt himself out, demonstrates this."³⁵

Historically, there are no doubt numerous examples of societies whose discontents (apparently necessary repressions) are reflected in a curious inertness in their artistic expression rather than in an anarchic and subversive power. The white English-speaking poets under discussion are perhaps no more than a further instance of this. Having largely abandoned myth, the perspectives it opens up and the energies it might release,

discovering that history is closed to them³⁶ and that any analogy between empirical and metaphysical worlds has disintegrated in their culture, these poets have often taken refuge in a poetry of petites sensations, falling back upon the production of 'situation reports' describing the phenomenal world in which they happen to be mired. Mike Nicol is representative of this retreat: witness the first section of a poem like his "1976":

Clink of ice in tall glasses and
 Laughter from the stone verandah
 On a hot night. Talk of good life,
 Swirling a dry martini,
 In the still garden of an evening.
 All day we lay in chairs pulled
 Up against the sun, alongside
 A sparkling pool,
 Hearing the drone of lawn-mowers
 The shouts of children in water:
 Sinking unpleasant thoughts
 In shandies beneath cool trees.

Not a sign of the desperate trouble
 Shows in our lives, yet it is not
 Easy to relax knowing that up
 Dark streets in dingy suburbs comes
 An explosion of glass, a retort of stens.
 There white is the colour of hate.
 The evening carries a hint of jasmine,
 Of bare arms and bra-less women;

Summer in October after a winter
 That scorned our privileges
 And open a gate in a distant wall
 To the notes of a grim music.³⁷

In the terms of world poetics, there is, of course, a poetry of the inconsequences of life and their saddening importance, particularly given the impotence of many people in relation to them. The English poet Philip Larkin was a master in this area. But the dilemma implicit in Nicol's poem is of a different order. However ironical or even satirical its final intent may be, the social reality it is seeking to describe is itself so tawdry and superficial (in its situation more than its decor) that the poetry almost inevitably ends up inheriting a banality in tone; any hope of satire is undermined. This is a poetry of 'lifestyles'. In the lifestyle of the English in South Africa there is, almost by definition, nothing luminous, let alone numinous except for the lurid racist glow of the panga which the 'gardenboy' is busy honing in the tool-shed for some future apocalypse, while the unhappy poet swims to and fro as does Christopher Hope in his "In a Swimming Pool in a Garden in White South Africa".³⁸ In reproducing this culture's language, poems like these have a tendency to take on that taint of blandness, that inauthentic tone, even the lie, which is written into the life of the sub-culture it might appear to be criticising. After a while neither this culture nor the language of its poets can be separated; nor can the reader escape the conclusion that the latter are fundamentally in agreement with that which they might wish to subvert. Such, at any rate, is the final effect of a

poem like Douglas Livingstone's "Dust", which concerns a casual labourer he knew. As he confesses, the poet has "learnt much" from his friend Mkweta:

His wife in Kwa Mashu, a concubine
in Chesterville, a mistress
in town: all pregnant. He'd brought turpentine
but they wouldn't drink it. This
was the trouble with women. Letters came
we couldn't read. He found another dame.

He left -- more money, walls half-done, him tight --
to join Ital-Constructions.
Perhaps it had been white men: I am white.
Now I phoned the ambulance
and sat with him. It came for Mac the Knife,
bore his corpse away, not out of my life.³⁹

It is to be expected that the language of these poets should be the vulgate of their own kind. But all too often it is no more than that. It is 'ordinary', middle-class English: cool, detached, 'chatty'. It is that 'everyday' language which commonly expresses an automatised perception of the world. The endless 'chat' defuses any linguistic vitality and, more damagingly still, it prevents the poet from being able to take a sufficiently critical stance towards his or her subject-matter. Their style of writing has long since been naturalised by their own culture; it is also the style of its journalists. Hence any criticism they register, any protest they make, can easily be

assimilated and neutralised: it is far from being offensive to the official order and culture. "The energy, the consciousness, and the wit of modern literature," Lionel Trilling has remarked, "derive from its violence against the specious good."⁴⁰ Given this poetry's manifest failure to reject the "specious good" in its own culture (it could almost be said to deliberately embrace such a location), it is not surprising that its English should remain tepid, destined to forfeit the energy generated by the force of any social rejections.

A counter-argument to this critique of poetic banality might suggest that the interest (even obsession) with irony in the work of many South African English poets since 1976 is a bulwark against the kind of neutralisation I've mentioned above. Irony has, after all, been long claimed as an insidious and forceful mode of literary subversion. I would argue, however, that as it appears in the poetry of white poets in the seventies, this obsession is not merely another reflection of the absurdities and farcical contradictions which abound in South African life and in relation to which the individual might have no other form of self-defence. It is also a product of the scepticism which is inherent in the English-speaking cultural tradition, a scepticism which is valued as a kind of defence mechanism against personal aggrandisement and the pretensions of transcendental religions, mystical philosophies and utopian politics.⁴¹ Many of the most published poems in South African English poetry have been in the ironical mode, for example, the work of Patrick Cullinan, Stephen Gray, Chris Mann, and almost all of Christopher Hope's volume, In the Country of the Black Pig (1981). A poem from Hope's earlier

work, which in many ways epitomises the vices of this
 ironisation is "The Old Men are Coming from the Durban Club":

After lunching agreeably but not too well,
 The old men are coming from the Durban Club
 Breathing easily and just nicely full.

They pass the Natal Building Society
 And the Netherlands Bank
 Where the tellers are giving out money.

They pass the phthisical hag who laughs
 By the wall of the Protea Assurance Company
 And coughs her difficult cough.

The old men's bellies show like whales
 Above their waistlines, their eyes
 Are oysters, their laughs are snails.

You'd never say that before dawn each sits
 On a lavatory seat, expensive trousers
 Around his ankles, and hawks and spits.

Long after the drinkers have left their pubs
 And sat down at their desks again,
 The old men are coming from the Durban Club.⁴²

There is a way in which this poem is entirely successful. Coolly,
 laconically, it deflates a kind of pretension through a series of

radically deflated, carefully modulated lines. Hope's poem even achieves a kind of melancholy undertone through the ironic question it begs: the old men may be coming from the Durban Club, but they are, of course, going nowhere.

But having read it, and the countless other similarly ironical, one's sense of dissatisfaction grows. Whether it be this poem, Patrick Cullinan's "We Always Greet You Smiling",⁴³ or Chris Mann's "Mr Morgangeld and Two Women",⁴⁴ a question always remains, and is always the same: is that all? And indeed it can't be. For as Geoffrey Thurley has suggested, although the mode of irony may be valuable as a means, when taken as an end its ultimate failure to commit itself either to statement or emotion makes it destructive of that full commitment of the self which is essential to major poetry.⁴⁵ It prevents the poet from putting roots down into the those emotions, whether joyous or despairing, which make for the renewal of poetry.

What has been written about the Movement poets in England in the fifties is directly applicable to the poets in the ironic tradition in this country:

'sense' (and irony is essential to this 'sense'), the central feature of that English tradition re-discovered by the Movement, is not something which it is very easy to admire in poetry. When the Movement poets dramatise themselves as stubborn, pragmatic, dragged downwards by a 'lump of English clay', when critics accuse them of failing to be generous or uplifting, when Davie, in his recent book, ponders whether Hardy and Larkin may not have 'sold poetry short' -- in all these instances one can see the same basic

question being asked: how can a poetry so concerned to unmask and deny also be in some degree affirmative? how can an empirical, obstinately 'sensible' poetic temperament nevertheless be capable of providing its audience with some kind of faith?⁴⁶

The answer is, at least on the evidence of the Movement poets and those in this country today, that a poetry in the ironical mode simply cannot provide that affirmation, that faith -- and this precisely because it discounts from the start the dimensions of myth and symbol, of the metaphysical, without which it would seem no affirmations can be more than partial, literally half-hearted.

One could go further. Irony is, in fact, one of the obvious means through which certain psychic needs can be ignored or discredited. The fact that it so palpably exists in white South African English poetry suggests that it does not simply work to guarantee a measure of authorial self-awareness (one which signals to the reader that the poet has not been seduced by the lies of a status quo). Rather, the mode serves as a means of self-defence in a political and cultural no-man's-land; this is irony as a symptom of defeat and self-defeat. It is not surprising, then, that the affirmations which this poetry achieves (the wholeness of vision for which it sometimes strives), never rise much above the level to be found in "Rorke's Drift A Century After The Battle", the final poem in Chris Mann's New Shades:

Compromised, scared, he'd come to prise
a Nowness from that Then. Instead of which

above an altar, woven in russet,
 in black and russet clotted wools, the Now
 disentangled, Himself, from out his Church,
 that sometime harbinger, and accomplice
 of conquest, and, in spiky letters, spoke:
 THANDANANI. 'Love One Another'! The frail
 futile, yet without which nothing. We can't.
 And won't. But must. Ja, I've been to Rorke's Drift,
 and in a way return there often, to stand
 beneath the sighing-widow pines, and affirm
 that guidance exists, and, it may be, redemption.⁴⁷

A poem like this underlines the history of a white South African poetry which tries, from its vulgate, for poetry: not a trace of dimension or resonance is to be found. With the failure of so many poets to reject the language of this sub-culture, and to turn away from the largely sterilising values which have been built into it, it becomes predictable that so few have possessed the artistic means to press back against the inhumanity of the social order in South Africa becomes predictable. In fact, their minds have been as captive as their English is one-dimensional, their culture hypocritical.

III

In the preceding pages I argue strongly against the vitality which some critics have ascribed, with celebration, to the work of poets in the liberal tradition in South Africa.⁴⁸ Despite the

argument's insistence on the local poverty of this poetry, it is obviously true that expectations of greatness, however qualified, can only be deflated further when the place of poetry as a genre in the entire modern world is considered. "Poetry (in the broadest sense of that word)," Eugenio Montale was to write in 1959,

is unfortunately the most defenseless of the arts today; for differing and perhaps contradictory reasons, neither the totalitarian nor those which delude themselves into thinking they are free can do anything to favour or protect its creation.⁴⁹

In South Africa, no less than in other countries, the status of this art has been vexed since the nineteenth century. Those conditions to which many a poet and critic elsewhere have drawn attention have all found their echo in local conditions. Chief amongst them would be the utter marginality of the social position of a poet within South African culture. "Poetry," as F. R. Leavis once said, "matters little to the modern world."⁵⁰ Social contexts in which poetry could be anything but an anachronism, arousing the kind of embarrassment commonly associated with the anachronistic, are rare and besieged. In those parts of the world under the sway of "First World" culture, people go to films, plays or watch television without self-consciousness because these are all activities which are sanctioned by a vast, unspoken, collective faith in the social acceptability of such forms of entertainment. Needless to say, this type of sanction does not extend to poetry readings. More

than at any other historical moment, poetry has to work (perhaps before all else) not just to perfect itself but to prove the validity of its own existence and to ensure any claim it might wish to have on the attention of an audience. Less than ever before can the contemporary writer remain unselfconscious about this art, taking its necessity for granted, treating it as axiomatic that homo sapiens is a poetry-making animal, and glorying in that.

Without wanting to discount the differences in South Africa between the various sub-cultures, it remains true that written poetry has become a minority art, practised by a minority, read for the most part by relatively small audiences and no longer even imagining the kind of authority that, say, Tennyson and his art held in the late Victorian period. Remarking on the shrinkage of "the estate of poetry," Edwin Muir was representative of a consensus when he noted in his The Estate of Poetry:

the effective range and influence of poetry . . . has greatly shrunk in the last two centuries and shrunk alarmingly in the century we live in. At present, poetry is neglected in all civilized countries, and it appears to be declining even in what we call uncivilized ones.

And he continued: "Sometimes poets are visited by a horrified surprise at the realization that things should be as bad as they are; that their audience has melted away."⁵¹

This widespread malaise has only been compounded by the divorce of the poet from what Czeslaw Milosz, the Polish poet and

essayist, calls "the great human family",⁵² aiding and abetting the retreat of poetry from its former public role. In South Africa, with passing decades its marginalisation (certainly a feature of colonial cultural norms) has been a more or less constant process and is by 1993 something of a permanent condition. When one remembers what a prominent twentieth-century American poet, Karl Shapiro, has said of poetry in his own country -- "the sickness of modern poetry is the sickness of its isolation from any living audience"⁵³ -- one can appreciate how much more advanced such a sickness must be in the local context where the kinds of funding that have sustained the 'poetry industry' in the United States have never been forthcoming. Notwithstanding the existence of a tradition of oral poetry and its mutation into English forms in the townships of South Africa in the seventies and before, the practice of poetry in South Africa is, of financial necessity, been a more or less socially solitary one. Any possible afflatus by the poet himself or herself, has not had much of substance to sustain it. As regards his or her status in the society, Douglas Livingstone was speaking for more than his own generation when he said: "a white poet in Africa is the lowest form of life in human terms. Every man's hand is against him -- nobody cares a damn about him."⁵⁴

This in turn is to be expected in a society dominated by its own brand of machismo and much given to regarding the practice of the arts as flaccid or worse.⁵⁵ Often enough, as a direct consequence, this low status has meant that South African English poets have set their sights at a correspondingly low level. Yet the contemporary American poet, Donald Hall is surely not wrong

when he writes of just this discouragement as an essential ingredient in a poetry that even aspires to be good:

I see no reason to spend your life writing poems unless your goal is to write great poems.

An ambitious project -- but sensible, I think. And it seems to me that contemporary American poetry is afflicted by modesty of ambition -- a modesty, alas, genuine . . . if sometimes accompanied by vast pretense. Of course the great majority of contemporary poems, in any era, will always be bad or mediocre. (Our time may well be characterised by more mediocrity and less badness). But if failure is constant the types of failure vary, and the qualities and habits of our society specify the manners and the methods of our failure. I think that we fail in part because we lack serious ambition. If our goal is to write poetry, the only way we are likely to be any good is to try to be as great as the best.⁵⁶

When applied to the South African context, and especially to that of its English-language poets, Hall's words seem chastening. But they merely add another dimension to those problems which this chapter has already discussed: namely, the assumption that English in South Africa could be a language which is historically neutral, particularly in the midst of the apartheid era, and that the poetry which embodied the values of the white English-speaking sub-culture could play a significant role, both politically and artistically, during this period. As was argued in Chapter 1 of this thesis, Clouts and his predecessors in the

tradition of South African romanticism, though they may have defined one of the chief problematics of South African English poetry as a whole, cannot be said to have overcome the difficulties that this aesthetic entailed in the local context. Unhappily, the same applies to those white English-speaking poets of the nineteen-seventies dealt with in this chapter (some of whom, of course, are also indebted to the romantic tradition.) The problem of a specific role for the poet, as well as an achieved literary condition, was to remain as complicated for a poet like Christopher Hope as it was for earlier South African English poets; perhaps even more so given the minute place the liberal poet had come to occupy in the broad social narrative. Nevertheless, this uncertain role did not stop both these and other poets (who were clearly not affiliated to the local traditions of romanticism and liberal-humanism) from searching for the kinds of myth and symbolisation which might give an energy and resonance -- indeed, a destiny -- to their work. As we will see in the next chapter, South African English poetry, early and late, is not necessarily devoid of informing myths. In one or other degree, many of these have been constructed in the poetry as an essential part of an attempt to find a solution, a poetic, which would be more viable in the local context. Whether this, in turn, has met with any real success is the substance of the next chapter. But first it is necessary to characterise South African English poetry more fully, defining in greater detail some of those features which have made, and continue to make it, so problematic.

Notes and References

1. Leonie Kramer, ed., The Oxford History of Australian Literature (Melbourne: Oxford U, 1981) 272.
2. As one indication of the possible riches and alternative traditions long in existence in South Africa, see my Return of the Moon: Versions from the /Xam (Cape Town: Carrefour, 1991).
3. Roy Campbell, "Fetish Worship in South Africa," Voorslag (facsimile reprint) (Durban - Pietermaritzburg: U of Natal P and Killie Campbell Africana Library, 1985): 15.
4. Voorslag (Appendix L) : 73.
5. Roy Campbell, The Selected Poems of Roy Campbell, ed. Peter Alexander (Oxford: Oxford U, 1982) 16.
6. Francis Carey Slater, The Collected Poems of Francis Carey Slater (London/Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1957) 300.
7. Dan Jacobson, Introduction, The Story of an African Farm (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971) 7.
8. Geoffrey Thurley, The American Moment (London: Edward Arnold, 1977) 5.
9. See, for instance, Leonie Kramer's comment on one of the most persistent general clichés found in the criticism of Australian literature: "Much writing on [Australian] literary history and criticism, both then and now, has been preoccupied with the growth to maturity of an individual and of a literary tradition. The principal condition for the maturing process is time. There is an assumption that the mere process of growth guarantees maturity, whereas it is only too easy to see that the

one is not a necessary consequence of the other. Because of the persistence of this theory of inevitable progress it is difficult to talk about observable stages in the history of Australian literature without seeming to subscribe to it. But to argue that there is a discernible difference between the characteristics of colonial literature, the realities and legend of the nineties, and the features of certain contemporary writers, is not to imply even a theory of development, let alone an achieved literary condition." The Oxford History of Australian Literature (Melbourne: Oxford U, 1981) 16.

10. Even when one turns to the history of local publishing and book-selling, the idea that culturally South Africa has moved from strength to strength cannot easily be sustained. The publisher Ad. Donker, for instance, has remarked: "The picture is far from rosy. In comparison with, for example, New Zealand, where there is one bookshop for every 75 000 people, we in South Africa have one bookshop for every 100 000 people of our total population. . . . The situation does not seem to have improved since the middle of the last century. To take Cape Town as an example, there are only a dozen bookshops of note there today, serving a population of over a million inhabitants and a major university. In 1853, as recorded in the Cape Almanac, there were six bookshops. The names are interesting to note here: they are Juta, Brittain, Collard, Robertson, Suasso de Lima and Van der Vliet. Only Juta still exists today, but we must compare the population of Cape Town of those years with today. In 1853, the population was 23 749 of all races, and the whole Cape Colony had only 224 827 of whom 8 500 were white, in those days probably the only potential buyers of books." "English-language Publishing in

South Africa," English in Africa 10.1 (1983): 33-34. Obviously it is difficult to make comparisons particularly when so many today rely on media other than books, but Ad. Donker's general point still holds.

11. Expressing his own misgivings about contemporary Italian culture, Eugenio Montale, in his essay "The Magnificent Destinies", made a point of general relevance: "The worst, the absolute abyss, would be if the meaning and the memory of that time which must flow into the time of tomorrow were lost; if that ascent, that stairway of values which the great spirits of the past attempted to build so that man -- even alienated man -- might make himself another image of his destiny on earth, were halted or cut short." The Second Life of Art (New York: Ecco, 1982) 38.

12. There is a useful description of all these in André P. Brink's "On Culture and Apartheid," in his Writing in a State of Siege: Essays on Politics and Literature (New York: Summit, 1983) 71-95.

13. James Olney, Tell Me Africa: An Approach to African Literature (Princeton: Princeton U, 1973) 75.

14. For further discussion of this development, see my "Poetry and Politicization" in Selected Essays 1980-1990 (Cape Town: Carrefour, 1990) 9-20.

15. Albert Camus, The Rebel (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971) 266.

16. Examples of this can be found in many quarters. See, for instance, the writers' statements collected in Momentum: On Recent South African Writing (1984), in Exchanges: South African Writing in Transition (1991), or the collection of criticism

Rendering Things Visible: Essays on South African Literary

Culture (1990). In almost every case the emphasis is exclusively on the writer's political position rather than any questions of aesthetics.

17. Christopher Hope, White Boy Running (London: Secker and Warburg, 1988) 104.

18. Lewis Nkosi, "Fiction by Black South Africans," African Writers on African Writing (London: Heinemann, 1973) 110.

19. T. T. Mayana, "Problems of a Creative Writer in South Africa" 86.

20. Njabulo S. Ndebele, "Against Pamphleteering the Future," Stet 5.1 (Dec. 1987): 11.

21. Martin Seymour-Smith, Guide to Modern World Literature (London: MacMillan, 1985) 1, 151.

22. The Australian critic Kevin Margarey is representative when he writes that "if one attempted to fit South African novels into a hierarchy that contained Henry James, Henry Handel Richardson and J. B. Priestly, one would have, I think, to make some remark such as that no South African novel rises above good third class." "The South African Novel and Race," Southern Review 2 (1963): 27. He was, of course, writing long before the emergence of novelists like J. M. Coetzee and the full maturity of others like Nadine Gordimer and Dan Jacobson.

23. J. M. Coetzee, "The Great South African Novel," Leadership S.A. 2.4 (Summer 1983): 79.

24. See André P. Brink, "English and the Afrikaans Writer," English Studies in Africa 3.1 (March 1976): 42.

25. Guy Butler, "The Language of the Land," English Studies in Africa 13.1 (1970): 87-92.

26. Mario Schiess, "Instrument of Reason," Contrast 8.2 (April 1973): 70.
27. Guy Butler, Songs and Ballads 8-9.
28. Stephen Gray, Hottentot Venus and Other Poems (Claremont: David Philip, 1979) 15.
29. Stanley Kunitz, interview ref. 222.
30. Peter Alexander, ed., The Selected Poems of Roy Campbell (Oxford: Oxford U, 1982): 18.
31. Quoted by Patrick White in Patrick White Speaks (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992): 154.
32. George Santayana, Selected Critical Writings of George Santayana, vol. 2, ed. Norman Henfrey (Cambridge: Cambridge U, 1968): 95-6.
33. A. Alvarez, ed. The New Poetry (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962): v.
34. Douglas Livingstone, A Rosary of Bone: Second Edition, With More Poems (Claremont: David Philip, 1983) 23.
35. Martin Seymour-Smith, Guide to Modern World Literature: 1081.
36. Christopher Hope enlarges on the reason for this as follows: "The Republic of today is a creation by Afrikaners for Afrikaners. That is why I see the English-speaking South African as having been displaced -- flotsam left high and dry after the tide. If he belongs to this country nowadays, it is in the same way as the marooned sailor belongs to his island. His institutions are continually attacked: press, schools, universities and churches. The outside influences which he represents merely by being here are resented and where possible suppressed. And his protest in the face of it all is a muted,

clandestine murmuring. Yet if he is ever to make a place for himself, he will have to resist. And herein lies his dilemma: how can he fight the people who abuse him without jeopardizing the privileges which his white skin has traditionally given him? If Afrikaans is the language of apartheid, then English is the language of conciliation and compromise." "Poetry and Society," Poetry South Africa (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1976) 137.

37. Mike Nicol, Among the Souvenirs (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1978) 18.

38. Christopher Hope, "In a Swimming Pool in a Garden in White South Africa," A World of Their Own: Southern African Poets of the Seventies (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1976) 79-80.

39. Douglas Livingstone, Selected Poems (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1984) 131.

40. Lionel Trilling, Beyond Culture (London: Secker and Warburg, 1966) 20-21.

41. In this connection, see Guy Butler's article, "The Future of English-speaking South Africa", March 1968: 4-5. There he writes that white English-speaking South Africans have a "practical talent for making things work. They are suspicious of magnificent political ideas, which make absolute demands upon men, and usually spell personal, social and natural disaster (Jingoism, Nazism, Fascism, Communism). They have an ancient belief in the primacy of the individual, in the value and wisdom of discussion, in the necessity for social adjustment."

42. Christopher Hope, Cape Drives (London: London Magazine Editions, 1974) 11.

43. Patrick Cullinan, Today is Not Different (Claremont: David Philip, 1978) 57.

44. Chris Mann, New Shades (Claremont: David Philip, 1982) 32-33.
45. Geoffrey Thurley, The Ironic Harvest (London: Edward Arnold, 1974) 10-11.
46. Blake Morrison, The Movement (London: Oxford U, 1980) 233.
47. Chris Mann, New Shades 42.
48. See, for instance, André P. Brink's Introduction to A World of Their Own: Southern African Poets of the Seventies: "This anthology is both a manifestation of and a tribute to a most remarkable new expression of major talent in South African English." (9)
49. Eugenio Montale, The Second Life of Art (New York: Ecco, 1982) 32.
50. F. R. Leavis, New Bearings in English Poetry (London: Chatto and Windus, 1961) 5.
51. Edwin Muir, The Estate of Poetry (London: Hogarth, 1962) 2.
52. See Czeslaw Milosz, The Witness of Poetry (Cambridge: Harvard U, 1983) 23-37.
53. Karl Shapiro, "What is Not Poetry," in Reginal Gibbons, ed., The Poet's Work (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979) 60.
54. Douglas Livingstone, "Douglas Livingstone: Poet Scientist," Interview by Michael Chapman, Leadership SA 3.2 (Summer 1985): 112.
55. There is a vivid fictional portrayal of this sort of prejudice in William Plomer's Turbott Wolfe (1925).
56. Donald Hall, "Poetry and Ambition," Kenyon Review 55.2 (Winter 1983/84): 90.

CHAPTER 3

THE SEARCH FOR A SOLUTION:

THE MYTHS OF SOUTH AFRICAN ENGLISH POETRY

I

"I dream of an art so transparent that you can look through and see the world," the American poet Stanley Kunitz said in his Paris Review interview in 1984.¹ By analogy one might ask: what is most immediately apparent to the average reader who tries to peer through the verbal scrim of South African English poetry, particularly if he or she is acquainted with the poetries of countries elsewhere in the world? What might emerge will, of course, be dependent on any particular reader's cultural spectacles and individual emotional needs, but with the poetry in question what seems most immediately apparent is the lack of a certain tactile quality, an over-all absence of texture, as if something had gone wrong with the English language itself when it crossed the Equator in its journey southwards to South Africa. Instead of the reader finding the world of the southern African sub-continent made flesh through the words of this poetry, it is a quality of bareness, even threadbareness, which is at once noticeable. An extraordinary thinness pervades the language of these poems. It is as if, as I have remarked in Chapter 2 of this thesis "the very words themselves had been dieted." As one consequence, the shape of whatever tradition exists seems more in conformity with a Giacometti sculpture than the earth-mother archetype in terms of which Africa has quite frequently been seen.

"You can," another contemporary American poet, J. D. McClatchy, has remarked, "run your fingers through the lines of a Mallarmé sonnet. The colors of a Stevens poem blaze and shift as

you turn it in the light of a larger idea or later image."² Yet the world of difference in the verbal textures created by one of Guy Butler's lyrics and -- to take another example -- one of W. H. Auden's cannot be ascribed to differences in talent and circumstance alone. In the case of South African English poetry a characteristic thinness is too widespread: it is palpable as much in the black poets of the nineteen-seventies as it is present amongst the war poets of Guy Butler's generation. Despite the fact that this is largely a poetry produced by "peoples still living and partly living in a sensuous unison with nature,"³ and also despite the realist aesthetic to which it subscribes overwhelmingly, it is strange, even remarkable, that there is very little in it of that "sensuous unison", or even of that "sensuality of the world" without which, as Octavio Paz has suggested, one seldom finds good poetry, at least in the modern period.⁴ Nor is there that much evidence of an intense and sensual bond with the landscape, despite the multitude of poems which attempt a kind of communion with the land. No matter how many poems from Thomas Pringle in the eighteen-twenties to Donald Parenzee in the nineteen-eighties set out in concerted realist fashion in pursuit of that real which is the world and the life of the world, it is rare that the latter is ever "bodied forth" (in D. H. Lawrence's sense of that phrase) and even the most rudimentary sensuous empiricism is achieved. More the norm is the kind of texture one finds in the opening stanza of Guy Butler's "Karoo Town, 1939":

In a region of thunderstorm and drought,
Under an agate sky,

Where red sand whirlwinds wander through the summer,
 Or thunder grows intimate with the plain, and rain
 Is a great experience like birth or wonder:
 By the half-dry river
 The village is strung like a bead of life on the rail,
 Along whose thread at intervals each day
 Cones of smoke move north and south, are blown
 By the prevailing winds below the clouds
 That redden the sundown and the dawn.⁵

This kind of severely pruned back, even straitened, lyricism is characteristic and might be the image of a world in which nature too is straitened, but such terms fail to achieve their own vividness. Even less do they reproduce that sensuousness of the world which is so often all the twentieth-century poet has had as a counterweight to despair.

In fact, moments of closely-observed realist detail are so much the exception rather than the rule in South African English poetry that the minute particulars registered in two stanzas from a South African poem of Rudyard Kipling's, "Bridge-Guard in the Karroo", are still a high-point in the poetry which has dealt with this country:

We hear the Hottentot herders
 As the sheep click past to the fold --
 And the click of the restless girders
 As the steel contracts in the cold --

Voices of jackals calling

And, loud in the hush between,
 A morsel of dry earth falling
 From the flanks of the scarred ravine.⁶

This lack of a realism, despite attention to detail, might be ascribed to sheer myopia. In Chapters 1 and 2, however, the relation forged between English -- as a language -- and the colonialist mind (both that of the nineteenth and the mid-twentieth centuries) was discussed. I want here to extend this discussion of a language, from my explorations of it as "romantic" or "liberal," into a further consideration of English as an imperialist project (which, in the nineteen-nineties, fertilises more controversy about socialist education than it does about poetry).

In his article "The English Language and Social Change in South Africa," Njabulo S. Ndebele drew attention to something that should not be forgotten in any approach to this poetry:

the history of the spread of the English language throughout the world is inseparable from the history of the spread of English and American imperialism. This fact is important when we consider the place of English in formerly-colonised multi-lingual societies. . . . It is not too difficult to see how English as a language became tainted with imperial interests at that time in the progress of western imperialism when the need for the standardisation of technology prompted the need for the standardisation of language. Consequently, the spread of English ran parallel with the spread of the culture of international business and

technological standardisation. . . . Today, the link between English and the Western corporate language is stronger than ever.¹¹

A poetry of much density and resonance would unlikely to be forthcoming from a language which had often, in its spread across the earth, been diluted, as George Steiner sees it, to "a thin wash, marvelously fluid, but without adequate base."¹²

In their Manifesto of the Communist Party, Marx and Engels wrote of the capitalist economic system as a ruthless demystifying force that strips away all that is hallowed in social institutions and relations, a system that in the final analysis delegitimizes itself by its own inexorable drive towards secularisation, by eroding all sacred tradition. "The bourgeoisie," they claimed, "has stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honoured and looked up to with reverent awe. . . . [Under capitalism] all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned."¹³ They might well have also said that that further expression of capitalism in crisis, namely colonialism, is an even more ruthless demystifying force, despite the eternal traditions of humbug that accompany its servants. It demystifies quite literally: by extirpating whole communities so violently that their myths cannot survive the exposure to new conditions.

It is less often remarked, however, that the same process is quite as damaging to language. It too is brutally demystified by the process of colonisation. The ability to generate symbolism, for instance, might be an innate capacity of the mind, prevalent in no matter what circumstances, but colonialism has a tendency

to leach out from any language those symbolic orders, imaginative reservoirs, which the poet characteristically interposes between himself or herself and the brute bedrock of reality. The language grows ever more and more symbolically impoverished, a people more and more defeated in its imaginative capacities. South African English poets make use of the symbolising capacities of language no less than their counterparts elsewhere in the world. But given the context of demystifying forces, of profanation noted by Marx and Engels, many of their verbal symbols have been debased, given as much to the reification of certain Darwinian notions about race as to the creation of any connections in which such notions could be challenged and dispersed. All too commonly even the most valued symbols become signs not so much of another reality, another world, which is richer, deeper, more enduring than this one -- that metaphysical world which, in a sense, fulfils this one and is made possible by language -- but are indications of a fall from precisely the possibility of such a world. After the initial imitations of the colonial period, there is really no "sublime" in South African English poetry for the simple reason that the English language, as it undergoes its South African mutation, is less and less able to provide for such expansions of the spirit. There is, it would seem, simply not the metaphysical space.

Still other linguistic conditions make the achievement of a poetry of much substance even less likely. There are, for instance, those distortions insinuated into language by certain developments in South African history. Writing anonymously in The New York Review of Books, Jane Kramer,* for instance, has pointed to the degree to which any language -- not only the

English one -- has long existed as a kind of sabotage in this country:

White or Black or Coloured English-speaking or Afrikaans-speaking or speaking any one of a dozen native languages, one starts, even in the best of faith, in bad faith. The languages of South Africa have been consonant with race and caste, owner and worker, citizen and servant, for so long that language itself -- the language one speaks and writes -- is a weapon there, quite apart from those details of identity and ideology with which it happens to coincide. Words smother, sacrifices to apartheid, in the closed context of the expectations they arouse. They can sanction such perverse exaggerations, such profound contempt, that anyone who wants to write in South Africa is left with the home truth that language has lost its metaphoric flexibility and assumed, instead, a kind of brute synecdochic power. By now, to write in South Africa is by definition political.¹⁴

If, at the outset, the English language in South Africa was freighted with the values of imperialism, then the debasement for which this was responsible was compounded by the implication of the language in the implementation of apartheid. As was the case with the German language and Nazism, it is easy to see how the meanings of words have been corrupted in South Africa by the long immersion of a language in political mendacity and worse. In his discussion of the decay of the German language during the Nazi period, George Steiner came to a conclusion that cannot be confined to Germany alone. "Languages," he wrote, "are living

organisms. . . . They have in them a certain life force, and certain powers of absorption and growth. But they can decay and die." And he went on:

A language shows that it has in it the germ of dissolution in several ways. Actions of the mind that were once spontaneous become mechanical, frozen habits (dead metaphors, stock similes, slogans). Words grow longer and more ambiguous. Instead of style, there is rhetoric. Instead of precise common usage, there is jargon. Foreign roots and borrowings are no longer absorbed into the bloodstream of the native tongue. They are merely swallowed and remain an alien intrusion. All these technical failures accumulate to the essential failure: the language no longer sharpens thought but blurs it. Instead of charging every expression with the greatest available energy and directness, it loosens and disperses the intensity of feeling. The language is no longer adventure (and a live language is the highest adventure of which the human brain is capable). In short, the language is no longer lived; it is merely spoken.¹⁵

But there is not only the possibility of linguistic decay or corruption (Orwell's thesis) through political mendacity. It is also the case that certain forms of social organisation make possible certain ways of speaking and writing, while limiting the possibilities of other ways of verbal expression. Thus the American philosopher Berel Lang can write:

A society that includes among its ideals decency and truth will reflect these in its forms of expression; and so, by the same token, a totalitarian society will shape the language to its own devices. There is, in short, a totalitarian "style" of speaking and writing, directly related to the principles of control and manipulation that characterise the totalitarian society in its more obvious political features as well.¹⁶

Even if, in South Africa, the classic model of the totalitarian society (Nazi Germany, Stalin's Soviet Union) has never been exactly duplicated, then the basic holds. Just as there are purely totalitarian styles of speaking, so there are the totalitarianism of apartheid styles; all are limiting and limited and will, almost inevitably, be manifest in the poetry of the society, often not through what is going on there, but in what is not going on. If poetry is the language art par excellence, the place where what can be done with words, by way of words, to make consciousness more conscious, is more apparent than anywhere else, so too it reveals, most usually by default, those pressures in a society which operate to reduce its language to an instrument which limits rather than enlarges thinking and imagination.

As an illustration of this point, some remarks of the literary critic, the late Jean Marquard, in her paper, "Some Racial Stereotypes in South African Writing," are worth recalling at this point. Noting that South Africa is a society which is highly symbolised -- i.e. linguistically stereotyped to a high

degree -- she speaks of the extent to which this society has been falsified by its symbols:

First there is the massive and overwhelming fact that whites and blacks do not meet on equal terms. Within the reduced space where articulate people do meet, such meetings are conditioned by predetermined categories, political labels for everyone -- guilty liberals, angry blacks, radical students, naive Marxists, northern suburbs housewives, privileged whites, the voiceless majority -- and one learns to replace process and becoming by the stasis of the symbol. The fluidity of individual, daily experience, with its potential to flow in haphazard, unexpected directions is dammed up and contained by the symbol which is its approximation.

And she underlines the point:

South Africans cannot develop philosophy, music, theories of religion and architecture because they constantly think, talk about, refer to or deliberately and defiantly evade, race. It is hard to enjoy architectural freedom when the main problem is where to site the non-European lavatory, or to enjoy opera when it becomes a guilty elitist activity that blacks are both unable to afford and unwilling to assimilate. Almost all our cultural experience is governed by the questions: is it relevant, is it multi-racial . . . is it escapist, indulgent, is it allowed? We are indeed, as Hope and Mzamane point out, controlled by apartheid, whether

we are the 'victims' or the 'oppressors'. But the position is even worse, for by internalising the conditions of apartheid we are becoming determined by it and our capacity for free choice is destroyed when we choose to live by fixed, unchanging symbols.¹⁷

South Africans, both writers and citizens, have long inhabited a verbal environment in which any number of words have taken on new meanings which negate original meanings. For example, the word "homeland", once one of the most beautiful in the language because of the connotations of that word -- a familiar human environment making possible the deepest sort of contact with nature, the past, a tradition, and, above all, promising that kind of rootedness in the absence of which the human being is destined to remain a stranger on the earth -- cannot be used in South Africa without its placement in the quotation-marks of otherness which indicate its sinister implications in the history of this country. It is a word which has, quite literally, died. The same could be said of words like "dispensation", "cooperation", "native", "black", "white", and any number of phrases like "peaceful coexistence", "incremental change", "broadening of democracy". When they are used in South Africa today, no dictionary (not even A Dictionary of South African English (1978)) gives any indication of the real, often bestial, meaning which the words have inherited. At best they can be used satirically -- which is perhaps another reason why satire is one of the most favoured modes in recent South African writing.¹⁸

It would be to state the obvious to say that, as one result of all this, the possibilities for communication between peoples had been compromised. Moreover, to live within a linguistic environment which is freighted with dead words -- words murdered by political abuse -- is also to inhabit a reality with inherent shame of cynicism. As one speaks, one sneers or cringes. The sneer itself might register the speaker's contempt for one or other contaminated word, and thus a certain distance from it, but this cannot extend the possibilities or opportunities for that "holy speech"¹⁹ which is, when all is said and done, something of which poetry probably has to retain at least a memory if it is to remain poetry at all. Indeed, a longing for something like this "holy speech" (here taking the form of a longing for the language of lovers) is movingly articulated in the monologue of Magda, the deranged heroine in J. M. Coetzee's In the Heart of the Country. At the same time the absence of such speech -- indeed, the absence of the possibility of this type of language, given the kind of social order that has prevailed in South Africa from the past to the present -- is also registered:

I was born into a language of hierarchy, of distance and perspective. It was my father-tongue. I do not say it is the language my heart wants to speak, I feel too much the pathos of its distances, but it is all we have. I can believe there is a language lovers speak but cannot imagine how it goes. I have no words left to exchange whose value I trust.²⁰

In addition to all this, it is evident that the flexibility of the English language in South Africa has been further reduced by the politicisation of culture as a result of the political struggle against the apartheid state, something which gathered momentum in the nineteen-seventies and after. This is an issue to which I turn fully in Chapters 4 and 5. Let me say here simply that, as a result of this momentum, little space was left in the narrow lines of the era's acceptable language for imagination, for shadings of meaning, even for figures of speech like metaphor. Language was flattened out, being conceived as little more than an instrument subordinated to the attainment of certain political goals, mute with respect to its own voice, detached from any sense of its own origins or purposes.²¹ In much of the protest poetry of the recent decades we find the willed recreation of language entirely as an instrument or means. The instrumental, utilitarian word comes to displace the word as word; the language of becoming grows so dominant that it forgets almost entirely the language of being.²²

Taken singly or together, factors like the above all lead to the same conclusion. The thinness of so much South African English poetry can be partially accounted for by recalling, first of all, some of the dominant mental habits of a culture or sub-culture, decaying six thousand miles from its parent culture. It can be further understood, in the second, by referring to the fate of a language which has been used to limit, not to enlarge, thinking and imagination -- a language first ironed out by the history of imperialism, then subjected to the gross stereotypes of the apartheid era, its range and flexibility further

diminished by the more recent anti-state politicisations of culture in South Africa.

Linguistically, South African English poetry would appear to float above whatever world is its ostensible subject, this world being reduced to the thinness and evanescence of a mirage as a result. It is a poetry unclothed and unhoused, no less in its beginnings than in its present state. If one tries to think of an analogous pictorial representation of the felt texture of this poetry, the work of one of South Africa's leading artists in any medium, the images of David Goldblatt, especially in photographic essays like In Boksburg (1982) come to mind. Alternatively, one is reminded of another of Henry James' books The American Scene (1907), in which, re-visiting the land of his birth, he noted repeatedly the extempore quality of all structures, their mission merely "to gild the temporary with its gold," and, above all, bewailed what he regarded at the impermanence, the waste, the immense promiscuity, the ultimate vacancy of it all.²³ It would seem that here, too, a vacancy of similar magnitude acts as a kind of infection in the poetry, and irrespective of the race, class or gender of the poets themselves, quite independently of the era in which they happened to live and write. From the nineteenth century till far in the twentieth, whether taking the form of a lyric, satire, epic, or elegy, the dominant impression is that of a poetry which is somehow etiolated, ill- or under-nourished, conspicuously starved, and certainly more or less lacking in full being. Irrespective of the critical tools used, whether of European or African provenance, this is one impression that does not diminish, even when one's acquaintance with the

poetry is a long one, and even if one focuses more on the present than the past.

II

A second general impression of South African English poetry is related to the first glimpse of its starvation, its spectral body. Since in the sphere of poetry, especially, the rule is that nothing is born of nothing, and, in particular, nothing notable is born unless inspired by an autochthonous culture, any reader of South African English poetry will at some point be forced into an awareness of how generations of poets have tried to compensate, both consciously and unwittingly, for their lack of a history, the lack of texture already mentioned, and find some myth which might give body, substance -- one might even call it a soul -- to their work. Great poetry, it has been said often enough, is always a matter of urgent myth-making. Whether this be regarded, in Jungian fashion, as an attempt to express with impersonal force the healing archetypal symbols of a collective unconscious and thus restore the psychic balance of a particular society in a particular time,²⁴ or is more simply the effort to transmute what T. S. Eliot termed "private agonies" and "animal feelings" into something "rich and strange",²⁵ poetry is a mental operation which has scarcely ever been able to deny an impulse to find in ordinary events a dimension of mythical meaning, and perhaps all the more so in a century like the twentieth in which so many of the cultural traditions which preserve the mythic, archetypal connections have been destroyed.

Yet what is striking about South African English poetry is that, for all the ways and means through which various myths have been invoked against brutality (brutalities both specially Nationalist and those of less obvious genesis) in the poets' work, none seems to have worked creatively or has retained a kind of lasting significance.²⁶ The myths invoked are all too clearly compensations, rendered false or even fake by so obviously declaring themselves as substitutes for a tradition that does not exist locally, a history that has remained tenuous. In any case, they provide no counterweight to the sense of cultural dereliction that has persisted among South African English poets. The only mythological resonances which do cling, across time, to this poetry involve - usually without self-consciousness - the danger or illegibility of something African.

In the nineteenth century, before the industrial revolution gathered pace in South Africa and its consequences made it more difficult to sustain a belief in the mythical sacrality of the land, the local versions of pastoral were embattled in ways damaging to their own validity or viability. No less than in Thomas Pringle, Arthur Shearley Cripps' "Namaqualand" is, in the words of J. M. Coetzee, little more than a "frenzied application of European metaphor to Africa in an effort to make it yield its essence":²⁷

A land of deathful sleep, where fitful dreams
 Of hurrying spring scarce wake swift-fading flowers
 A land of fleckless sky, and sheer-shed beams
 Of sun and stars through day's and dark's slow hours,

A land where sand has choked once fluent streams --
 Where grassless plains lie girt by granite towers
 That fright the swift and heaven-nurtured teams
 Of winds that bear afar the sea-gleaned showers.

The wild Atlantic, fretted by the breath
 Of fiery gales o'er leagues of desert sped,
 Rolls back, and wreaks in surf its thunderous wrath
 On rocks that down the wan, wide shore are spread;

The waves for ever roar a song of death,
 The shore they roar to is for ever dead.²⁸

To the European outsider or interloper, the African landscape, whether mythologised in terms of its violent, inhuman wildness or as a kind of Virgilian paradise, is in the tradition of romanticism always a myth of displacement, of being anything but at home. Rehearsed in a colonial context, such a myth in Cripps' poem is not only "about" Africa in the most superficial sense (the sense nominated by the poem's title alone), but anticipates in its very structure that spectre of otherness (which would later translate itself into the notion of "swart gevaar"), and which runs as securely through white English writing in South Africa as it does through any Afrikaner documents about divine will. The romantic myth of exile carries no substance since the real import of the poem lies precisely in its failure to achieve a language adequate to the nature of the land, ominous and incomprehensible. If, essentially, it remains a poem about England, it is about an English terrorised by the fact that in

the African Atlantic it can find no mirror, no terms of self-recognition.

Even in terms of romanticism itself and its particular articulation in South Africa, the much-exploited myth of Nature seldom achieves its goal: to wit, the integration of alien European man with the foreign terrain of the African continent and the successful embodiment of this in verse.²⁹ To date it would seem that no local poet has been able to give us work in which we are overcome, at least for a moment, by a feeling that we and this universe may be part of some great meaning which cannot be grasped or articulated, but which is almost sensibly present. Neither Pringle nor Clouts, both poets related to the romantic tradition though separated by more than a century in their lives, are able to give us the conviction that our feelings may have a metaphysical depth beyond that of the rational intellect, and that perhaps they might apprehend, however dimly, something in the cosmos inaccessible to reason. Despite the plethora of nature poems hymning the South African landscape, that sense created so indelibly in the best of Wordsworth -- the sense that the human and natural worlds are enclosed in some ultimate harmony -- continues to elude them, however many lines they might use.

Even in those poems that deploy or re-deploy what has been generally, if not quite convincingly, regarded as the single most dominant myth in the strand of South African English poetry written by whites, the myth of Adamastor,³⁰ the force of the figure often seems vitiated by an inflated use of poetic means, a derivative Baudelairean rhetoric, as is conspicuous in the best

of these, Roy Campbell's "Rounding the Cape", surely as famous as any other single South African English lyric:

The low sun whitens on the flying squalls
 Against the cliffs the long grey surge is rolled
 Where Adamastor from his marble halls
 Threatens the sons of Lusus as of old.

Faint on the glare uptowers the dauntless form,
 Into whose shade abysmal as we draw,
 Down on our decks, from far above the storm,
 Grin the stark ridges of his broken jaw.

Across his back, unheeded, we have broken
 Whole forests, heedless of the blood we've spilled,
 In thunder still his prophecies are spoken,
 In silence, by the centuries, fulfilled.

Farewell, terrific shade! though I go free
 Still of the powers of darkness art thou Lord:
 I watch the phantom sinking in the sea
 Of all that I have hated or adored.

The prow glides smoothly on through seas quiescent:
 But where the last point sinks into the deep,
 The land lies dark beneath the rising crescent,
 And Night, the Negro, murmurs in his sleep.³¹

Likewise, the many attempts on the part of white poets to penetrate to some mythical heart of an Africa environment which both attracts and repels them, so seeking a surer sense of their own troubled identity, merely seems to underline the essential inability of the non-African to feel at home on the continent. The poetry seeks consolation in its own images of the continent's inhumanity; scrutiny of the poet's is never entertained. In William Plomer's famous "The Scorpion", the myth of Africa itself is a myth which marginalises, even displaces the perceiving consciousness, resulting (in the most optimistic of interpretations) in an ambivalence which cannot be resolved one way or the other. It is an index to an alienation which, it would appear, permits no solution:

Limpopo and Tugela churned
 In flood for brown and angry miles
 Melons, maize, domestic thatch,
 The trunks of trees and crocodiles;

The swollen estuaries were thick
 With flotsam, in the sun one saw
 The corpse of a young negress bruised
 By rocks, and rolling on the shore,

Pushed by the waves of morning, rolled
 Impersonally among shells,
 With lolling breasts and bleeding eyes,
 And round her neck were beads and bells.

That was the Africa we knew,
 Where, wandering alone,
 We saw, heraldic in the heat,
 A scorpion on a stone.³²

In 1993, *Plomer's Africa*, where much critical writing has revealed *the* fascination of the colonialist author with "the dark" and "the female" to be the most transparent imagery of English dread, Plomer's "negress" with "bleeding eyes" -- "That was the Africa we knew" -- strikes one less as a fitting "objective correlative" for a continent than it conjures up the Oedipal spectre of a child swearing to murder his father. The representation is so transparent; it may be psychoanalysis, but whether it is poetry only in the most limited sense.

The same sense of dead-end blockage could easily be said to infuse the subsequent myths that have been invented or bootstrapped into existence in order to fulfil this poetry's long search for a soul. The Apollonian-Dionysian myth which Guy Butler invoked in articles and poems in the nineteen-fifties seems to grow less substantial, and even less suggestive of a marriage between Europe and Africa, with each passing year. A poem like his "Myths", whose final stanzas are quoted in Chapter 1 of this thesis, seems seminal nowadays not because it effectively weds two dissimilar continents (or the opposed ideas that two different cultures are supposed to embody), but because it is an important historical demonstration of how difficult it is singlehandedly to give authentic life to a myth in a place more concerned with divorces than unions between cultures, not to mention a myth which assumes the essential, God-given, dichotomy

between two continents. This is more the import of its final stanzas.

Moreover, even though a poem like "Myths" seeks the goal of an imaginative possession of a country which is understandably common amongst colonial literatures, attempting to marry a European cultural inheritance to South African circumstances, it seems unaware of a singular irony. Not a little of European literature -- one thinks of Thomas Mann's Death in Venice (1912) -- has been made out of the human psyche battling under the antagonistic rules of Dionysus and Apollo, seeking a means of escape from the potentially tragic conflict between the chaos of the passions and the order of reason, the jungle and the garden. Most of it declares the impossibility of precisely the marriage that Butler holds out as fulfilled. Certainly, Freud's Civilisation and its Discontents would be less sanguine than this poem about the potential for such a union.

No less implausible appears that myth of eternal presentness, that aesthetic of immanentism, or that tradition of "dew on a shrub", invoked by Sydney Clouts in his "Residuum", particularly when the possibilities of such an ultra-romantic myth are placed in the social context and historical context of the South Africa nineteen-sixties in which it first appeared. The first section of the poem is clearly the work of someone with the courage to create and cultivate his own garden in circumstances hostile to many needs of the psyche, but to "enter the quick grain", difficult enough in the Lake District of nineteenth-century England or the woods of New England, can scarcely be thought of as being central to the destinies of poetry in this country, especially when it ignores the ironies

that attend such an endeavour in the midst of apartheid South Africa. Rather than giving us the outlines of a specifically South African poetics, there for later poets to build on, it remains the solitary spiritual ambition of a suburban visionary:

My tradition is dew on a shrub.

One word is too many; many, too few.

Not for perfection though that is a part of it.

The pressure of silence is about me.³³

Very much the same thing could be said for whatever myths seem popular at other moments in South Africa's history. If, moving into the historical present, we find repeatedly a fear of the nemesis to be visited on the coloniser whites by vengeful blacks, culminating in a holocaust of bloodshed, the poems themselves cannot transcend the doom they foretell, even in imaginative terms. They tend merely to pass a sentence of death from which there is no reprieve or possibility of reprieve. "Great poetry," Stanley Burnshaw has written, "believes because it has to believe, possibility being the condition of all imagining."³⁴ Forgetting this, the final effect of a poem as technically adept, even brilliant, as Christopher Hope's "The Flight of the White South Africans" is one of numbness, evident in the concluding third section:

Our sojourn: what might dear Milne have made of it
 Or Crompton, Farnol, even the later James,
 Who promised homely endings, magi who lit
 The lamp we wished to read by, gave us The Queen,
 A Nanny we almost kissed, our English names?
 We blink and are blinded by the Congo sun
 Overhead, as flagrant as a raped nun.
 Such light embarrasses too late. We've seen

So little in the little time spent coming
 To choke on this beach of unbreathable air
 Beyond the guns' safety, the good plumbing;
 Prey of gulls and gaffs. We go to the wall
 But Mowgli, Biggles and Alice are not there:
 Nongquase, heaven unhoods its bloodshot eye
 Above a displaced people, our demise
 Is near, and we'll be gutted where we fall.³⁵

Not content to leave things as they are, hideously in balance,
 the poem succumbs to that tone of masochism bordering on self-hatred which is common among those both guilty and impotent.
 This is a poetry which might express a common South African nightmare; but even here the myth of apocalypse is expressed in such a way that, artistically, it carries with it no principle or possibility of regeneration. The poem simply passes sentence on the culture which was its matrix, and in doing so is tantamount to its own executioner. It is, perhaps, another instance of that impulsion towards self-annihilation not absent among intellectuals in South African culture.

It is not less difficult to call into question what is possibly only the latest myth through which a number of South African English poets have sought to give a more than personal meaning or resonance to their work: namely, that of the Utopia to be gained (or Eden to be restored) once the present political dispensation in South Africa has been destroyed, along with its legacy, and a fully democratic government, representing the will of the majority of South Africans, has been elected. There are by now a host of these poems, Andries W. Oliphant's conclusion to his volume At The End of the Day, the poem "First Light", being as representative as any:

In the barrels of our rifles
 we will place palm branches
 and multicoloured flowers.
 We will sing
 a vast choir of voices rising to a crescendo
 of the struggle's singular accomplishment.
 The baker and the fisherman
 with baskets of bread and fish.
 The towers and the bridges,
 people the shafts of labour
 seized from the invader and the thief
 The gesture of the fist
 will become a hand signalling us
 to take the highroad of freedom and peace.

We will then return to the deep roots of love
 unblighted by the plague,

untainted by the scourge of hatred.

We, you and I, and all the people
will embrace, in the warm light of the sun,
the air above us living with the wings
of a hundred thousand pigeons.

With our feet firmly on the ground
over minds will take to the skies
with the ease of helium balloons.

To the west we will see darkness fading
as the sun's bright banner
intercepts the fleeing scoundrels.

Ah, the heady festival of peace.³⁶

One is forced to ask, on reading this poem, whether Oliphant's "light" is not the mere corollary of Plomer's "brown and angry miles" of flood-water. This is clearly neither a poem, nor myth, which can bear much ironical contemplation; in fact, it is one where the poetry of ideology almost begs to be brought down to the prose of reality. A single sentence like Immanuel Kant's "out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing can ever be made" destroys such a poem as quickly and effectively as any amount of attention to its more hackneyed expressions. Oliphant's "First Light" is almost pure melodrama, a word defined by the OED as "A dramatic piece characterised by sensational incident and violent appeals to the emotions, but with a happy ending." It sacrifices realism for impact and can easily be judged distorting by comparison with the evident complexities of life. Despite the respectable political patina the poem wears, it consists as much of pious formulae as the worst sort of nineteenth-century

religious or veld-and-vlei verse; its uplift is on the level of Norman Vincent Peale or Patience Strong. Poems like these, conspicuous in recent decades, unfortunately exemplify Milan Kundera's re-definition of kitsch "as the absolute denial of shit . . . kitsch excludes everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence."³⁷

Such poems of a future utopia, however popular they might have been (in the original sense of that word) and firmly rooted in the psychic needs of the oppressed peoples, are of dubious power. This is not because hope, and the necessity for hope, is to be disparaged. It is because in the twentieth century such hope can only be plausibly created, as a sequence of poems like T. S. Eliot's Ash-Wednesday (1930) shows so well, if it is achieved, and shown to be achieved, in very teeth of some despair. This being absent, the myth serves to do nothing but decrease the reader's grasp of reality. As myth, the various conceptions of a future utopia strike one as being no more substantial than all their various predecessors.

In sum, then, South African English poetry as a whole would still seem to exist as a poetry in search of a soul, more or less unsuccessfully trying to animate and re-animate myths which never seem quite appropriate to the needs of society or the claims of reality. On the one hand, it is the artificiality of such myths as myths which remains most striking. The impression of thinness survives whatever the deployment of myth that might seek to dispel it. On the other hand, where the archetypes of difference are spelled out into mythology, all we encounter - again and again - is a psychic paralysis. All is "dark" or light,"

"strange" or "peaceful," and no epiphany of a less banal mythos is written.

III

In a letter to the literary journal Contrast in 1976, Christopher Hope accurately described what has latterly become the greatest myth of all regularly resorted to by South African poets, English, Afrikaans, or otherwise:

What is important in South Africa is not art but apartheid. That is the single issue touching us all. It's in the air we breathe, bred in the marrow, curls along the intestines and even those who prefer to look in their hearts and write . . . will find it there too. The thing that separates us, paradoxically, is our only common ground. After successfully evading this central issue for years . . . South African poets in an unprecedented gathering two years ago [in 1974] at the Summer School of the University of Cape Town came up hard against the problem that could be ducked no longer. Never mind that apartheid was unpromising ground for verse and often boring to boot. It was, we felt, the one real thing, offering a glimpse of the real in every-day experience. To ignore that was to go for the merely poetic and to co-operate in one's own emasculation.³⁸

Not only has the central political fact of apartheid dominated South African life in many of its aspects, but it was this

defining feature of the society as a whole which was to act as a foil against which an identity, even a soul, for South African English poetry might be found. The myth informing the poetry has been increasingly the promise of politics -- a certain kind of political struggle against the state, whose shapes were often both pre- and pro-scriptive. It is in the confrontation with politics and social injustice -- so Hope's letter suggests -- that at last the poetry has come or will come into its own. What, really, he asks, is South African English poetry? Nothing or next to nothing, the common historical answer might be, until it becomes, in one or other way, the poetry of apartheid, its being energised in various degrees of rage, defiance or despair, by its protest against the social injustices caused by a system of institutionalised racism. The poetic in South Africa became synonymous with the articulation of counter-state political work; this, and nothing else, was its raison d'être, its life's blood. It needed no other myth -- such was the common argument -- to animate its existence. South African English poetry would begin to achieve maturity only once it realised its address should be to history rather than the lyric moment, when, as Peter Horn puts it in his Brechtian "Explaining My New Style",

I do not walk in the forest
 admiring flowers and trees:
 but among policemen
 who check my passport
 and my political background.³⁹

Whatever the reality and validity of opinions like the above -- and they are certainly wide-spread today⁴⁰ -- it cannot be said that the culture of the political struggle against the state has added much to the creative efforts of the South African English poet. No doubt the insistent pressures of political issues meant that some of these poets have been more urgently compelled to do that which all serious artists have to do -- namely, to question their ethical relationship to their times, this being central to their life and art -- but all too often this has meant something quite other than the emergence of a tradition of great political poetry. It very difficult, at any rate, to find a poem amongst this poetry which could be mentioned in the same breath, say, as Brecht's "To Posterity" or Auden's "September 1, 1939". "It has always amazed me," Lewis Nkosi has also written, "that bad writers should consider racial conflict a God-sent theme when prudent writers know how resistant this theme has proved to be to any artistic purpose".⁴¹ Amazing or not, it has become more and more clear that counter-state politics, far from being a creative gift or providing a definitive myth, have only further complicated the already complicated situation of the local poet, confronting him or her with artistic problems to which they have all too rarely been equal.

Indeed the overriding problem for South African English poets has not been that they are not political, or politically conscious enough -- a complaint voiced often enough by more radical critics. Rather, it is that so few of them have had the ability to deal with the demands of both their own (and others') work in the struggle in accordance with aesthetic demands. (Nor, in fact, have they been able to deal with aesthetic demands in

accordance with the exigencies of their political convictions.) The major issue to which their work gives rise is almost never whether their hearts have been in the right place, but that there has not been sufficient skill in the hand that holds the pen. Thus whilst the local strand of aestheticism has long been denatured by its inability or refusal to deal with matters of social concern (something evident, for example, in the poetry of Sydney Clouts), the by now far more prominent tradition of political poets has responded by producing rock-cakes (formerly art for art's sake poets offered nothing but cream-cakes). Neither has provided a fully nourishing meal.

The fact remains that local poets have made heavy weather of trying to reconcile or at least bring into fruitful relation the respective claims of politics versus poetry -- what Seamus Heaney, the Irish poet, has termed "suffering" on the one hand and "song" on the other.⁴² Whereas Derek Walcott, the Caribbean poet, is able to preserve the tension between his divided loyalties, the allure of the English language and his hatred of an alien occupying power, animating his poetry precisely through this --

Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?

I who have cursed

The drunken officer of British rule, how choose

Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?⁴³

so much of South African political poetry is almost a text-book instance of an art whose political commitments mangle its lyrical impulses, resulting in a poetry which is neither progressive

politics nor good poetry. Again, one thinks of Peter Horn and the unresolved war that goes on in his poetry between his ideological Marxism and the inclinations of his imagination. At any rate, no South African treatment of the inevitable tensions between the two has received anything like the lucid attention given it by Czeslaw Milosz, who in his analysis of similar tensions in the context of his native Poland and the cultural context of Stalinism, speaks of the poet's insoluble contradiction in the twentieth century, caught between being and action, a commitment to art on the one hand and also to a solidarity with men and women on the other.⁴⁴ With perhaps the singular exception of Jeremy Cronin (who I refer to in my Conclusion), no local poet, even in the last few decades, has produced work which redefines the relations between poetry and politics, making out of the inevitable tensions between the two something as remarkable, say, as the Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert's "Five Men" or his later "To Ryszard Krynicki -- A Letter" -- both poems in which lucidity of mind becomes synonymous with beauty of spirit.⁴⁵ A critic like Michael Chapman might write of poets like Thomas Pringle, Roy Campbell, Douglas Livingstone, Lionel Abrahams and Mongane Wally Serote as having created for their readers "a locus of debate concerning spaces for the poet at any one time or place", but the evidence is flimsy.⁴⁶

Indeed it is quite possible to argue that the explicitly political life of anti-apartheid activities, far from offering South African English poetry a sustaining myth, has been the most frequent source of its manifest slightness. Quite apart from T. S. Eliot's mindful warning -- "A political association may help

to give poetry immediate attention: it is in spite of this association that the poetry will be read, if it is read, tomorrow"⁴⁷ -- politics has offered the poet the easy escapes of ready-made topics, emotional posturing and melodrama, as well as that facile form of extroversion whose rhetoric enables the poet to sidestep the more insidious but necessary forms of self-questioning. It has provided innumerable clichés but has seldom issued in the awareness that any writing about horror, local or elsewhere, imposes an additional burden of responsibility on the individual writer. In reply to an interviewer's question, Geoffrey Hill, the English poet, speaking of the Nazi concentration camps, suggested why this should be so:

I would add only that the burden which the writer's conscience must bear is that the horror might become that hideously outrageous thing, a cliché. This is the nightmare, the really blasphemous thing: that those camps could become a mere 'subject'.⁴⁸

Hackneyed or not, the reader all too frequently comes across political poems of the entire period after 1948 which are variously truncated or mutilated even in the bitterness of their satire, or the ardour of their protestations. On the one hand, one gets the crippling vacillations of a series of white poets who, given their allegiance to their liberal background, being unable to ally themselves fully with any side in the struggle for South Africa, and perhaps still incapable of living anywhere else than in the country of their birth, end up writing poems of the tragedy of being an exile in one's own country, politically

isolated to the point of non-existence as a political force. However effective as satire, the sense of obsolescence at which Anthony Delius arrives by the end of his "Lament of the Liberals" seems almost pre-planned -- a foregone conclusion. In a real sense, he has nothing whatever to say:

Ten little liberals waiting to resign,
One went and did so, and then there were nine.

Nine little liberals entered a debate,
But one spoke his heart out, and then there were eight.

Eight little liberals saw the road to heaven,
One even followed it, and then there were seven.

Seven little liberals caught in a fix,
One stayed liberal, and then there were six.

Six little liberals glad to be alive,
One turned a somersault, and then there were five.

Five little liberals found they had the floor,
One spoke for all of them, and then there were four.

Four little liberals sitting down to tea,
One choked on a principle, and then there were three.

Three little liberals looking at the view,
One saw a policy, and then there were two.

Two little liberals lying in the sun,
One turned dark brown, and then there was one.

One little liberal found nothing could be done,
So he took the boat to England, and then there were none.⁴⁹

This is a poetry whose myth of the dead-end, the historical cul-de-sac, is itself deadening, not even able to invoke the apocalyptic mode. And it is no less so in the work of more recent poets like Chris Mann.

On the other hand, there is the seventies tradition of Sowetan writers, consisting mostly of black poets, whose poems, while not necessarily being mere slogans, are aesthetically flawed in ways which it is not difficult to demonstrate. The complex disappointments of this poetry form the thesis of Chapter 4. Here, let me briefly exemplify the point with Oswald Mtshali's much-anthologised "An Abandoned Bundle", a poem which is demonstrably lightweight by comparison with the work of Blake, Plath and Auden which Nadine Gordimer invokes in attempting to characterise his poetry in her Foreword to his Sounds of a Cowhide Drum (1971):

The morning mist
and chimney smoke
of White City Jabavu
flowed thick yellow
as pus oozing
from a gigantic sore.

It smothered our little houses
like fish caught in a net.

Scavenging dogs
draped in red bandanas of blood
fought fiercely
for a squirming bundle.

I threw a brick;
they bared fangs
flicked velvet tongues of scarlet
and scurried away
leaving a mutilated corpse --
an infant dumped on a rubbish heap --
'Oh! Baby in the Manger
sleep well
on human dung.'

Its mother
had melted into the rays of the rising sun,
her face glittering with innocence
her heart as pure as untrampled dew.⁵⁰

One only needs to write this out to see that it is not even
particularly good prose:

The morning mist and chimney smoke of White City Jabavu
flowed thick yellow as pus oozing from a gigantic sore. It

smothered our little houses like giant fish caught in a net. Scavenging dogs draped in red bandanas of blood fought fiercely for a squirming bundle. I threw a brick; they bared fangs flicked velvet tongues of scarlet and scurried away, leaving a mutilated corpse -- an infant dumped on a rubbish heap -- 'Oh! Baby in the Manger sleep well on human dung.' Its mother had melted into the rays of the rising sun, her face glittering with innocence her heart as pure as untrampled dew.

This has the advantage of a certain simplicity and straightforwardness. Nevertheless, the poem's mostly declarative sentences hardly conceal the deliberate art of a Hemingway; nor is the irony of the conclusion free from the heavy hand which turns it into plain sarcasm. It is in fact unnecessary to compare Mtshali here with better poets of different climes: the poem's central problem is not simply its exploitation of cliché but the ~~unself~~-reflective and utter chaos of its moral problematic. Not even a poem still more frequently anthologised than "An Abandoned Bundle" -- Mongane Wally Serote's "City Johannesburg" -- will stand up very well to that rudimentary test implicit in Ezra Pound's demand in his "A Retrospect" that poetry should be at least as well written as "the unspeakably difficult art of good prose."⁵¹

The politics of writers tend to be the politics of the unpolitical; that is to say, they are embraced for the sake of life and not for the sake of public visibility. But there is no glimmer of this inevitable goal of politics -- life itself -- in a poem regularly anthologised as a cardinal example of South

African political poetry, James Matthews' "living in our land is a political action". Moreover, it is in a poem like this that what is perhaps the single greatest limitation of almost all poetry similarly inspired by South African social conditions becomes manifest:

living in our land is a political action
boarding a bus you see a sign that says
Black man, know your place
and Black woman even if you're 75
suffer from swollen limbs
you've got to climb those stairs
you cannot sit up front
living and dying is political
if you're Black
for your welfare they give you
slips of paper that turns living
into a nightmare and when dead they
extend their powers and shove you
into a hole in the ground allocated
away from them to remind you
of the way they forced you to live
and they say that the people
are a happy people, happy
in their separate boxes
not knowing that our smiles
are the masks we wear to cover
the rage stirred up that will
jump out and tear white arrogance

apart for their political evils conjuring
our sunny land into a blazing hell.⁵²

Setting aside the apparently unselfconscious use of clichés and that relentless stereotyping of which Jean Marquard writes and which has already been mentioned above -- "separate boxes", "sunny land", "blazing hell" and so forth -- only a moment's scrutiny reveals that in a poem like this the vulgarity and lies of the ruling white ideology have also infected Matthews' apparently dissident imagination. This is reflected in a poetry that fails to break out of the mould of banality, bigotry, and violence, which has been imposed on the entire country from above; all that defines the oppressor is mirrored rather than refuted. "[L]iving in our land is a political action", in particular, remains entirely subservient to the reality which it purports to be attacking; its language alone ensures that neither Matthews nor his readers will gain another purchase on this. In the work of poets as various as James Matthews or Peter Horn one finds the verbal equivalent of the Biblical "eye for an eye", "tooth for a tooth". They exemplify, in fact, the manner in which anti-apartheid political imperatives have often worked to throw the poet off balance, reducing the voice of the self to that of a pitiful, sentimental dwarf while inflating the voice of society to that of an equally hollow monster, precluding the poetic transformation of any reality, and underlining that impression of thinness -- indeed of poetic failure -- mentioned at the outset of this chapter.

In short, the tragedy of South Africa's history, particularly in the twentieth century, has had effects on its

literature no less beneficial than those observed by Joseph Brodsky in his analysis of what he calls "the metaphysical slump" to be observed in Russian prose since Dostoyevsky:

such was the magnitude of what happened in Russia in this century that all the genres available to prose were, and still are, in one way or another, shot through with this tragedy's mesmerizing presence. No matter which way one turns, one catches the Gorgon-like stare of history. And this is precisely where the Russian prose of this century fails. Hypnotized by the scope of the tragedy that befell the nation, it keeps scratching its wounds, unable to transcend the experience either philosophically or stylistically. No matter how devastating one's indictment of the political system may be, its delivery always comes wrapped in the sprawling cadences of fin de siècle religious humanist rhetoric. No matter how poisonously sarcastic one gets, the target of such sarcasm is always external: the system and the powers-that-be. The human being is always extolled, his innate goodness is always regarded as the guarantee of the ultimate defeat of evil.⁵³

Brodsky's own indictment -- for it is no less than this -- can be applied with equal force to a still more highly regarded South African political poet like Mongane Wally Serote, to his later work like Third World Express (1992) as much as to his earlier volumes of the nineteen-seventies. As will be argued in greater detail in Chapter 4, none of it offers what Brodsky calls in the same essay a "stylistic cure,"⁵⁴ answering to the needs of

readers to emancipate themselves from their times and, still more importantly, enabling them to gain a surer grasp of the particular malaise of their time and place.

In the case of a poet like Serote or Mtshali, an indictment of a social system might find partial formulation in their work, but this tends to be overwhelmed or undermined by the work's own stylistic helplessness. The poets remain in the predicament of being without any "cure" for South Africa and its oppressions, condemned to suffer this world -- without any relief or reprieve -- in the same way, presumably, that their readers must suffer their work.

And this is ironical -- indeed doubly so. For it is precisely in the work of poets like Mtshali and Serote -- all those loosely associated with the Soweto poets -- that critics have tended to find, if not quite Brodsky's "stylistic cure", then at least a cure for (a solution to) all the previous shortcomings in South African English poetry which have been mentioned in this thesis so far.

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16. Berel Lang, Writing and the Moral Self (New York: Routledge, 1991) 109-110.

17. Jean Marquard, "Some Racial Stereotypes in South African Writing," unpublished paper presented to the Conference on Literature and Society in Southern Africa, U of York (8-11 September, 1981): 17-18.
18. See Ian Glenn's work in this connection, especially his "South African Satire Now," New Contrast 20.1 (1992): 80-90.
19. The phrase is Zbigniew Herbert's and appears in his poem "To Ryszard Krynicki -- A Letter," Report from the Besieged City and Other Poems (New York: Ecco, 1985) 21.
20. J. M. Coetzee, In the Heart of the Country (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1978) 97.
21. Lang 158.
22. For an elaboration of this point, see my essay "Poetry and Politicisation," Selected Essays 1980-1990 9-20.
23. Henry James, The American Scene (1907; London: Granville, 1987) 38.
24. For C. G. Jung's theory of art and its function, see his The Spirit in Man, Art and Literature (1966; Princeton: Bollingen/ Princeton U, 1971) esp. 71-80.
25. T. S. Eliot, "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca," Selected Essays (London: Faber and Faber, 1934) 137.
26. Malvern van Wyk Smith, it should be noted, argues otherwise in his anthology Shades of Adamastor (1988), finding in the Adamastor myth a tradition which spans more than a century. The logic of this anthology, however, reveals that the myth itself becomes less and less viable for the white poet as time advances. Moreover, despite the extent of van Wyk Smith's research, it is arguable that the tradition he perceives is in fact much more tenuous than might appear to be the case. This is

suggested, perhaps, by the extraordinarily disparate examples of poetry that the anthology attempts to yoke together. It may also be asked whether the Adamastor myth is not being used to construct a tradition that, in reality, does not exist in the original sense of the word "tradition" at all. In other words, it may still be an open question whether the myth is not simply a critical myth, providing another kind of 'tradition-substitute' -- in this case, for the critic rather than the poet.

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44. Czeslaw Milosz's formulations of this central contradiction are to be found in many places, but most incisive of all, perhaps, is the one included in his Nobel Lecture (New York: Farrar Strauss Giroux, 1981) 11.
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Upstream 6.3 (Winter 1988): 28.
47. T. S. Eliot, ed., A Choice of Kipling's Verse (London:
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51. Ezra Pound, Literary Essays of Ezra Pound (London:
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52. James Matthews, ed., Black Voices Shout! (Athlone:
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CHAPTER 4:

THE SEARCH FOR A SOLUTION II:

THE SOWETO POETS AND AFTER

I

Soweto poetry -- the name most commonly given to the new black poetry -- was once hailed as the "single most important socio-literary phenomenon of the seventies in South Africa,"¹ and continues to hold considerable critical value in the eyes of certain critical schools. Given its apparent newness, and the shock of that newness when it first began emerging in the late nineteen-sixties and early seventies, the critic who delivered this judgement may be excused a measure of hyperbole. Being a specifically township poetry, it gave expression to what Nadine Gordimer was to call the "urban theme" and its "classic crises":

tribal and traditional values against Western values, peasant modes of life against the modes of an industrial proletariat, above all, the quotidian humiliations of a black man's world made to a white's specifications.²

Moreover, here was a poetry which appeared to have collapsed a long-standing South African distinction between the realm of poems and the streets and struggle of daily living. Black poetry, in the words of Oswald Mtshali, initially the most famous of the Soweto poets, "depicts the black man's life as it is shaped by the laws that govern him".³ It came, in other words, from a social context in which daily life, everywhere permeated by violence and

death, seemed to have made it impossible for the poet to dwell in a Blakean or Wordsworthian world where the growth of the poet's soul, the exploration of individual self-consciousness, might be of paramount salience. This new black poetry was political in the most direct of ways, reflecting over and over the truth proclaimed by Mbulelo Mzamane: "Art and politics in South Africa, as in many parts of Africa, have become inseparable for the simple reason that politics pervades all aspects of a Black-man's existence."⁴

But there was more to it than this. As has often been noted, Soweto poetry emerged from a social and historical context in which the presence and shaping influence of previous generations of black writers had been largely erased. Recalling the number of these writers whose work had been officially banned by the South African state and who had been forced into exile after Sharpeville, Richard Rive remarks that when Mtshali's Sounds of a Cowhide Drum was first published in 1971, "there was almost no precedent for it The writers of the seventies were forced to start from scratch without receiving any momentum from the Protest wave which preceded them."⁵

Inevitably, discontinuities of this order were to mark the writing of the new black poets at the deepest level. As a generation they, especially, were forced to suffer the deprivations of Bantu Education, every conceivable cultural dislocation, appalling living conditions, and much state harrassment. As they themselves were to imply, they were, in some degree, instances of writers "operating blindly in a

vacuum".⁶ Like some black fiction writers of the immediately preceding period, they too seemed almost completely unaware of the more radical aesthetic innovations that had taken place in the twentieth century.

These deprivations were externally imposed and enforced by the apartheid state. But such liabilities could be turned to advantage. In Mtshali's work, for instance, it was at once apparent that the weight of the Western tradition, and specifically the English poetic tradition, while not altogether absent, did not lie heavily upon his work. Accordingly, his poems exhibited a new primitivity; some had the force, the freshness, and the (only apparently) naive quality of the work of a painter like John N. Maufangejo. This is something evident from the very first stanzas of the opening poem in Sounds of a Cowhide Drum, "The Shepherd and his Flock":

The rays of the sun
are like a pair of scissors
cutting the blanket
of dawn from the sky.

The young shepherd
drives the master's sheep
from the paddock
into the veld.⁷

Also evident from the start was this poetry's tone of direct emotional involvement. In Serote's "Alexandra", for

example, there was a commitment to emotion, however painful, ambivalently Oedipal, for which one looked in vain in much white poetry of the same period:

Alexandra, hell
 What have you done to me?
 I have seen people but I feel like I'm not one,
 Alexandra what are you doing to me?
 I feel I have sunk to such meekness!
 I lie flat while others walk on me to far places.
 I have gone back from you, many times,
 I come back.
 Alexandra, I love you;
 I know
 When all these worlds become funny to me
 I silently waded back to you
 And amid the rubble I lay,
 Simple and black.⁸

This is a poem which, even in its use of the mother archetype, gave credence to the notion that there is nobody who, caught between two exploded worlds, does not reach back to the security of the figure who shielded his childhood from the terrors of the night. One would have to go back to a novel like Alan Paton's Cry, the Beloved Country (1948) to find a literary work in which a suffering love, and the intrinsic power of such a suffering love, was more immediately expressed.

Yet, whatever the individual successes, the Sowetan poetry seemed to be based on very flimsy foundations. When in nineteen-eighty Serote was asked in an interview whether he had been influenced by "traditional African oral poetry", it seems he was not being merely churlish when he replied: "I do not know."⁹ As will be seen below, there was more than one other black poet of the same generation who had an uncertain sense of the tradition, or amalgam of traditions, in which he or she was operating.

Still, it was easy to see that the new black poetry of the nineteen-seventies, while being sui generis, bore points of resemblance with poetries elsewhere in the world. From the outset much of it assumed the function of a poetic witnessing; with Whitman it said: "I was the man . . . I suffered . . . I was there."¹⁰ In part at least, the nature of the poetry could be defined by seeing it in relation to that tradition of populist democratic poetry which has had a distinguished number of practitioners in the United States of America, ranging from Whitman himself to Allen Ginsberg. It, too, was a poetry defined by an implicit sense of largeness, the conviction of having (at least potentially) a whole people as its audience, and by its preparedness (to use Whitman's words again) to sound its "barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world".¹¹ Only an instinctive sense of aspirant nationhood, of potential democratic vistas, makes the Whitmanesque form of address feasible. In his "America" Allen Ginsberg introduces a kind of rhetoric which is instantly recognisable in Serote:

America I've given you all and now I'm nothing.
 America two dollars and twentyseven cents January
 17, 1956.

I can't stand my own mind.
 America when will we end the human war?
 God fuck yourself with your atom bomb.
 I don't feel good don't bother me.
 I won't write my poem till I'm in my right mind.
 America when will you be angelic.¹²

The personification of an entire nation (here, through the metaphor of a city) introduces a similar dialectic of love and anger, spurning and suing for love, in Serote's "City Johannesburg":

Jo'burg City, Johannesburg,
 Listen when I tell you,
 There is no fun, nothing, in it,
 When you leave the women and men with such frozen
 expressions,
 Expressions that have tears like furrows of soil
 erosion,
 Jo'burg City, you are dry like death,
 Jo'burg City, Johannesburg, Jo'burg City.¹³

So far as can be established, there is no question of direct influence here. Rather, the similarities between the two forms of address have been determined by a social and historical context in which the poet assumes the role of

populist orator, in which every "song of myself" doubles as the birth-song (potential or actual) of a nation, and in which the poet is alive to the epic scale of a people's suffering.

In the specific South African context, features like the above have been strengthened by the requirements of oral performance. The new black poetry was one which was decisively shaped by the degree to which, in Mzamane's words, it was "read at funerals, conferences, concerts and private parties, as part of a wide programme of conscientization."¹⁴ Often accompanied by music, drums and mass dancing in which the audience participates fully, the actual performance of this poetry was often nothing less than a rite of passage, a ritual of confession, purification and redemption. In the context of such performance, a living community was created out of the audience, one in which the individual was at once dissolved and redeemed -- redeemed because dissolved. While the poet himself or herself was to assume the role of something more than a single individual -- the spokesperson for a collective -- so the individual hearing him or her was no longer separate, internally divided, isolated in his or her political impotence. Through the oral performance of latterday epics like Ingoapele Madingoane's Africa My Beginning (1979), certain myths were reenacted in which a downtrodden people progressed from impotence to strength, from sorrow to a triumphant sense of deliverance through solidarity. In this sense, the poetry obviously performed a similar function to

that which Stephen Henderson found operating in the oral tradition in black American literature:

In the oral tradition, the dogged determination of the work songs, the tough-minded power of the blues, the inventive energy of jazz, and the transcendent vision of God in the spirituals and sermons, all energize the idea of Liberation, which is itself liberated from the temporal, the societal, and the political -- not with narcotic obsession to remain above the world of struggle and change and death, but with full realization of a return to that world both strengthened and renewed.¹⁵

Such an immersion in the waters of collective myth renews the strength for the struggle ahead, pledging people to one another, binding them in that community which is essential if they are to struggle effectively against that which oppresses them.

It is also easy to note such intentions of empowerment in the work of the new black poets in South Africa, whether in a single lyric like Mtshali's "Sounds of a Cowhide Drum" or a much longer epic narrative like Serote's No Baby Must Weep (1975). Amongst many others, poems like these gave support to the belief, soon widespread, that the emergence of these new black poets had introduced South Africans to a type of poetry which would change forever their sense of what South African English poetry was and, indeed, could be. From the new beginnings established by the work of Mtshali,

Ndebele, and their fellow poets, there was every reason to believe that a specifically indigenous English-language poetry would develop, one not beholden to metropolitan norms or conventions, and making a clean break with the concerns of white South African English poetry just as the South African Students' Organisation had broken away from the predominantly white National Union of South African Students in the early nineteen-seventies. *WRONG - SASO FORMED 1968!*

From the start it was also a source of critical celebration that Soweto poetry carried a seeming challenge to notions about poetic versus colloquial language. The diction in a Serote poem may have been remarkable for its new aligning of poetic language with the spoken idiom in the townships, replacing in the local context the clichés of romanticism with what seemed at first sight to be a non-poetic modernity. It might have seemed, then, that what he was doing was analagous to what, say, T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound had managed to achieve in their own historical context, finding that apparently non-poetic language which might be the poetic language of the future. But a great deal more than this -- the substitution of the "staffrider" for Pringle's horseman riding far and wide in the open veld -- was read into this poetry. It was seen to have an even more historic mission. In an article first published in 1985, Jeremy Cronin writes of the reconstructing of the English signification system which was entailed by this mission:

I believe [he wrote] that poetry has been used by the African poets [in South Africa] of the last decade [the nineteen-seventies] to "nationalise" the English language. That is, to transform the English language -- one of the colonial languages -- into a language expressing the emergent culture and aspirations of the majority of South Africans.¹⁶

In short, the fact that many a Western aesthetic convention informing previous South African English poetry had been well and truly "dondered"¹⁷ -- to use Mothobi Mutloatse's word -- whether by conscious design or simply through ignorance of them, gave critics reason to believe that Soweto poetry and what followed it was important. It seemed to them to represent a concerted challenge to, as well as undermining of, what had long been the dominance of a specifically white aesthetic. Anne McClintock, finding a radical cultural politics in the poetry, was herself representative in summarising the challenge this poetry articulated:

Sharpeville and its aftermath ushered in a period of calculated refusal of canonized white norms and standards. The South African liberal aesthetic, itself never whole or complete and already strained by its distance from the European tradition, began to fray and unravel. Most white English poets, increasingly edged from cultural power, comforted themselves in their unclassed solitude with the contradictory faith that

the lonely poetic voice was also the eloquent mouthpiece of universal truth -- a faith that became increasingly untenable for educated black writers not only barred from the white "universal" but also standing, at this point, somewhat uneasily within their own communities. During this period a marked change in aesthetic values took place as black literature became steadily more radical and polarized.¹⁸

In this conception, the new black poetry becomes a prime means of questioning the existing canon of South African English poetry, contesting its dominance, exposing (among much else) that what is usually called "poetry" is often enough no more than a name for those writings certified as valuable by the ruling classes at any given moment in history. At the same time its own practice makes it plain that poets are not necessarily to be judged according to their 'sensitivity', 'sensibility', their 'craftmanship' -- things like the appeal of their subject matter, their emotional range and depth. There was no such thing as 'inherent' poetic value. There was, more accurately, the power battle between different culturally specific and ideologically determined discourses; and the new black poetry took its greatest significance from the fact that it was a writing against the dominant poetic discourse in South Africa, a bringing to the centre of that which has been marginalised, a redefining of the canon to give pride of place to the hitherto repressed. Such a

project, at any rate, can be seen as implicit (growing ever more explicit) in a poem like Serote's "Hell, Well, Heaven":

I do not know where I have been
 But Brother,
 I know I'm coming.
 I do not know where I have been,
 But Brother,
 I have a voice like the lightning-thunder
 over the mountains.
 But Oh! there are copper lightning conductors for me!
 I do not know where I have been
 To have despair so deep and deep and deep
 But Brother,
 I know I'm coming.

In his survey of South African English Literature Grounds of Contest, Malvern van Wyk Smith refers to the ". . . diastole and systole of appropriation and renunciation, aggression and resistance which is really the one major theme of all our writing."²⁰ Serote's "Hell, Well, Heaven" is, one might say, part of that systole of renunciation and resistance. Even more significantly, it could be regarded as part and parcel of the Third World's resistance to the oppression exerted by the cultural dominance of the western world.²¹ Its very language was one of the ways in which this battle is being fought out. Such was the critical manoeuvre, at any rate, through which an added weight of significance was

attributed to this new type of South African poetry in English.

II

For all that, the achievements of this poetry remain altogether modest. Like the photograph of the young woman in Philip Larkin's poem, "Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album, the poetry itself has grown smaller and clearer as the years have gone by. Similarly, the many, often elaborate (and perhaps over-elaborating) articles in Michael Chapman's Soweto Poetry, usually celebrating this poetry, now look distinctly premature. It is not that what was once a spate of poems seems to have diminished in recent years.²² If Mtshali, Serote, Ndebele and others formed a kind of poetic vanguard in the nineteen-seventies, one cannot help asking: where is the rearguard? Younger poets like Christopher van Wyk and Donald Parenzee have emerged (though to date neither has published more than one volume), but with the exception of one or two poems there has been no argument that convincingly demonstrates that their work is a development, however defined, on those who came to prominence before them. Formally, they add very little. There is a curious lack of linguistic energy in their work, one which is hardly offset by the supposed ideological progression sometimes claimed for it.²³

The picture becomes still more bleak when one asks what has become of the founding members of Sowetan poetry.

Oswald Mtshali's single collection since his justly celebrated Sounds of a Cowhide Drum, the volume entitled Fireflames (1980), would seem to mark a regression on any possible level. More enraged than engagée, it is almost entirely contaminated by an anger and a militancy that overwhelms the poet's formal skills:

For me the smell of gunpowder is a perfume
 whose fragrance sustains my sense of smell
 and drives away the rancid and pungent odour
 of a crematorium, where youthful ambitions
 are burned to ashes,
 as cinders of militancy send hissing sparks to the sky,
 and boiling blood turns to broth.²⁴

Mongane Wally Serote, judging by his more recent collections, including The Night Keeps Winking (1982), A Tough Tale (1987) and Third World Express (1992), has evolved a style which consists almost entirely of his freely-associated longueurs, one in which a number of aesthetics tangle in so confused a manner as to serve the ends of each other's incoherence and to muffle that anguish (always combining love and wound) which was at the heart of Serote's more consistent early work. Even Jane Watts in a favourable chapter on Serote's poetry is forced to take note of the "discursiveness, repetition, lack of direction and lack of specific form" in long poems of his like No Baby Must Weep and Behold Mama, Flowers. She concedes that neither poem is a "literary masterpiece" and resorts to

several unconvincing lines of argument -- "to acknowledge," she writes, "that the two poems are both genuine searches is, in fact, to recognise the impossibility of finished form. Form can only given when a search has been concluded"²⁵ -- to demonstrate that the above features of his work are in fact virtues.

Although contemporary critics like Jane Watts have made every effort to see in the later work of poets like Serote a developing -- indeed burgeoning -- "discourse of liberation" rather than a mere poetry of "protest", the notion of a coherent black aesthetic would still seem to remain as remote and unformulated as some mythical black value-system. Surveyed as a whole, black poetry since the late nineteen-sixties would seem to consist of a body of work which, rather than bringing to ever greater definition an aesthetic all its own, gives evidence of a number of half-assimilated European poetic conventions. As often as not these are patched together in so makeshift a fashion that, on reading the work, one thinks not in terms of such words as a 'renaissance', of 'breakthroughs' and 'innovations'. Even whilst bearing in mind the kind of political value which critics like Anne McClintock have seen in black poetry's assertion of a counter-tradition, forms which are alternative or directly oppositional to the dominant forms of a ruling culture, one is also reminded of the many forms which cultural impoverishment has taken and continues to take in South African history. What is more, one is led to question what it might be, or might have been, that has meant that the abundant talent and promise first shown in

Mtshali's and Serote's first volumes should still remain largely unfulfilled.

To say this, it needs to be added at once, is not to blame. At least it is not to blame the poets themselves, several of whom have gone to extraordinary lengths in their endeavour to create their work and the possibility of another culture in their country. Perhaps more than any other group of writers in South Africa's history, the Soweto poets and those associated with them have had to produce their work while bearing the full weight, the far from immaterial implications, of all that T. T. Mayana only sketches in his article "Problems of a Creative Writer in South Africa":

The cultures of South Africa are seriously impoverished. The country's history has been too much one of cataclysmic wars and perennial migrations: the wars and migrations of the Mfecane, the treks and attendant wars of the Boers, the perennial movements of Boer and African populations into the cities in search of livelihood, and the uprooting and replanting of African populations prescribed by apartheid laws and that is still going on. Added to this is the compartmentalization of ethnic groups into exclusive units. The total result has been to destroy the cohesiveness of old African communities without the development of a new culture enriched by a diversity of constituent influences Great literature generally operates through the stable vision of a

traditional outlook, steeped in the illuminating symbolism of a rich past. South African society is sadly lacking in those graces, and a writer tends to work in a vacuum.²⁶

Not surprisingly, that vacuum to which both Nkosi and Mayana refer has had effects as limiting as they might be fertile. There is no culture without a recognition of legacy -- a fact underlined, whether deliberately or not, in more than one of the autobiographical statements of the Soweto poets. In an article of his written in 1976, Sipho Sepamla was to confess:

What I have always regretted is the lack of some ideology as a point of departure. My cultural background has too many gaps for me to have a solid base. Like a child growing up in a restrictive home, I have known too many don'ts. Capitalism, which is the only system I've seen in operation, I can't claim to know that well Socialism tends to confuse me because it seems to have too many heads or voices. As for Communism which appears to have gripped many Black writers in America, well, the less said about that swear word in South Africa, the better, I suppose. Even religion tends to make my head giddy. On the one hand are the many teachings and divergent practices of Christianity. On the other are vague outlines of my ancestors' ways. Is it any wonder that my work lacks a

depth of sorts? Is it a wonder that there are very few ideas I tend to toy with?²⁷

Even allowing for the conscious ironies in this statement, it seems reasonable to suppose that Sepamla is not really joking when he alludes to an absence of sustaining cultural foundations for his poetry. Yet, when he goes on to speak in the same place of those who were, at that time, "asserting the Black ethos", referring to Black Consciousness, both a political movement and ideology, which held out the promise of something more sustaining than the culture he had known, perhaps promising an identity that he felt he lacked both as poet and citizen, he was pointing to something which would prove a mixed blessing for black South African poets.

There is no doubt that the Black Consciousness ideology, like Négritude, which provided Senghor, Césaire and other African intellectuals estranged from their roots back in Francophone Africa or the Caribbean, with a "distinctive set of attitudes out of which they could create, a definite vehicle for their passion and energies,"²⁸ gave ideological coherence to black poetry in South Africa. It was to provide many of the philosophical underpinnings of an art-form. It was also to be influential in supplementing the culture, urban, contingent, deracinated, which was felt by poets like Sepamla to provide very flimsy foundations for their own work.

Historically, it was inevitable that in South Africa a movement should arise which urged blacks to liberate

themselves psychologically from the slave mentality imposed on them by the coloniser whites. There is no doubt, too, that Black Consciousness was, as No Sizwe puts it in his One Azania, One Nation, an "historically progressive by-product of the anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist struggles of the twentieth century."²⁹ Being the revenge of the slave on the master, an attempt thereby to establish a new basic dignity for black, it was also bound to have a considerable influence on the arts of the nineteen-seventies.

Right from the start, however, the ideology of Black Consciousness was to come under attack. Baruch Hirson, for instance, noted that the statements the movement produced on questions of race and class or any of the structural problems of South Africa were often superficial.³⁰ Moreover, such political criticisms were rapidly applied to the arts as well. Kelwyn Sole was among those pointing out that Black Consciousness poetry "dwells on the issue of skin colour at the expense of an understanding of the economic causes of exploitation and embodies themes of a utopian past and future."³¹

In fact, the limiting effects of the Black Consciousness ideology lies in something other than the evident truth that it was neither particularly scientific, at least in the Marxian sense of that word, nor as interested in class formations as Sole would have liked it to be. It was disabling for the black poet in much more general terms.³² In its particular effect on poetry, Black Consciousness had its greatest influence not in determining certain themes, such as the assertion of self-identity and

psychological liberation in Serote's "What's in this Black 'Shit'". Much more importantly, it gave to a number of black poets a particular myth of "black experience". This, as Kelwyn Sole rightly points out, was often used as if it had an "absolute explanatory value"³³ in itself. Strangely enough, the phrase came to operate in a way similar to F. R. Leavis' "life", as a kind of authority against whom there could be no dispute, a court against which there could be no appeal. This myth of experience became a guarantor of authenticity; it automatically conferred a kind of privilege, even distinction, barred by definition to those people (presumably whites) who did not have access to it. The presence of the myth of "black experience" was not only to help give definition to the work of poets like Serote and Sepamla; it was to become synonymous with the poetic. Mafika Gwala sloganises in his "Getting Off The Ride":

I ask again, what is Black?

Black is when you get off the ride.

Black is point of self-realisation

Black is point of new reason

Black is point of: NO NATIONAL DECEPTION!

Black is point of determined stand

Black is point of TO BE or NOT TO BE for blacks

Black is point of RIGHT ON!

Black is energetic release from the shackles of

Kaffir, Bantu, non-white.³⁴

These lines clearly contain the Black Consciousness codes for an anti-homeland policy (to be Xhosa or Zulu is to be fooled into giving up the Black claim), and, in the obvious reference to Hamlet, they hold out the promise of identity crises resolved. But there was more to it than this. In such a poem "black" literally becomes poetry; participation in a mystique of "blackness", so-defined, was the place in which the poetic was to be found. Black Consciousness, in short, through its myth of "black experience", seems to have made it unnecessary for the individual poet to bring any further analytic attention to bear upon his or her aesthetic. The latter had, as it were, already been vouchsafed.

Perhaps this was an inevitable, even necessary, self-protective measure for black poets in South Africa. At the same time it resulted in a kind of chauvinism, a turning away from the outside world which, in the longer term, was to prove damaging. To say this is not to subscribe to some colonial or neo-colonial notion of a metropolitan centre whose approval all writers on the periphery should seek to win. It is merely to suggest what in a place less sectarian than South Africa might be accepted as the most basic of truisms: the more writers retain an awareness of worlds beyond their own, the more outward-looking (in this sense) they remain, so much the better for the health of their art. While there are exceptions to this -- most notably Mazisi Kunene who, although an exile, works almost exclusively from his internalised sense of his Zulu heritage -- such examples only go to prove the rule. To attempt to produce a poetry

in the modern era in ignorance of at least some the literatures and aesthetic traditions elsewhere in the world was to confer on it that type of adolescence which has nothing to do with youth.

It was just this ignorance of global frames, though, that the myth of "black experience" helped to justify. It validated, even in advance, the authenticity and poetic nature of the poet's utterance. Thus, ironically, Black Consciousness came to have a role for black poets not dissimilar to the role which romanticism assumed in the career of Sydney Clouts: it licensed a certain avoidance of self-scrutiny and the neglect of many a contradiction -- in the realm of aesthetics not least. If many a white poet during the same historical moment was caught between the impossibility of identifying with 'England' on the one hand, and a fear of fragmentation, of a local culture without distinction (in both senses of that word) on the other, then a black poet was obviously in no less divided a world, living somewhere between the European tradition to which he or she was tied by virtue of the language being used and the reality of the South Africa in which a daily survival was forged. Black Consciousness, in its readiness to reject this obvious dividedness, enabled the black poet to pretend that the tensions generated by it (which included aesthetic tensions) either did not exist or were certainly not worthy of attention.

If this is borne in mind, it becomes more easy to understand why a poet as talented as Mongane Wally Serote should seem to have developed little after his initial

volume Yakhal'inkomo, first published in 1972. Although in later work like the long poem "Time Has Run Out" (included in The Night Keeps Winking) Serote would seem to be working in what may be one of the more significant new genres of modern times, namely the poetic sequence which enables the poet to exercise his or her whole being and (in Serote's specific case) to recover the total experience of being black in the world, his actual poetic practice embodies an aesthetic which has never been duly considered by the poet. Evidently, it is still based on a myth of experience, one not far removed from the aspiration which Allen Ginsberg was to see as being at the basis of his Howl: "I thought I wouldn't write a poem but just write what I wanted to without fear, let my imagination go, open secrecy, and scribble magic lines from my real mind -- sum up my life".³⁵ But, unfortunately, as almost any section of a poem like Serote's "Time Has Run Out" will reveal, in his case the effect of this letting go is considerably less spontaneous or anarchic:

the bright eye of the night keeps whispering and
 whispering
 when it paves and pages the clouds
 it is knowledgeable about hideous nights
 when it winks and winks like that and the stars keep
 whistling
 it will see us one day
 when children, mad at us, will spit and kick us in
 public

they had their trouble; they ask us about the love

we made so that they could be born

for what?

soweto?

please, can someone, my countrymen, say a a word of

wisdom

we need the truth not fiction

when we ask why;

we need to hear words

which, if the lips make them, do tremble

they do so only because they know

they understand the perilous billows of our country

which we've learnt how to ride

not because they fear our stare

or they are angry because we do not believe the report.

alas --

time has run out.³⁶

Here, as in all his longer work, Serote falls into a boringly slack verse-line. There is an endless proliferation of tones without focus. At its worst, his language becomes one which means almost nothing, and is a substitute for everything. Even the most rudimentary critical commonplace, such as the following from Douglas Livingstone, exposes the lack of a necessary aesthetic self-consciousness in Serote's work:

The sprawling technique, or lack of it, militates against the memorability of the work. Many [black]

poets unfairly lame themselves in this They will know what I mean when I say: a worked and moulded snowball can be thrown further and harder than handfuls of snowflakes. (It will also probably resist melting for longer.)³⁷

In his great epic of decolonisation Return to My Native Land (1939), Aimé Césaire strengthens the subversive force of his poem by conscious use of the techniques of Surrealism to work against and throw off the oppressive yoke of French rationalism and its notions of poetic propriety. In doing so he manages to reject (all the more forcefully) the internalised sense of inferiority of his people. In Serote's work, however, nothing remotely comparable takes place. This is clearly because, while the political rebellion which his poetry attempts to enact is not in question, he, like many black poets who came to prominence at the same time, never manages to combine this with a fully-fledged aesthetic rebellion.

This failure becomes apparent from other perspectives. From one point of view, the work of a poet like Serote (and that of the other black poets) can be usefully understood as resisting the sequestering of poetry into a small plot of genteel 'lyricality', breaking with the orthodox lyric prescriptions, exploding the notion of the historical self-sufficiency of the lyric as the core of modern poetry. His poems ("Time Has Run Out" would again provide the relevant example) could be seen as the erosion of the boundaries between the lyric poem and other modes of discourse. On the

face of it, at least, his work would seem to embody a further example of the poetics to be found in Pound's Cantos, particularly if one regards the latter's greatest achievement in the following terms:

Perhaps Pound's chief gift to the contemporary poet . . . is his recovery for poetry of "the comic, the satiric, the grotesque, the narrative," his move beyond the isolated lyric poem (poema) valorized by New Critics like Stanley Burnshaw, the poem as embodiment of "the radiant glory of speech in flight," of crystallized emotion, toward a larger, more capacious poetic form (poesis) that could once again accommodate various levels of discourse.³⁸

It may be the case, as Perloff says in the same study, that "the 'poetic', in our time, is to be found, not in the conventionally isolated lyric poem . . . but in texts not immediately recognisable as poetry".³⁹ In this sense, Serote might even be regarded as one of those aesthetic radicals who have enlarged our very idea as to the scope and nature of poetry in the contemporary world.

Unfortunately, claims of this order can simply not be supported when Serote's work is scrutinised more fully. Although his poetics would seem to have something in common with Pound's, he can hardly be called a post-modernist in the way that is entirely valid for the earlier poet. This is because there is too little evidence in the poetry itself that that form of heightened linguistic self-consciousness

which is post-modernism is really there, informing it at the deepest level. There is no sign that, for Serote, language has become the arena of production rather than representation. On the contrary, his very lack of awareness of the implications of his style, means that, more often than not, his poetry lapses into the style of an unreflective anti-poetry.

Even in this respect it is like the work of other black poets of the period in showing itself to be unaware of the tensions and debates that have informed modern poetry elsewhere in the world. Michael Hamburger in his The Truth of Poetry has given a useful summary of the features of anti-poetry as it appeared in the work of any number of Eastern European poets (among others) after the Second World War. In this type of verse, he argues, both feeling and metaphor are subordinated to an 'objective' function, to the presentation of socially relevant realities. Anti-poetry registers an impatience with the merely decorative word, regarding the invention of metaphors and elaborate similes as a self-indulgent luxury. It is an extreme form of the 'low mimetic', austere dedicated to rendering 'things as they are', in the everyday language which people actually speak. Most importantly, it is a form of poetry which is in explicit revolt against the entire tradition of Romantic-Symbolist verse with its transcendental temptation and ambition to have poetry approximate the condition of music.⁴⁰

Now, even from so brief a definition, it will be apparent that much of the new black poetry has obvious

affinities with European anti-poetry.⁴¹ Oswald Mtshali, for instance, makes this explicit, when he writes:

The English we use in our poetry is not the Queen's language that you know as written by say Wordsworth or Coleridge. It is the language of urgency which we use because we have got an urgent message to deliver to anyone who cares to listen to it. We have not got time to embellish this urgent message with unnecessary cumbersome ornaments like rhyme, iambic pentameter, abstract figures of speech, and an ornate and lofty style. We will indulge in those luxuries which we can ill-afford at the moment when we are a free people. Only then shall we write about bees, birds, and flowers.⁴²

His message is clear: the historical circumstances into which black poets in South Africa have been thrown has made it both impossible and undesirable for them to aspire to the norms prescribed for poetry by the European Romantic-Symbolist tradition. Yet at the same time, Mtshali and his fellow poets (almost without exception) betray no conscious awareness of the exact nature of their revolt and its various implications. The most conspicuous consequence of this is that their poetry frequently indulges in a romanticism which, even in the same poem, they would seem to be attacking and rejecting. Mtshali himself has an undue fondness for "ornaments" and an "ornate and lofty style" -- all too evident in such poetic howlers as "effulgent in the

firmament" ("High and Low") and "a desert mirage of fleeting dreams" ("Dirge for My Passing Years").⁴³ Nor can he seem to avoid the abstract figures of speech, even at times the iambic pentameters, which he denounces as luxuries.

This might not matter. After all, it has been demonstrated time and again that any amount of distinguished poetry has been generated by the tensions between a poet's Romantic-Symbolist and other, contrary leanings. Michael Hamburger has himself argued that there is almost no worthwhile poet who does not harbour within himself or herself an anti-poet as well as a Romantic-Symbolist.⁴⁴ But when the particular poet in question is not especially aware of these tensions, the results tends to be something other than a heightened creativity. This is even more the case if it is the poet's intention to produce a trenchant political poetry. Put simply, the 'message' of the poem has a tendency to blur, if not to be cancelled out or erased, under the series of unconscious tensions warring within the writer. Ingoapele Madingoane's Africa My Beginning, for example, strikes one as the deliberately chopped-up prose of anti-poetry on the one hand, but it is also full of what could be described as romantic excrescences on the other. It wavers between a number of aesthetics just as, thematically and ideologically, it wavers between the ancestors and Marx:

shower my soul of you who love me
play me a tune to soothe my anger
lest i explode to avenge my castration

and reap the wrath of ancient gods
 i beg you colour
 veil of my shame
 peel yourself off me
 and let me be what i am
 for without you
 there is hope
 in this
 tortuous path
 towards the mating of men
 a solid foundation
 towards a true and lasting
 salvation 45

This is an epic, one might say, that attains epic status only in the degree to which it is garbled. Such a poem, far from conveying memorably (say) a new African humanism, says as much, if not more, about the difficulties the poet has had in combining modern and traditional elements, about an eclecticism which is artistically untenable. It suggests the kind of aesthetic no-man's-land that, willy-nilly, many of the black poets have been forced to occupy.

Aesthetic difficulties like these have been more obscured than surmounted when, as the nineteen-seventies advanced, several critics claimed a significant reorientation had become apparent in black poetry. What began largely as a poetry of "protest" -- defined by Richard Rive as that writing which focusses on black-white relations and

addresses "a white conscience inside and outside South Africa on the moral responsibility towards oppressed Blacks"⁴⁶ -- was to change its address, particularly after the Soweto Revolt in nineteen-seventy-six. This reorientation is apparent when one compares the first few stanzas of an early Mtshali poem, "The Master of the House", with any extract from one of the most enraged of the many angry poems in his second collection, Fireflames. The first poem begins:

Master, I am a stranger to you,
but will you hear my confession?

I am a faceless man
who lives in the backyard
of your house.

I share your table
so heavily heaped with
bread, meat and fruit
it huffs like a horse
drawing a coal cart.⁴⁷

A poetry which once sought recognition and justice from whites, now simply asserts equality and spurns debate. In "Flames of Fury" one can see all too clearly a poetry of resistance directed exclusively towards a black audience and its mobilisation for racial war:

Wait for them, brother,
 wait for them, sister,
 be ready;
 flames of fury are coming
 like a wild veld fire
 fanned by a whirlwind of fleeing dwarfs,
 be ready, brother,
 be ready, sister;
 listen to the sound of the war trumpet,
 telling you to cry and gnash your teeth,
 announcing the pains of death
 and the blood that will flow wider
 than the Tugela River in flood,
 when it burst its banks
 to drown the laggard locust.

O yes, my brother,
 and you my beloved sister,
 there will appear in the horizon
 flying machines sweeping like swallows
 that snatch the newly-hatched maggots in the sky,
 and spit flames of fury,
 and squirt swords of poisonous death
 which will leave man and beast roasted,
 peeling off like over-ripe bananas.⁴⁸

In the case of a poem like this, it is not hard to agree
 with Michael Chapman when he finds in it "a vision of a

revolutionary future," a celebration of African "heroism" and an increasing concern

not so much backwards on a bare Soweto existence as forward to a 'pre-Azanian' phase of South African history, one wherein the construct of 'the people', including the participatory ideals of black community, has increasingly begun to function as an inspirational myth.⁴⁹

But it would be equally easy to argue that the second poem by Mtshali, while there is no denying its changed political orientation, exhibits something more significant still. With its odd assortment of near-archaisms ("laggard locust"), the unintentional bathos that does not sort well with the prophetic stance of the poem ("peeling off like over-ripe bananas") and its species of 'space-invader' hyperbole jumbled together with pastoral imagery ("flying machines sweeping like swallows"), it might well reveal far more about the real and terrible difficulties the black poet has experienced in reconciling different traditions than it might about a more progressive political orientation. In fact "Flames of Fury", like much of the later as well as the earlier Serote, is more an exemplification of a set of strains, aesthetic more than political, which can find no resolution in the poetry itself. Their presence suggests not so much a significant reorientation that has come about through a new form of address, but the degree to which the coherence of a Black

Consciousness culture -- perhaps all South African cultures -- have been thrown into confusion.

That these aesthetic strains should find few solutions, in the seventies, as well as in the eighties, is dismaying. But it is hardly surprising either. For the relatively slight achievement of black poetry, as well as its failure to show much development with time, can also be attributed to the fact that it was particularly ill-served by its critics.⁵⁰ Like the majority of those already quoted in this chapter, these critics were more and more inclined to substitute politics for aesthetics not only as the yardstick of all artistic value, but also as the chief means to human fulfilment and transcendence. Common discriminations of value were often abandoned as so much outdated, superseded bourgeois machinery, while a notion of the 'progressive', ideologically defined and aesthetically threadbare, was substituted as the sole measure of literary excellence. Ducking the issues of resonance, quality, and intelligence, Michael Chapman was to end off his review of Serote's A Tough Tale with the words:

That certain things need to be said outweighs any ideal of what is 'poetic'. In its commitment as well as its frustrations, in its expansions as well as its contractions, A Tough Tale finally demands to be taken on its own terms: as contextualised utterance.⁵¹

A rare critic like Lionel Abrahams, who was to remain instinctively suspicious towards what he was to call that

"form of power drive which is the radical approach to things," was to become a voice in an outer wilderness, apparently relegated to the past, certainly solitary, and just as often derided. He himself was to resort to another form of protest:

My deepest quarrel is with the doctrine that literary values like subtlety, complexity, disinterested verisimilitude, individual imaginativeness and general human appeal are bourgeois and Western prerequisites and hence not African.⁵²

But it fell largely on deaf ears. By the nineteen-eighties a poetics of "commitment" had been publicised so widely and confidently that the very notion of the aesthetic had been largely abolished from the critical climate. As a result, local criticism of black poetry would say almost nothing about matters of aesthetics. For critics to call attention so insistently to the political aspects of Soweto poetry was to camouflage, wittingly or unwittingly, any possible aesthetic shortcomings in the work. In its most extreme form, the political imperative could assume such importance that all else, poetry included, was seen to be totally subordinate to it. "What direction does the liberation struggle take in the 1980s?" Serote was to ask in 1980, repeating an interviewer's question. "That is the direction of the black South African poet."⁵³ Jeremy Cronin, similarly, was to argue:

In Serote's poem, "What's in this Black 'Shit'", there is a symbolic dethroning of an individual apartheid functioning. Increasingly, the question has become one of a collective resistance, spearheaded by the working class, and of a material dethroning of the whole system [of white rule].⁵⁴

Not surprisingly, Cronin was unable to suggest how this was to be translated into aesthetic terms. Like many critics, he seemed entirely unaware of the consequences of making aesthetic questions subordinate to the struggle for power and its various, often changing, requirements. It was, of course, to place aesthetics in the same position as morality in the Leninist conception of revolutionary ethics. As David Shub quotes Lenin:

We repudiate all morality which proceeds from supernatural ideas or ideas outside class conceptions. In our opinion, morality is entirely subordinate to the interests of class war. Everything is moral which is necessary for the annihilation of the old exploiting social order and for uniting the proletariat We do not believe in external principles of morality and we will expose this deception. Communist morality is identical with the fight for strengthening the dictatorship of the proletariat.⁵⁵

In practice, such a conception was to lead very quickly to the destruction of even the possibility of a morality. In

the exact same way, the subordination of aesthetics to the interests of South African politics (which often enough meant class war as well) was to help destroy the chance black poets might have had to establish a distinctive poetic.

Although in 1984 Njabulo S. Ndebele in his "Turkish Tales and Some Thoughts on South African Fiction" was compelled to remind his fellow black writers, both fiction writers and poets, of a fairly unremarkable truth -- "All the writer needs to understand is that he can only be genuinely committed to politics through a commitment to the demands of his art"⁵⁶ -- to the black South African poet the kind of distinction Stephen Spender had long since drawn in an essay of his was still regarded as one more bourgeois flight from political realities and responsibilities:

The temptation of the poet is to take over the rhetoric of political will and action and translate it into the rhetoric of poetry without confronting the public rhetoric of politics with the private values of poetry. If there is a sin common to poetry such as Auden's "Spain" . . . it is that the poet has -- if only for a few moments -- allowed his scrupulous poet's rhetoric of the study of "minute particulars" to be overwhelmed by his secret yearning for a heroic public rhetoric. Sensibility has surrendered to will . . . ⁵⁷

But, as will be seen in the next chapter of this thesis, the possible consequences of certain kinds of political rhetoric

have to be taken into account. The distinction Spender is concerned to make, one which has often been forgotten in South Africa since the nineteen-seventies, is based on an awareness that poetry as a weapon of the struggle, and writing in general when seen only as a "discourse of liberation", may well lead to Lebanon rather than freedom.

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14. Mzamane 55.
15. Stephen Henderson, Understanding the New Black Poetry (New York: William Morrow, 1973) 21.
16. Jeremy Cronin, "'The law that says / Constricts the breath-line (. . .)'": South African English Language Poetry Written by Africans in the 1970s," English Academy Review 3 (1985): 26.
17. Mothobi Mutloatse, Introduction, Forced Landing (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1980) 5. The paragraph in which the word donder appears, is worth quoting in full: "We will have to donder conventional literature: old-fashioned critic and reader alike. We are going to pee, spit and shit on literary conventions before we are through; we are going to kick and pull and push and drag literature into the form we prefer. We are going to experiment and probe and not give a damn what the critics have to say. Because we are in search of our true selves -- undergoing self-discovery as a people."
18. Robert Von Hallberg, ed., Politics and Poetic Value (Chicago: U of Chicago, 1987) 237-238.
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21. For a further illustration of this line of argument, see Barbara Harlow, Resistance Literature (London: Methuen, 1987) 31-74.

22. Writing in 1985, Jeremy Cronin draws attention to "a certain slowing down in terms of English language poetry from Africans in South Africa." (37).

23. See Jane Watts, Black Writers from South Africa: Towards a Discourse of Liberation (London: St Anthony's/MacMillan, 1989) 7-55.

24. Oswald Mtshali, Fireflames (Pietermaritzburg: Shuter and Shooter, 1980) 39.

25. Watts 197.

26. T. T. Mayana, "Problems of a Creative Writer in South Africa," Aspects of South African Literature, ed. Christopher Heywood (London: Heinemann, 1976) 12.

27. Sipho Sepamla, "The Black Writer in South Africa: Problems and Dilemmas," New Classic 3 (1976): 24. Even the novelist Mbulelo Mzamane was to write, in an autobiographical statement, "I was painfully aware of a groping, of something lacking in my work, the absence of an ideological framework to elevate my work to the standard I so admired" (Momentum 302.)

28. Richard Rive, "Senghor and Négritude", Selected Writings (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1977) 124-125.

29. No Sizwe, One Azania, One Nation (London: Zed, 1981) 21.

30. See, for example, Baruch Hirson, Year of Fire, Year of Ash: The Soweto Revolt (London: Zed, 1979) 291.

31. Kelwyn Sole, "Culture, Politics and the Black Writer: A Critical Look at Prevailing Assumptions," English in Africa 10.1 (May 1983): 73. But this was merely to condemn the poetry for not being politically analytical in the way that Marxist sociology is political. In any case, embedded in arguments of this sort was the questionable idea that if only this poetry were to exchange the use of such symbols as 'black' and 'white' for the discourse of race and class it would automatically become a more valuable, progressive form of art. Quite apart from there being no logical way of determining how or why this should be so, such a line of argument was based on a fundamental misconception, a forgetting of the fact that poetry, like all the other arts, is a form of symbolic discourse. As Czeslaw Milosz has written: "Dialectical reasoning may be well balanced, but art is not born of dialectical reasoning. Art is rooted in much deeper, primitive strata laid down into the individual by past generations." The Captive Mind (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980) 238. The fact that all black people may not belong to the same class (or class fraction) pales into insignificance when set beside the possible symbolic significance, the emotional predisposition, that the word "black" might create when used in poetry. In the latter context such words are immune to the kind of theoretical criticism that Sole makes for the simple reason that it is not at the level of theory that they make their appeal. "Black" is not being used sociologically to describe a social reality, but rather to assist in its

constitution. Besides, thinking in myth is probably unavoidable in any collective social action.

32. It is worth remembering at this point that the twentieth century has been witness, perhaps more than any other, to the phenomenon of ideologies masquerading as substitute cultures. If any lesson can be learnt from this, it is that real literatures can only be made out of cultures and not through hurriedly cobbled-together ideologies reliant upon one or two half-truths. Just as socialist realism in the Soviet Union, with its relentless reliance on a few tenets such as 'optimism' and 'partyism', was bound to produce an art of ever-diminishing scope, so it now seems increasingly difficult to see how it could ever have been believed that a poetry that had as its central slogan the notion that 'black is beautiful' (and, by implication, the conviction that 'white is ugly') could ever have amounted to very much. No poetry which consists primarily of denying full existential reality to an other (white or black, male or female) can escape from serving the ends of its own emasculation. No literature, whether in South Africa or elsewhere in the world, could have been long sustained by a belief in 'blackness' or 'black experience' and a determination, however understandable, to reject all aspects of white culture, local or foreign, as the work of the devil.

33. Sole 47.

34. Mafika Pascal Gwala, Jol'iinkomo (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1977) 66-67.

35. Quoted by Barry Miles, Ginsberg: A Biography (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990) 187.
36. Michael Chapman, ed., The Paperbook of South African English Poetry (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1986) 172-173.
37. Douglas Livingstone, "The Poetry of Mtshali, Serote, Sepamla and Others in English: Notes Towards a Critical Evaluation", New Classic 3 (1976): 62.
38. Marjorie Perloff, Poetic License: Essays on Modernist and Postmodernist Lyric (Evanston: Northwestern U Press, 1989) 13-134.
39. Perloff 18.
40. These defining features have been summarised from the chapter "The New Austerity" in Michael Hamburger's The Truth of Poetry: Tensions in Modern Poetry from Baudelaire to the 1960s (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972) 242-293.
41. A similar connection has been made by Michael Chapman, South African English Poetry: A Modern Perspective (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1984) 251-258.
42. Oswald Mtshali, "Black Poetry in Southern Africa: What it Means," Aspects of South African Literature, ed. Christopher Heywood (London: Heinemann, 1976) 127.
43. See Sounds of a Cowhide Drum 27; 66.
44. See The Truth of Poetry 346.
45. Africa My Beginning 5.
46. Richard Rive, "Black Poets of the Seventies", Selected Writings (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1977) 74.
47. Sounds of a Cowhide Drum 55.
48. Fireflames 19.

49. Michael Chapman, ed., Introduction, Soweto Poetry (Johannesburg: MacGraw-Hill, 1982) 22.
50. Not to mention its editors and publishers.
51. Michael Chapman, "A Tough Task for the Critic", Upstream 6.3 (Winter 1988): 28.
52. Lionel Abrahams, "My Face in My Place," Momentum, eds. M. J. Daymond, et al. (Pietermaritzburg: U of Natal, 1984) 4.
53. Michael Chapman, ed., Soweto Poetry 115.
54. Cronin, "'The law that says / Constricts the breath-line (. . .)'" : 45.
55. David Shub, Lenin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970)
- 57.
56. Njabulo S. Ndebele, "Turkish Tales and Some Thoughts on South African Fiction," Staffrider 6.1 (1984): 48.
57. Stephen Spender, "Writers and Politics", Writers and Politics: A Partisan Review Reader, Edith Kurzweil and William Philip, eds., (London: Routledge, 1983) 230.

CHAPTER 5**THE LEGACY OF A STRUGGLE:
VIOLENCE IN SOUTH AFRICAN
ENGLISH POETRY**

I

"People," Octavio Paz has written, "have never known the name of the age in which they live, and we are no exception to the rule."¹ It may be that, only two or three years after the events of February 1990, South Africa has already left its brief Prague Spring behind and has entered another unnamed, and perhaps unnameable, territory. Nevertheless, there sometimes comes a moment in a nation's history when it is evident that a certain tide has turned. It may be that South Africans are now living in one of these moments. Even though the malignant tide of this nation's apartheid decades has far from spent itself, it has at least acknowledged ideological defeat, and, like the real thing that consists of saltwater, it has left behind a certain volume of debris, all of it exposed in the clear, often shocking manner of things suddenly left high and dry.

These are no doubt many, ranging from the atrocities of the Civil Cooperation Bureau to the moral morass of Winnie Mandela. But whatever the number, one thing we cannot help noticing with ever-greater clarity is the sheer extent of the wreckage (inter-racial, cross-cultural, nation-wide) left behind by that South African version of social engineering known as apartheid. In the same way that the Czechs, for instance, have lately been forced to realise the terrible cost of the Soviet experiment in their country, so we today are better placed -- indeed horribly placed -- to appreciate the utter disaster of the last four decades of South African history.

We can better appreciate, too, that for all the talk of a new South Africa this is as much a time of retrospection as it might be one given to anticipations of the future. This is, after all, probably the first time in almost half a century that we are in a position to grasp a certain past as past. Exposed to the light of a different era, we are able to look back and see how much now stands revealed for what it is -- or as something other than it once appeared to be.

This applies no less to the arts. When, from this historical vantage-point, we now ask what the poetry of the last decade shows us, what the real evidence of this literature might be, the answer is, as has already been suggested in previous chapters, unflattering. It will be the argument of this chapter that, if anything, the beginning of another era in South Africa's life has suddenly shown the extent to which much of this art has compromised itself, how deeply it has been implicated in the more horrifying aspects of the nation's recent history, and how many of its words belong not simply, merely, to a history of poetic fashions in South Africa.

II

In 1937, one of this century's most famous political poets, Bertolt Brecht, already in exile from Hitler's Germany, wrote a poem whose theme was a provocation to all poets in periods of social catastrophe:

In Dark Times

They won't say: when the walnut tree shook in the wind

But: when the house-painter crushed the workers.

They won't say: when the child skimmed a flat stone
across the rapids

But: when the great wars were being prepared for.

They won't say: when the woman came into the room

But: when the great powers joined forces against the
workers.

However, they won't say: the times were dark

Rather: why were the poets silent?²

The explicit challenge in these lines -- for poets not to be silent, however ominous the historical moment -- has become one of the most common ways of defining the poet's responsibility to society, whether in Nazi Germany or elsewhere. And it is a challenge -- so much is immediately clear -- which has scarcely gone unheeded in the literary culture of South Africa.

Here, in the last ten or so years, the poets have been anything but mute. With energies both loud and bold, they witnessed and protested; they scorned and exhorted. At one moment they flew to Los Angeles to decide if cultural boycotts should be 'blanket' or 'selective'; at another to the Victoria Falls to talk to the African National Congress. They participated in culture-fests at home and abroad, appearing on book-week panels, in schools, at workshops. They formed new cultural organisations, re-named themselves "cultural workers", and helped staff those bureaucracies of trainee censors that went

graced, diplomatically, with the name of a "cultural desk". They debated, and re-debated, the place of their art in the political struggle. And they fought. They fought the government, and they fought its institutions. They fought their language, and they fought the silence. And above all, they fought each other in those artistic feuds whose rancour grows in direct proportion to their pointlessness.

Whether any of this had a significant effect, or whether it was just so much localised sound and fury amidst the greater national cacophony, we will never really know. No doubt this is because the efficacy of poetry can never be measured in the way that, say, the popularity of a consumer product might be gauged through market research. But at the outset we may assume that, however great the expenditure of energy, however loud the voices of individual poets, the actual effects of the poems themselves were always constrained by the limits of the art itself -- by the fact that poetry is an art. "I know that all the verse I wrote, all the positions I took in the thirties, didn't save a single Jew," W. H. Auden once said. "These attitudes, these writings only help oneself. They merely make people who think like one admire and like one."³ Nor could Brecht deny the general truth of Auden's retraction. Even though the German poet wrote pieces like "In Dark Times", as well as satirical ditties in which he mocked Hitler's moustache ("So small a toothbrush for so big a mouth"),⁴ World War II went on, not deflected in the least from the precise and murderous course which it took. In this respect, not one of South Africa's contemporary poets could claim to be an exception from a rule whose relevance is as international as its meaning is chastening.

There is, however, a kind of literary failure about which we in South Africa can be more certain, and much less proud. It is only recently, in the last two or three years, that it has become perceptible. In fact, it has only been possible to see this failure for what it is as a result of one particular word which has newly lodged itself in the minds of South Africans. It is one with which we are all familiar, being as old as the most commonplace nuts and bolts of the English language. But, latterly, it has come to be used in a context, an historical climate, which has served to give it a meaning so new it is as if the word had only just entered the language.

In South Africa five to ten years ago, the word "violence" would most normally have been understood as an epiphenomenon. Thus even in the recent past it was common for political scientists (to take just one example) to use phrases like "structural violence", this being one of the consequences of the many inequalities entrenched in South Africa's social structure. But today the word no longer exists in a subservient, secondary relation to some other primary cause, whether this be the structures of the society, or, more specifically, the South African Police, Right-wing death squads, or simply people made desperate by poverty. Rather, it has quite suddenly, albeit invisibly, undergone a kind of ascendancy, becoming a primary term in relation to which all other terms have been reduced to secondary, somehow inferior counters. In the last year or two, at least three studies (most notably André du Toit's and N. Chabani Manganyi's Political Violence and the Struggle in South Africa)⁵ have appeared which use "violence" as the key-word in their titles. The book that has far outsold the most recent

novels by our best-respected writers, Rian Malan's My Traitor's Heart⁶, owes much of its popularity, I am convinced, to its repeated argument that South Africa is about one thing and one thing only: a violence that is ubiquitous, unceasing, ever-renewing. It is only by recognizing this, Malan insists, that one can begin to understand the place, both in its past history and present calamity. Today, there is even a newly-instituted Centre for the Study of Violence at the University of the Witwatersrand.

It is almost always the sign of something afoot when a word ordinarily no more than one amongst many, suddenly acquires the status of a new verbal deity. In the case of "violence" this is not hard to understand. When so many of the articles in daily newspapers have become little more than verbal body-counts⁷, it is no surprise that the word itself should take on an utterly new, doubly macabre resonance. But it is also true that the prominence given to the word today measures the extent to which its referent -- the actual killing of South Africans by South Africans, daily and nightly -- has become both uncontainable and unspeakable, overflowing the bounds of any categorisation, overwhelming through its horror, its sheer magnitude, any possible causal explanation for it. Thus, phrases like "the violence" are invoked as a kind of helpless talisman, their repeated invocation in the media registering little more than our own lack of control, our helplessness, in relation to that which they designate. Moreover, the generality of the word's reference, its almost pitiable inadequacy in relation to the reality, has rapidly become a kind of perverse, inverted tribute to the truly unspeakable nature of that which defines so much of

the country's life. The word "violence", in short, is our stand-in for that which beggars description.

While the end-point of the South African killing-fields is quite uncertain, their existence has already brought about many changes. Carried beyond a certain point, terror always produces a shift in a culture's scale of values, including several semantic shifts as well. Here, it has led not only to a re-definition of the meaning of several words, but it has also given additional prominence to another species of language. Only a few months ago a foreign journalist, Scott MacLeod filed a story on a "comrade" he had interviewed in Soweto. It included the following two paragraphs:

He says to call him "Che Guevara". He lives in Zola, one of the ghetto districts that make up the black township of Soweto outside Johannesburg. At 22 he is a hardened veteran of the struggle against apartheid. He has killed "enemies of the people" and is prepared to kill again.

Seven years ago he became a supporter of the then outlawed African National Congress. With other teenagers he started stoning police vehicles. When leaders of the liberation movement sought to make the townships ungovernable, he became one of the enforcers. If he caught a family paying rent to municipal authorities in defiance of the rent boycott, he would serve them with an eviction notice. "If they refused to go," he says, "we'd speak to them in the language of the struggle. We'd kill them and burn their houses down."⁸

It is accounts like these -- and they are legion -- which make it hard to avoid the conviction that in contemporary South Africa there are now two entirely different kinds of language engaged in an unequal struggle. On the one hand, there is the type which I am using to write this chapter; on the other, there is that species of discourse which is extra-linguistic, whose main verbs are sticks, stones, spears, bullets, and whose syntax is the essentially mute, sub-verbal one of assault, lynch, rape, and murder. It is sometimes equally hard to escape the impression that if democracy is still absent in many aspects of this culture's life, then it is as nothing to the lack of equality that exists in the relationship between these two species of language.

For those whose faith rests in words not stones, for people like writers, the rapid ascendancy of this new, sub-verbal language has presented another challenge, its unchecked spread generating another kind of trauma. No doubt we are not the first writers to live in a country whose history repeatedly throws up new horrors to render the writer at a loss even as he or she has just mastered techniques for representing the old. But there is little question that an altogether new sense of the fragility of words, their powerlessness, even pitifulness, in relation to those ever-greater areas of life beyond or beneath speech, has lately become an obsession amongst some of the finest writers in this country. In J. M. Coetzee's latest novel, Age of Iron, it is clear that much of the anguish that propels the narrative lies in the narrator's corrosive sense that words, all that we mean by "humane discourse", have no longer anything to say to those who speak "the language of the struggle". Hence the narrator's

outburst as she tries to find a way of living in the "Time of the Comrades", the South Africa of the late nineteen-eighties:

"You do not believe in words. You think only blows are real, blows and bullets. But listen to me: can't you hear the words I speak are real? Listen! They may only be air but they come from my heart, from my womb. They are not Yes, they are not No. What is living inside me is something else, another word. And I am fighting for it, in my manner, fighting for it not to be stifled . . ."9

It is probably more than a coincidence that both the most poignant and dramatically charged moment in Athol Fugard's latest play, My Children! My Africa!, comes when "Mr M", an elderly black school-teacher, who describes himself as a black Confucian, confronts a prize pupil of his who has thrown in his lot with the Comrades and is about to enforce a boycott of the educational system. In reproaching the latter for his recourse to violence, the schoolteacher weighs the two types of language, the one against the other, in a manner as powerfully literal as it is figurative:

[The stone in his hand] No, you didn't need me for lessons in stone-throwing either. You've already got teachers in those very revolutionary subjects, haven't you? [Picks up his dictionary . . . the stone in one hand, the book in the other] You know something interesting, Thami . . . if you put those two on a scale I think you would find they weighed just about the same. But in this hand I am holding the

whole English language. This . . . [the stone] . . . is just one word in that language. It's true!¹⁰

True or not, both the school-teacher and his faith in words ("Don't scorn words. They are sacred! Magical! Yes, they are . . ."¹¹) are soon swept away. In a moment expressive of more than his own plight, he realises that all his wonderful words are "useless, useless, useless!"¹² before being done to death by the other language, the language of stones, spoken by the youths whom it has been his life's work to educate.

Still, this conclusion, so much a sign of the times, is far from being the only revelation which the present has brought home to us. It is, so far as South African literature is concerned, not even the chief one. No doubt, from the perspective of the nineteen-nineties, we are better placed to consider the many paths that have led up to the present reign of violence. We can appreciate, for instance, the justice of the African National Congress' repeated assertion that the appalling killing in the black community has been largely provoked by agents of the State (the purpose being to weaken or discredit the African National Congress along with the cause of black liberation). We can see too the part played by the Left's frequent refusal to question its own endorsement of violence, most recently epitomised by the national organiser of the Pan African Congress and his claim that "Armed struggle is the highest form of negotiation."¹³ It is now clearer than ever that South Africans of all persuasions have long been in love with violence. Privileging its own torturers, each and every side in the political struggle has indulged in what Albert Camus once called (in connection with the Algerian

conflict), a "casuistry of blood"¹⁴, justifying their own recourse to violence by pointing to the crimes of the other side. The Left as well as the Right has made much use of a concept of "good" torture and "bad torture", "good" murder and "bad" murder, the epithet varying as the activity in question favours one's own or the other side. Yet, even while the commentators have stressed that the antagonists in the violence are many, underlining the complexity of its causes, not one of them has drawn attention to the rôle which South African writers might have played in creating a climate for violence.

I, for one, cannot escape the suspicion that if South Africans are currently engaged in killing each other in ever-greater numbers (wantonly, indiscriminately, in ways that beggar description), then this is not just the exclusive legacy of apartheid. Today, we can also see -- perhaps for the first time -- the degree to which many a writer, poet, and critic, has also been implicated in what is now known numbly, helplessly, as the "spiral of violence". For the last ten to twenty years a considerable number of poets, black and white, have been chiefly engaged in paving the road to the cemetery, verbally aiding and abetting the murderous climate that now prevails in this country. Convinced they may have been that they were agents instrumental in the creation of a new, humane culture in which no life would be violated, but it now seems ever more clear that their poems were all along manufacturing little more than that rhetorical seed-bed, the linguistic provocation for and accompaniment to the slaughter which would ensue -- and which, above all, serves to give an identity to the historical moment in which we now find ourselves.

III

On the face of it, this claim -- that many a contemporary South African poet can be numbered amongst those responsible for the piling-up of corpses in present-day South Africa -- may seem preposterous. After all, it is well known that poets the world over most closely resemble the writer in Isaac Babel's story, a figure who, with spectacles on his nose and autumn in his heart, is the very type of person with no skill in nor inclination towards violence.¹⁵ Besides, writers are more or less marginalised figures in our society, their work going unheeded from one year to the next. Unless they happen to belong to a mass organisation and find their voices amplified by this circumstance, even the channels for significant influence, whether for good or ill, simply aren't there. Granted that some poets may have used their verses as a call to arms, but we also know that there is a marked distinction between rhetorical violence and the act of killing.

Or is there? Of the many omissions in those recent academic studies that have tried to explain the proliferation of violence in South Africa, one is most obvious. In none of them is there any mention of the possible effects of a rhetoric of violence on the actual killing that is presently taking place. And obviously for good reason: the connection is somewhat more difficult to prove empirically than, say, the link between widespread poverty and crimes like robbery. Even so, there are a number of historical precedents which establish a direct connection between

the one and the other, demonstrating that between such things as incendiary words and murder there might be less distance than ordinarily supposed.

To take just one example, Simon Schama's Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution, which was published to coincide with the Bicentennial in 1989. Among the many original arguments put forward in this book, Schama deliberately places the Terror at the centre of the Revolution; it is its motor, its energy, its driving force. In his view, that Terror was not only a product of certain institutions in which the arbitrary powers of a revolutionary police state came to be vested, but was also a consequence, in a more profound sense, of the very language of revolution. By examining its rhetoric of violence -- one which he variously describes as idealistic, histrionic, enraged, and paranoid -- Schama seeks to portray the Terror and its carnage not as a mistake, an aberration, a policy compelled by circumstances, or the acting out of Jacobin ideology, but as much the product of a certain kind of language as any other single factor. And thus he is able to conclude:

Historians . . . are much given to distinguishing between "verbal" violence and the real thing. The assumption seems to be that such men as Javognes and Marat, who were given to screaming at people, calling for death, gloating at the spectacle of heads on pikes or processions of men with their hands tied behind their backs climbing the steps to the "rasoir national" were indulging only in brutal rhetoric. . . . But the history of Ville-Affranchie, of the Vendée Vengé, or of the September massacres suggests in fact a

direct connection between all that orchestrated or spontaneous screaming for blood and its copious shedding.

. . . Humiliation and abuse, then, were not just Jacobin fun and games; they were the prologue to killing.¹⁶

Even allowing for the great distance in time and space that separates eighteenth-century France and present-day South Africa, there is more than a fanciful analogy between the two. This will be all the more clear to anyone acquainted with the poetry and other literature of South African in recent times. Even the individual phrases with which Schama seeks to characterise the rhetoric of Revolutionary France have a far from alien ring. In fact, he could easily be speaking of literary culture in South Africa when he writes, at one point, of "a polemical incontinence that washed over the whole country",¹⁷ and, at another, of an historical moment when "nothing outreached the long arm and booming voice of political harangue."¹⁸ He could have been describing some of our most popular poetry of the last decade when he further characterises the Revolution's rhetoric of violence in terms of its "apocalyptic tone", its "hectoring messianism", its "sanguinary hysterics", and "partisan apopleptics".¹⁹ We, too, have had many a poem (or crypto-poem) "tuned to a taut pitch of elation and anger, most striking when it was most punitive, most powerful when it was dividing people into patriots or traitors,"²⁰ the absolutely good and the utterly damned. And the result of it all, I suggest, in contemporary South Africa as in the France of two centuries ago, is fresh corpses in new graves.

Local examples of rhetorical overkill are not hard to come by. By now we have had scores of poems that wallow in the same blood-drenched imagery even as they hymn the same mythology of blood. Again and again they forge the same resolute connection between bloodshed and freedom, the one being understood as the indispensable irrigant of the other. Between the contemporary South African poet who declares that "blood is the life of our struggle"²¹ and the young eighteenth-century Frenchman who was convinced, as Schama quotes him, that "our liberty can only be assured if it will have for its bed a mattress of cadavers,"²² there is far less distance than two centuries. Even when not awash in sanguinary imagery, there are innumerable poems which celebrate militarism, and always with little awareness of the consequences of that which they are invoking. Thus Dikobe wa Mogale's "Baptism of Fire":

. . . our words
 like a butchers knife
 slash through your ears
 the time has come
 for you to reap
 the whirlwind you sowed
 for it is now
 a harvest of fire
 freedom
 is once more
 on the lips
 of the oppressed
 struggle breaks open

like an old wound
 and bleeds afresh . . .
 the time has come
 to strike and parry
 deadly blows as we
 make a final stand
 digging heels
 into the red flesh
 of ancestral soil
 overhead
 iron sharpens iron
 in a baptism of fire.²³

This is, precisely, a "prologue to killing".

Or take, for instance, any stanza from Oswald Mbuyiseni Mtshali's "Flames of Fury":

Yes, brother,
 and you my sister,
 gird your loincloth
 and bellow like a bull bristling with massive power,
 blow your nostrils to blur the sun,
 shake the earth to its rotten roots,
 lick the gunpowder from the rusty cannons,
 clash the shield against the spear,
 let the bullet explode into a weeping droplet of semen,
 let the assegaai sing the sweet song of our victory,
 let death and despair perish into the enslavers'

dungeon of defeat.²⁴

A celebration of Zulu cultural values? An attempt to embolden a people? Perhaps. But whatever else a poem like this may be, it is representative in its conversion, of high political, and even religious, ideals into more elemental notions of the enemy, physical punishment, and blood. Conducting a long flirtation with violence, rhetorically invoking that moment when words will be supplanted by fists, and spears, and bullets, in such poems there is always an absolute collusion between high national rhetoric and undeniably low, dangerous and murderous activities. Moreover, poems like Mtshali's always carry the suspicion that behind the rhetoric and enthusiasm lie infantile, atavistic desires to fight and to kill, to hurt and be hurt. Stripped of their rhetoric, the essence of their message -- indeed, the essence of what poetry they contain -- amounts to little more than the Pan African Congress slogan, "One settler, one bullet."

In fact, a journey through the representative anthologies of the era -- with Mtshali's "acrid dust of hatred / and flames raging for vengeance,"²⁵ with Serote proclaiming "our rage is as red as furious flames,"²⁶ and Don Mattera's warrior "burning the bush with your blood"²⁷ and James Matthews' mind "honed to a cutting edge / to draw blood from the oppressor's flesh"²⁸ -- is like entering a linguistic chamber of horrors. It is all a long praise-poem to the virtues of patriotic gore.

It is undeniable that the road to this slaughterhouse was always paved with the very best of intentions. All these words swollen with blood and tears, and often quite empty in proportion as they were swollen, were not the product of people who were

indifferent to South Africa's suffering. Behind the rhetoric, it is equally clear, lay a well-known pathology of the verbal imagination. Enraged and traumatised as these writers were, it was natural for them to respond as if they believed they could out-stare the horror by imitating it, disarming its power to terrorise through an ever more obsessive mimesis. Thus, perhaps, the tendency of these writers to deal in overblown metaphors ("fire and shrapnel leap horizon's barricade"; "Graffiti screams from a sonorous woman / as the hymens of her sanity rupture" ²⁹) which point more to a kind of thoughtless exhibitionism on the part of the poet than to the suffering which first moved him or her to speak. Nevertheless, under the burden of South Africa's recent history, they have either forgotten or ignored what the English poet, Geoffrey Hill, has called the poet's "empirical guilt", "the tongue's atrocities", "the indecencies of the language" and "its great potential for violence".³⁰ There is simply no discernment of the writer's moral liability for those literary artifacts which he or she has made.

Worse still, in their work any connection between word and thing, signifier and signified, becomes tenuous to the point of non-existence. In a way that is reminiscent of totalitarian societies (linguistically speaking, the latter may be defined as those forms of social organisation in which the arbitrariness in the relation between sign and signified is exploited to the point where almost any stable relation dissolves), we can see how many a poet in South Africa has been seduced into using words without even beginning to consider, let alone imagining, any possible referent for them. That verbal common denominator, blood, becomes in their hands little more than a counter, and almost

never those infinitely precious four or five litres so easily drained or spilled from the individual human body. Glibly invoked, unconsciously decanted into poem after poem, this liquid is made to mean almost anything but pain, suffering, wretchedness -- and a horror that is scarcely believable. So profound has this verbal sickness grown in many a poet's work that, evidently, they stand in the same relation to the actual nature of suffering as did Robespierre to the reality of the massacre of the Swiss guards on 10 August 1792. As Schama describes their fate and Robespierre's reaction to it:

By noontime they were given neither shelter nor quarter. Hunted down, they were mercilessly butchered: stabbed, sabered, stoned and clubbed. Women stripped the bodies of clothes and whatever possessions they could find. Mutilators hacked off limbs and scissored out genitals and stuffed them in gaping mouths or fed them to the dogs. What was left was thrown on bonfires, one of which spread to the palace roof. Other bits and pieces of the six hundred soldiers who perished in the massacre were loaded haphazardly onto carts and taken to common lime pits. It was, thought Robespierre, "the most beautiful revolution that has ever honored humanity."³¹

Throughout the nineteen-eighties, and even before, Mtshali's "sound of the war trumpet"³² found its precise echo and encouragement in the predominant critical idiom of the era. It, too, was a kind of rhetorical bloodbath. Succumbing to that false identification of revolution in life with that of

radicalism in art, the majority of critics were insistent in their demands for a poetry which took revolutionary action as its chief rôle-model. Like the oppressed peoples of South Africa, words, in their view, had to be empowered, while poets had to become politicians of the word in pursuit of a mass constituency. As Lionel Abrahams put it in an issue of the South African Literary Review in 1991, the progressive view entailed the belief that all art was little more than a "means of waging the unending struggle over socio-political hegemony (or, in primitive terms, who -- or which class -- will be boss?)".³³ Thus even the metaphors most favoured by these critics could have been borrowed straight from the training manuals of Umkhonto we Sizwe or the South African Defense Force.³⁴ Thus Jeremy Cronin spoke enthusiastically of a new "insurgent" poetry.³⁵ Almost any contribution to a discussion was, in the terms of that most vainglorious of all expressions, "to make an intervention". Anthologies and other collections were given titles like Armed Vision and Fire with Your Pen.³⁶ During this period even the more arcane languages of literary theory went clothed in a kind of fake activism, as if no self-respecting critical discourse could be dressed in anything but designer military fatigues.

From one point of view, all such fashions might appear to be nothing but innocent enthusiasms -- or desperations. But we are also well-acquainted by this stage of the twentieth century with what may be called the academic "normalisation" of evil and bloodshed. On the basis of their favoured idiom, South African critics may well have made a contribution to this "normalisation" as great as that made by those who once used the Bible to justify the domination of one race over another. Even if their acts of

verbal barbarousness had few ways of percolating through to the society at large, creating the rhetorical seedbed for actual crimes of violence, they nevertheless provided every stimulus for individual writers to continue fraternising with blood.

In the humanist tradition, at least, much has been made of the ways in which language might corrupt and be corrupted. George Orwell argued in his classic essay, "Politics and the English Language", that the English of his era was decaying as a result of that "calculated mendacity" which, in his view, defined almost all modern politics. When the main goal of politicians was to lie, it was inevitable that language should attempt to disguise itself with every kind of long-windedness and verbal obfuscation -- in the same way, Orwell says memorably, "as a cuttlefish squirts out ink".³⁷ A later figure in the same tradition, George Steiner, has long argued that it is perfectly possible for a language to get what he calls "the habits of hell" into its syntax, particularly when it has been implicated, as the German language once was, in a policy of systematic extermination such as the Final Solution.³⁸

However, as far as I know, not nearly so much has been made of what is probably the main agency (at once the most seductive and most corrupting) through which words forfeit their human meanings and take on barbarous ones. In South Africa, as elsewhere, this process of corruption normally begins to set in when a language is pressed to over-reach itself. Provoked by one or other historical catastrophe, poets along with other citizens feel duty-bound to ignore what might still be called the 'natural station' of language in life, and press it into action. To alter somewhat Mandelstam's famous sentence, there is nothing so fatal

for "the life of the word" than for it to enter an "heroic era".³⁹ In this circumstance, it is not enough that words designate various concepts or objects, they must themselves become an act. Instead of referring to one or other activity, they must transcend themselves by becoming that activity. This not only generates a new vocabulary -- a kind of verbal giantism in which words are hugely inflated by their activist pretensions -- but something of a new aesthetics as well. If there has been one unusually distinctive aesthetic in South African poetry in the last ten years, it may well have been defined by the efforts of many a local poet to transcend words in a lyrical apocalypse of that which they repeatedly invoke -- blood.

Yet, as the Greeks knew, reality has a way of taking its revenge on all that overreaches itself. From the perspective of the nineteen-nineties, we are able to contemplate several unamusing ironies. We are, for instance, able to see that the language of our most fervent, liberatory poems is often no more than a facsimile of the language of its greatest enemy; linguistically-speaking, there is an exact moral equivalence. When one of South Africa's most prominent political figures was recently reported as saying "the government leaves us no choice but to rise up in the struggle to defend our living space and our freedom with the necessary means at our disposal,"⁴⁰ this could have been Chris Hani rather than Dr Andries Treurnicht. And so it was with our poets. Their rhetoric was based as firmly on the shibboleths of Romantic nationalism -- "blood, honour, soil" -- as Afrikaner nationalism had long been.

More ironical still was the fact that, throughout the recent past, it was simply taken for granted that the words of poets

could only be empowered if poets gave their services to mass organisations. Those who remained independent -- freelance, so to speak -- were, by definition, impotent, their poems without power. Yet, today, having witnessed the un-alienated people's poet working up his or her audience into a kind of collective frenzy in which the individual becomes submerged and unconsciousness (i.e. the possibility of evil) grows exponentially, we may better reflect that those were never in a position to have their words amplified in the rage of some collective heart, may at least have escaped implication in that war for which the "un-alienated" word so often called. Moreover, they may have escaped a further bitter irony. For many years by now, the more apparently radical among the poets have striven to make of their poems cultural weapons in the struggle for freedom. But we know from recent events in South Africa that so-called "cultural weapons" -- assegais, sticks shod with iron, pangas and spears -- can kill people no less surely than those weapons less obviously cultural like R4 rifles and AK47s.

Worst of all the ironies, perhaps, was the mounting evidence that this poetry was based on a value entirely at odds with freedom. Its rhetoric might seem vacuous (and therefore harmless) enough, but the value underpinning much of it was not. Behind it lay the frequent conviction that words derive their meaning altogether from force -- and from nothing else. There was, in short, a profound, if unconscious, nihilism in much of this poetry. Embedded in it was no such value as liberty, ardently fought for, passionately sustained. There was rather the slave's knowledge that might makes right, that power is meaning, that words are authenticated, if ever, not by the Logos

but by spilt blood. Not only was this an aesthetics forever on the side of the powerful, the victors, rather than the powerless or the defeated. It also generated much work which was as imaginatively atheistical, as inherently oppressive as is any other activity whose basic word is power and power alone. It produced many a poem whose radicalism lay not in the vehemence of its protest, its penetrating dialectics, but in the supreme value it attached, nihilistically, to the freedom of brute force.

No-one, having bet everything on the requirements of political struggle, should be astonished if, sooner or later, they are forced to confront the violent fruits of such a wager. When, late in his life, Ezra Pound was asked why he had forbidden anyone to listen to a magnificent recording he'd made years earlier of his reading of his "Sestina: Altaforte", a poem in which, in the mask of Bertrams de Born, he praises war, he is reported to have paused a long while before replying. "War," Pound said, " -- is no longer -- amusing."⁴¹ In present-day South Africa, awash as it is in bloodshed, it is no longer very amusing either -- indeed, far from the humorous -- when one reads lines like the following from the anthology I Qabane Labantu: Poetry in the emergency / Poësie in die noodtoestand, first published in 1989:

bring your luggage

makarov

limpet mine

grenade

pangas

bombs
 molotov cocktails
 stones
 Pula pulani

don't leave
 your luggage
 behind!⁴²

For the same reason there is today something literally repugnant -- physically repulsive -- in the idiom much exploited by contemporary South African poets in their efforts to empower their verses. When one of the best-intentioned of them speaks of a road block at which "the pigs are smiling / a glint of death in the eye / blood oozing",⁴³ one should not be surprised if he should now see his lines not as a powerful flourish, tribute to his skill in the metaphors of hate, but as a patent addition to that thoughtless cocktail of rhetorical violence which often culminates in still more people losing their lives. Nor should any writer who has laboured so long to make his or her words simulacra of the killing, the lynch, the ambush, be surprised if they now stand quite helpless, doubly empty-handed, even disgusted with themselves, in the face of the actual carnage.

"I believe," Simone Weil wrote after the defeat of France in 1940, "in the responsibility of the writers of recent years for the disaster of our time."⁴⁴ And she went on to explain that the great sickness of her own era, the first half of the twentieth century, was what she called "the growing weakness, and almost the disappearance, of the idea of value."⁴⁵ She cited the

examples of French Surrealism and Dadaism, movements which, in her view at any rate, suggested "the intoxication of total licence, the intoxication in which the mind wallows when it has made a clean sweep of value and surrendered it to the immediate." And she spoke particularly scathingly of the Surrealists for having chosen the total absence of value as their supreme value: "Men have always been intoxicated by licence, which is why, throughout history, towns have been sacked. But there has not always been a literary equivalent for the sacking of towns. Surrealism is such an equivalent."⁴⁶

Whether South African poets and their critics agree with Weil or not, there is every reason to believe that they, too, are responsible for the disaster in their own country. Having invoked war for so long, their words inflated by bloodthirsty, death-dealing pretensions, and having glorified armed struggle and militarism in so many poems, they too have swept aside many values in a kind of intoxication, aiding the progress of society down that famous path envisaged by Dostoyevsky's Shigalev: "Starting from unlimited freedom and aiming at unlimited despotism." But as the violence continues, they might be forced to recall, with shock and dismay, that if there is anything that distinguishes the poet from others who speak his or her language, it is, as Alexander Wat once put it, the former's responsibility for every word used, his or her instinct to "rediscover not the meaning of each word but only the weight of each word,"⁴⁷ its possible effects, its bearing on humaneness. And so that people may realise afresh what it actually means -- what is entailed in reality -- when the slogan "Freedom or Death!" is chanted; so they may no longer go in criminal ignorance of the reality hidden

under a mask of noble phrases; and, most of all, so that human blood may not be seen as the necessary yeast of freedom, the fertiliser of every authentic liberation, but as those humble four or five litres per body which, when spilled, tends to fertilise nothing but greater barbarism and misery.

IV

There is a sentence worth recalling at this point because it expresses a predicament which might explain (and even justify) the kinds of rhetoric that I have been pointing to. "Every age," W. H. Auden wrote in his essay "The Poet and the City", "is one-sided in its political and social preoccupations and in seeking to realize the particular value it esteems most highly, it neglects and even sacrifices other values."⁴⁸ In a country like South Africa, in which for many the supreme value has long been that of liberation, it becomes perfectly understandable that language should be dragooned into the struggle, being used as a further weapon with which to attack the enemy and enflame the fighting spirit of one's comrades. If this has meant that a number of writers have become corruptors of the word rather than its custodians, then this simply could not be helped. For we know, too, that the task of harmonising all values is an impossible one, in theory as much as in practice, and that this is an inescapable, if melancholy, aspect of the human condition.

But to argue in this way is also to ignore something else. It is to forget that in the sphere of poetry, at any rate, we are not necessarily fated to be the victims of the dilemma

encapsulated in Auden's sentence. Being an art, the activity of poetry is not forever forced to choose between the mutually exclusive possibilities of being politically powerful, on the one hand, or spiritually and morally compromised on the other. No doubt today it is unfashionable to use the word "spiritual" (and its cognates) in any discussion of literature. Nevertheless, there is a way of defining that word which does not entail a belief in any particular religion or suggest that I myself am ripe for conversion. Scheler, the twentieth-century German philosopher, for one, once remarked that the human being was not only a conscious being but also a spiritual one. He defined the latter as one who is able to say "no" to his or her immediate environment. In this basic sense, no human being can fail to be engaged in activities which are, in Scheler's phrase a "manifestation of spirit".⁴⁹ In these terms, too, we can understand why the art of poetry is modally a spiritual one. It makes possible imaginary acts of disobedience against the limits imposed by the human condition. Even in the act of positing other worlds, however make-believe, this art of words is inherently metaphysical. It has the potential to create another space, to by-pass and therefore defeat those existential conundrums which seem to require, as if by an inflexible law, the violation of a language for the sake of political empowerment.

This can be further illustrated by looking beyond South Africa. Recently, an English translation of one of the more important books in Polish literature was published. It is entitled My Century: The Odyssey of a Polish Intellectual and it consists of the memoirs of a Polish writer, Alexander Wat. His life was both extraordinary and terrible, a modern odyssey which

having carried him through the major upheavals of this century, fully justifies the somewhat grand title of the book. Wat was involved in the Dadaist movement in Warsaw; he became the editor of Poland's most important Communist cultural periodical; and he was to spend years as a prisoner and exile in the Soviet Union. He died in 1967, but not before speaking in his memoirs of the need for a certain kind of antidote to the disease which he saw afflicting the youth of the Soviet Union:

In order to liberate themselves from Stalin's heritage in their souls, they must first "detach themselves from the enemy". Like a snake shedding its skin in the springtime, they must throw off not only any concern with Stalinism, communism, revisionism, but those ugly words themselves. In that sense the free people are not Andre Voznesensky, Yevtushenko, or Tarsis but people like Joseph Brodsky, the Solzhenitsyn of Matronya's House, the Tertz-Sinyavsky of his last (apolitical!) works. Political thinking has become so distorted and corrupted during this long long half century that one has to begin by tearing it out, roots and all, from one's soul to prepare the ground for a healthy and humane politics that fosters the virtù of the free citizen. . . . Of course, acts of political rebellion, and, even more so, a political rebellion in the mind, are useful things because they can squeeze concessions from the rulers. [But] personally, I see the hope of Russia not in them but in life itself, existence (Sein) in an utterly different spiritual space.⁵⁰

This might seem a far-fetched hope. The necessity for it might also seem to have been rendered obsolete by recent break-up of the former Soviet Bloc. Yet I, for my part, do not believe it to be irrelevant when the blood-stained legacy of much of South Africa's poetry is borne in mind. For a long time now, most of us in this country have been obsessed with anything but an "utterly different spiritual space". We have been obsessed with the twin co-ordinates of politics and history, forgetting that whatever the legitimacy, even necessity, of our fascination with these, if we are oblivious to another dimension, another "space", we are most likely to fail as poets -- and as something more than poets. For what is the result of this obsession, after all these years? Spasms of violent historical change, on the one hand; and a literature which twitches and convulses bloodily on the other. But I think that by this stage we can also see that history, our own South African history, is a curse rather than a boon, and that if our literature stands in need of many things at the moment, then it is for a measure of its autonomy and independence from social pressures to be restored. History will, almost assuredly, go on producing its clamour, up to its elbows in blood. But there is every reason why literature should not respond mimetically, slavishly; and why there might be some point were it to show itself to be a little more squeamish, taking to heart a plea like Andrei Sinyavsky's in his A Voice from the Chorus: "Words must not shout. Words must be silent."⁵¹

Poetry, far from being history's minion, aiding and abetting its uncertain progress, is, if it is anything at all, actually history's antagonist. Pre-eminently so; modally so. It is in this art's often ignored capacity to call into question, even

refute, the historical, existential, and linguistic orders through which we are compromised again and again, which is at the root of its spiritual power. Appropriately, there is a further illustration of this in a book by another Polish poet and essayist, Stanislaw Baran zak's Breathing Under Water (1990).

Almost all the essays in this collection deal with the same over-riding theme, that of the "Recalcitrance of Literature" in the face of "History's Immovability" (Baran zak's capitals). For this writer, not only history but existence itself is a kind of petty totalitarianism writ large -- random, cruel, heartless, vicious, inhuman, abnormal, anti-normal. But in the same way, Baran zak argues, that political dissidence matters in a totalitarian political context, so poetic dissidence matters in the existential context: "Every good poem, by its sheer emergence and existence, appears to be, on its own miniature scale, History's spoilsport." And he goes further:

History may compel us to think that the individual and his personal world-view do not count in the general picture; and yet poetry stubbornly employs and gives credence to the individual voice . . . History may teach us abstract thinking; and yet poetry insists on seeing things in their specificity and concreteness . . . And finally, History may demonstrate by millions of examples the continuous triumph of Newspeak, a deliberate and systematic falsification of words' meanings; and yet a single good poem is enough to counter all this tampering with language by making the reader aware of the word's hidden semantic possibilities.⁵²

This is, of course, Barančzak's way of suggesting how literature might create that other "spiritual space" of which his compatriot, Alexander Wat, once spoke. More importantly, it is another way of indicating how it is that poetry is modally a spiritual activity, a way of saying "no" to one's immediate environment. Still more importantly, it is another way of recalling that even if our historical moment is especially violent, then the art of poetry will also have failed if it should become implicated in this moment, and, for whatever large-hearted motives, wade into blood as well.

IV

Needless to say, there have always been those in South Africa who have had nothing to do with a rhetoric of violence; who have, ironically, never sought that kind of institutional backing which might amplify their voice to a murderous bellow; who have, in a word, kept their distance from all that tends to brutalise. But I note only that these writers are amongst those who have been least praised by the majority of South African critics in the last decade.⁵³

Poets work with the lightest of all raw materials. In essence, they are craftsmen and -women of breath. But this would hardly seem credible to anyone reading or re-reading much of our recent poetry, so freighted is it with imprecations, injunctions, steel, and bile, and blood. No doubt history will always tempt poets to assume the rôle of the poet of the Russian Revolution, Mayakovsky, who was once proud to declaim: "I shake the world

with the might of my voice."⁵⁴ Yet the unfortunate, often destructive consequences of such bombast will always bring to mind the example of one of Mayakovsky's contemporaries. In praising a handful of his fellow-poets, it was Boris Pasternak who created a metaphor the very disjunction of whose terms epitomises everything which recent South African poetry seems to have forgotten. It was he who said both more modestly, truthfully, and memorably than anything in Mayakovsky: "we were the music in the ice".⁵⁵

To all that I have argued, the response might well be: does it really matter? If there had been more music in the ice of our own era, less blood and gore in the poetry of the last decade, more equivocal calls to arms, more ironical treatments of the heroic death and 'legitimate' massacre, and a more conscious recognition of what knives, bullets and burning tyres actually do -- would this have made any difference at all to the daily body-count? In the context of South Africa, where poetry really is a minority sport, are such scruples anything but academic? Besides, don't we have to allow for the possibility that the reading of even the most exemplary, linguistically fastidious books might lead to something morally deplorable? In other words, isn't what we might call the ethics of reading much more complicated than my argument might imply?

To be sure, there is no way of establishing empirically the degree to which the rhetorical violence in recent South African English poetry has contributed to the climate of killing that defines South Africa from one day to the next.⁵⁶ But I also know that none of us can ever be certain of the consequences of even our smallest, apparently irrelevant concerns, particularly when

it comes to matters of language. In any event, we know that the imaginary spaces created by the arts, while perhaps being replicated by nothing in the world, have a way of re-arranging our inner furniture such that they do make a material, if often invisible, difference to the way we conduct our lives. If words brutally invoked, and brutally deployed, were as responsible as the guillotine for much of the bloodshed of the French Revolution, then perhaps it is not unreasonable to suppose that those used with other ends in view may not be so readily implicated here and now, in South Africa in the daily loss of lives. Poor in political spirit they may appear to be, but perhaps they will not be so strangely silent, guiltily tongue-tied, bereft, as much of our poetry now appears to be when faced with the evidence, the blood for which it has often bayed.

At the very least, many a South African poet cannot plead innocence, nor expect to be taken as an innocent bystander, when he or she now points in horror and outrage at the present killing. When along with so many others they refer to some "third force", allegedly responsible for many of the killings, they should not be surprised if they are reminded that language -- in fact, their kind of language -- has been as much the "third force" as any other mysterious agency. Nor would they have a sound basis on which to object if any reader should now come to the conclusion that much of what they have written belongs not to the history of South African poetry, but rather to the history of murder in South Africa.

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30. The phrase "the tongue's atrocities" is to be found in Geoffrey Hill's poem "History as Poetry," Collected Poems (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985) 84. The manner in which 'poetic' rhetoric may incite atrocities, the collusion between poetry and history, is also a constant theme in Hill's interviews and other writings. See, for instance, John Haffenden's Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation (London: Faber and Faber, 1981) 79-99. In this interview Hill again suggests that the poet as well as the demagogue is all too capable of linguistic atrocities.

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50. Alexander Wat 199-200.
51. Andrei Sinyavsky, A Voice from the Chorus (London: Fontana, 1977) 77.
52. Stanislaw Baran czak, "The Revenge of a Mortal Hand," Breathing under Water: And Other East European Essays (Cambridge, Harvard U, 1990) 244.
53. Writing in a Cape a Town newspaper, Andries Walter Oliphant produced the representative type of dismissal: "Literature emanating from the English petty-bourgeoisie remains, as before, permeated by liberal humanism. These poets [he is referring to Lionel Abrahams, Douglas Reid Skinner and Basil du Toit] seem committed to unhistorical and abstract notions of human subjectivity and their central aesthetic of universality remains Eurocentric in origin and reference." South 23 Feb - 1 Mar 1989: 10.
54. Vladimir Mayakovsky, Mayakovsky, trans. Herbert Marshall (London: Dennis Dobson, 1965) 104.
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56. Yet a direct relation between language and violence was again underlined when in the Cape Times (April 23, 1992: 5) it was reported that "in another bid to end violence, the National Party Peace Secretariat . . . warned political leaders who did not stop their war talk that they would be brought to book. The secretariat . . . gave vent to its frustration in trying to implement the National Peace Accord at local and regional levels

and then having these undermined by political leaders' outbursts."

CHAPTER 6**THE PROBLEM RECONSIDERED:****THE LOST TRANSCENDENCE**

I

The conclusion of Chapter 5, which dreads the implications of an unreflective language of violence, returns my thesis to poetry's ancient claims of redemptive mythology (whether of nationalism or of, simply, emotion). The problem of the appropriateness or viability of the various myths around which various poets from 1820 to the present have tried to organise their work was opened by Chapter 3, where I argue that the myth of a specifically political redemption for South Africa has not nourished poetry in English. Considering such an argument stated, I need to continue the discussion of mythology in South African English poetry because of a conviction that despite its failure to date, South Africa needs a poetry of transcendence more desperately than one knows how to describe.

What cannot fail to strike any reader of South African English poetry is the fact that, whatever the variousness of the myths themselves, they are seldom if ever used with any stylistic force. Even later than happened to be the case in Australia, a country in which modernism, as Vivian Smith notes, "starts to enter . . . by the end of the 1st World War" and in which central figures in American modernism like Wallace Stevens, Carl Sandburg and Conrad Aiken were starting to be known in Melbourne by 1918,¹ this poetry had a tendency to be traditional and deeply derivative, often following worn-out paths long since abandoned in the mother country.

Paging through any anthology like Michael Chapman's A Century of South African Poetry (1981), one is rarely conscious

of Pound's aesthetic imperative to "make it new"; the poems are mostly instances of old wine in older bottles. Even when Chapman purports to see in the verse of one of the Veldsingers of the first two decades of this century, Mabel Alder, an exemplification of some of the central aesthetic convictions of Imagism, the evidence of the verse itself does not really support his argument. Her "The Street of Peacocks" begins:

Far up the shadows of the street,
Between a rift of timbered walls,
A tender light of earthly sun
Bestowed a golden shaft of gleam,
And birds of snow, with unheard calls,
Passed on the ray, and, one by one,
Departed from the street of dream.²

Phrases like "a golden shaft of gleam" are precisely those abstractions or admixtures of the concrete and abstract, like "dim lands of peace", whose use Pound specifically proscribed for the modern poet in his "A Retrospect".³

In fact, that major poetic revolution of the English-speaking world in the twentieth century, modernism, arrived late in South Africa, as did all other aesthetic revolutions, and then only in either dilute or mangled form. Writing in 1970, R. G. Howarth was correct to observe:

A test of progress in literature throughout the English-speaking world is the incidence of modernism. . . . South Africa, apart from an upsurge of literary vitality in the

twenties and the current revival of poetry, may also be said to be as yet largely untouched by the movement. The reasons for this apparent backwardness lie in the loss of writers to England and in an exaggerated regard for and a somewhat timid dependence on overseas achievement along with a certain conservatism of practise.⁴

To date there is even less evidence that the "Pound-Williams tradition", identified by Majorie Perloff as "the central tradition of postmodernism" in the English-language poetic tradition⁵, has begun to be assimilated by South African English poets. Nor is it possible -- this being one of the chief difficulties of writing a coherent history of this poetry, or even putting together a coherent anthology⁶ -- to trace in its haphazard historical development any systematic process of modernisation as successive generations of poets move to assimilate and adapt for local use the innovations of romanticism, then symbolism, modernism and beyond. In fact, in the case of South African English poetry we are dealing with a literature which confounds, inadvertently, most of the usual categories: modern/postmodern, romantic/realist, symbolist/immanentist, confessional/deep imagist, and so forth.

Now a skill in assimilating and utilising the various discoveries of poetic modernism, particularly from the era of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, is not necessarily a sufficient virtue in itself for any poet. Yet, as Joseph Brodsky has also observed:

if the standards of modernism have any psychological significance, it is that the degree of their mastery indicates the degree of a writer's independence from his material or, more broadly, the degree of primacy of an individual over his own and his nation's predicament.⁷

In other words, in Brodsky's view that style of aesthetic extremism which is modernism -- a going to the very edge of existence, and beyond -- enables the writer to reach a position where his or her art attains a kind of mastery over life, and the latter has to live up to the demands of the former, and not vice versa.

Judged from this perspective, the prospect presented by South African English poetry is a melancholy one. It is not simply that in a country whose intellectual traditions are as rudimentary as those in South Africa many an overseas innovation either gets mangled in its adaption or assimilated in such a way as to produce a quasi-modernism, a semi-surrealism, an anti-poetry by default rather than by design. Even in the the work of poets most widely and highly regarded for their modernism, no doubt Sydney Clouts, Douglas Livingstone, and to some extent Ruth Miller, the stylistic extremism (if it could be said to exist at all) fails to constitute an avant-garde, a deliberate moving beyond or overturning of aesthetic conventions so as to alter the ways of seeing in society at large and thus bring about a change in its consciousness. In any event, the innovations of poetic modernism re-surface in South Africa so long after the modernist movement's historical apex in the West (usually taken to be the nineteen-twenties) that its ostensible aesthetic

radicalism is always muted in this context by the knowledge that such things -- or at least similar things -- have been done elsewhere beforehand and often done better. For example, a Sydney Clouts' poem anthologised so frequently as to seem almost a 'classic' of South African poetry hardly adds much to that crisis of language and representation so often seen as definitive of the modernist movement as a whole:

After the Poem

After the poem the coastline took
its place with a forward look
toughly disputing the right of a poem to possess it

It was not a coast that couldn't yet be made
the subject of a poem don't mistake me
nothing to do with 'literary history'
But the coast flashed up -- flashed, say, like objections
up to the rocky summit of the Sentinel
that sloped into the sea
such force in it that every line was broken

And the sea came by
the breaking sea came by⁸

"Modern poetry," Octavio Paz has noted, "is inseparable from the criticism of language, which in turn is the most radical and most virulent form of criticism of reality."⁹ Nevertheless, in this parable of world defeating word and then, ironically, revealing

the latter's mastery of the former even as it declares its own defeat, there is never any sense of that blasting of the roots of utterance itself, such as we get in Eliot's The Waste Land, in the late poetry of Osip Mandelstam or in the poems of the great South American poet César Valléjo. The impression is not dissimilar in the case of Douglas Livingstone poems like "Stormshelter", sometimes cited¹⁰ as an example of a modernistic stay against the chaos of an unfathomable, relativistic world, but which lacks even the grace of the inward gaze:¹¹

Under the baobab tree, treaded
 death, stroked in by the musty cats,
 scratches silver on fleshy earth.
 Threaded flame has unstitched and sundered
 hollow thickets of bearded branches
 blanched by a milk-wired ivy. Choleric
 thunder staggers raging overhead.

'Never stand under trees in a storm.'
 Old saws have an ancient rhythm
 in them, but these dry, far from bold
 norms and maxims are scalpel-severed
 by the sharp, needle-thin lightning,
 frightening reason behind the eye,
 slivered into lank abstract forms.

Steel spears, slim, yielding and stained
 lightly with water, rattle their points.
 Jointed the hafts swing, tufted brightly,

maiming invisibly. The shafts reel
 through the streaked Impi from Nowhere.
 There is only one thing to do --
 wheel, stamping, into that brittle rain.¹²

Fine as this is in its way, both grimly and cheerfully stoical, there is nothing in it which carries the implicit threat, the controlled and yet unfathomable emotional desperation of Eliot's "These fragments I have shored against my ruins".¹³ Even in the poetry of Wopko Jensma, clearly written in English imitation of that German and Central European anti-poetry made internationally known in the nineteen-sixties through Penguin's famous series of "Modern European Poets" in translation, the extreme literalism with which he treats such topics as the psychopathology of everyday life in South Africa tends to flatten it to such a degree that it is reduced to the far more deadening everyday life of psychopathology.

It is rare indeed that we are aware of any South African English poet making a conscious effort to define or develop a poetics. Even that basic aesthetic self-consciousness -- how do we perceive? how do we record our perceptions? what do we take these perceptions to mean? -- is conspicuous by its absence. Moreover, the history of South African poetry in English has known no-one like a Robert Graves, for instance, who has insisted that poetry is an entity different from all others, not an amalgam of philosophy, religion, politics, romance, or anything else, but a mysterious thing in its own right, demanding special and rigorous dedication from special people. Apart from Sydney Clouts, perhaps, there has been a dearth of those who, rejecting

the idea that the poet was simply the mouthpiece for moralised ideas or 'messages', have regarded the practice of poetry as essentially the effort to discover (and re-discover) the meaning of the poetic in their particular time and place.

II

This refusal of a poetic practice, in its own right, as a source of social revelation reinforces another impression as insistent as any other: the felt lack of radicalism in the poetry itself. No matter whether the poet or poem in question seems to have been driven to the very boundaries of language by the stress of experience, by the loss of someone beloved and the subsequent work of mourning; whether it is politically radical in the vehemence of its call, say, for a classless, people's republic of Azania -- one's sense of the fundamental conservatism of the poetry remains as obdurate as its stylistic conservatism is manifest. Where there does seem to be a concerted attempt to undermine conventional poetic diction, as in Sydney Clouts again, the poetry itself remains, as was argued in Chapter 1 of this thesis, incoherent even when apparently original. For the rest, though, South African English poetry appears quite content to remain wedded to an aesthetic of realism, one which is, moreover, seldom haunted by that problem of the real, that hunger for the real, which is often at the basis of the most radical innovations in art and which is not to be confused with a mere taste for the banal.¹⁴

It should be untrue that South Africans are generally more backward or spiritually ill-equipped than people elsewhere in the world. Nevertheless, to be acquainted with poetry from countries elsewhere in the world, particularly in the twentieth century, is to be reminded that the insubstantial quality of most local poetry is largely because the poets have not been able to bring themselves into coherent relationship with international traditions and aesthetic revolutions -- in short, to modernise themselves. What we get, therefore, is a sense of existential poverty in the poetry which seems the counterpart of that thinness of texture in the daily life of South Africa which has often been pointed out.¹⁵ It is the kind of thinness, the inadvertent poverty, that is produced, willy-nilly, by those who have evidently not had the technical means to deal with their experience, and modern experience especially. South Africa itself, especially since 1948, has become notorious as one of the uniquely evil societies on the planet. Yet if the reader surveys the poetry once more, he or she will quickly discover that almost no poet has convincingly shown the ability to develop a creative means of confronting evil or of probing the roots of violence and reaction in the human being and society as a whole. (Nor, interestingly enough, has the evil itself found a poetic representation which could even hint at the incessant intent of its attack.) Instead, what the poems normally offer up are bland accusations concerning the nastiness of South African policemen, the awfulness of apartheid, and protestations concerning the unbudgeable goodness of those who have had to suffer both. But these are mere caricatures of that world of evil which is inseparable from the moral world as we know it. By now there is

in this poetry many a rote characterisation of the "Boer" as a paragon of brutality, but hardly any explorations of that cruel sensuality that underlies so much human evil. While there exist innumerable poems calling down imprecations on those who wield power in South Africa, there is virtually no work which examines power as such and the calamity it represents for all those -- almost always in the majority -- who are condemned to suffer it. Not surprisingly, it is in the poetry, therefore, rather than the evil practice or persons whom it is concerned to attack that there appears an echo of Hannah Arendt's "banality of evil".¹⁶ Eschewing, as it mostly does, any introverted gaze and exploration of the private realm, almost always avoiding in its self-confident extroversion the far from transparent or innocent workings of the human psyche, this is a poetry which regularly presents us with an almost ludicrously simplistic (and therefore irresponsible at the deepest level) conception of the human being. For the most part it all has the analytic and artistic complexity of a three-frame cartoon strip. This is especially true of anti-apartheid poetry, and protest poetry in particular. It enacts a drama of evil which tends more or less to be on the same level as a Punch-and-Judy show.¹⁷

It is as one further consequence of the same general stylistic conservatism that one cannot help feeling that the poetry never quite gets to the heart -- any heart -- of the matter. This is evident in all sorts of other areas of common South African experience as well. The exile poetry of Arthur Nortje, for instance, while it is clearly traumatised by the experience of uprootedness and the corrosive way in which this can operate upon the self and its identity, never gives the sense

that is penetrates through to the terrible heart of human solitariness. Even poems of his like "Waiting" or "Up Late" cannot compare, at least in this respect, with narratives like Robert Frost's "A Servant to Servant", even though the latter has nothing to do with a politically-motivated exile.¹⁸ The prison writings of Dennis Brutus have an undeniable documentary value, as is evident from the second poem in his Letters to Martha sequence:

One learns quite soon
that nails and screws
and other sizeable bits of metal
must be handed in;

and seeing them shaped and sharpened
one is chilled, appalled
to see how vicious it can be
-- this simple, useful bit of steel:

and when these knives suddenly flash
-- produced perhaps from some disciplined anus --
one grasps at once the steel-bright horror
in the morning air
and how soft and vulnerable is naked flesh.¹⁹

There are of course numerous occasions on which poetry becomes a witnessing in the most literal sense, being able to do no more than record that something happened, when it did, and as it did; further commentary is either superfluous or impossible.

But lines like Brutus', however deliberately flattened and understated, have been run down into the pedestrian, the downright drab. Things as they are -- as they journalistically, drably, are -- are here presented without imagination or vision, as though these latter were deceptions, as though a prose-drabness by its oppressive presence confirms the poem's authenticity. In any case, a prison poem like this, which tries to suggest the kind of stratagems to which humankind turns in its nakedness, falls far short of embodying that kind of naked insight into the powers that poetry itself might possess as a mechanism of survival. After his brutal incarceration in a series of Soviet prisons during the Second World War, the Polish poet Alexander Wat, for instance, was to affirm:

I knew poetry was a consolation, and something more than that as well: a wretched creature, subjected to misery of every sort, struggles towards beauty from the abominable depths of his misery. . . . Let the critics discourse on the structure of poetry, linguistic entropy, metonymy -- poetry fulfils itself when it is an act of heroism."²⁰

Of course there have been a few writers, in South Africa and elsewhere, whose radicalism has nothing to do with politics and is not even the expression of a particularly passionate love of justice or liberty. (I am thinking of writers like J. M. Coetzee and certain aspects of the work of poets like Ingrid Jonker.) These are the writers and poets who have been radicalised, pushed to certain extremes in their art, not through ardent political convictions, but through pain and their sensitivity to suffering.

Their creativity is galvanised not so much by the possibility of a more just world, but by the evidence, say, of natural injustice, of all that cries out against life itself. For them, real literature issues less from noble sentiments and a love of liberty than from their awareness of a discrepancy, precisely, between consciously held beliefs and inner realities. Looking inside themselves, they might find no spontaneous belief in democracy, no immediate conviction as to the essential liberty of the human being and his or her inalienable rights. It is through discrepancies like these, producing an inner protest, issuing often enough in confession, that their art is forged most powerfully.

Nevertheless, even the indigenous varieties of "confessional" poetry (which are more likely to come from the above kind of writer than the more committed one) are subject to the same kinds of criticism already made of political poets like Dennis Brutus. With the exception of the Afrikaans poetry of Ingrid Jonker, perhaps, none of it can stand comparison with the savage, expressionist force of Sylvia Plath or Anne Sexton, and the profound personal sense in which they reiterate Luther's "Ich kann nicht anders." Unquestionably, to be a poet means to live with inner tensions that most other human beings would ordinarily (and perhaps wisely) try to dispel as quickly as possible. It means confronting oneself over and over, particularly those aspects which are least in harmony with the self one might prefer to be. It is to incline, if not to solitude and introspection, then at least towards that inner life in which the imaginal may be found and found again. It is to push oneself repeatedly against all resistances, most especially those inner ones which

are the most obdurate and fearful of all. It means, not least, the preparedness to undergo the pain of many a death and that other pain involved in an equal number of rebirths. But if one looks, for instance, at the work of a sexually solitary and obviously tormented man like Charles Eglinton, one sees at once that he has not, in his work, faced up to the problem which obsesses him: sexual anguish. His style is almost deliberately hammered into the shape it assumes in order to immunise himself against the menace in his sexual emotions. He has not gone to his deepest fears and confronted them -- something which no serious artist can ultimately avoid doing.²¹

As for the "first and last things", those literal matters of life and death whose reality was made more urgently, sometimes despairingly, real as a result of the enlistment of a generation of South African poets in the Second World War, this never gets much beyond a justifactory religious humanism, undoubtedly moving in F. T. Prince's "Soldiers Bathing" but hardly able to keep company with T. S. Eliot and his religiously-inspired later work like Four Quartets, in which the human spirit in travail makes such inordinate demands on language and on the reader's understanding. Poetry undoubtedly entails all that Plato intended when he said that to philosophise was to die, but Prince's finale now seems more a kind of wallpaper disguising the cracks beneath than a justification of the ways of God to men:

These dry themselves and dress,
Combing their hair, forget the fear and shame of
nakedness.
Because to love is frightening we prefer

The freedom of our crimes. Yet, as I drink the dusky
 air,
 I feel a strange delight that fills me full,
 Strange gratitude, as if evil itself were beautiful,
 And kiss the wound in thought, while in the west
 I watch a streak of red that might have issued from
 Christ's breast.²²

Ironically, even at the time of this writing there seems to be more genuinely religious sentiment, as well as the certainty of love, both earthly and supernatural, in a passage from J. M. Coetzee's latest novel, Age of Iron, than in any South African English love poem that could be cited, Douglas Livingstone's not excepted. At one point his dying protagonist writes to her absent daughter as follows:

In every you that I pen love flickers and trembles like Saint Elmo's fire; you are with me not as you were when you left, but as you are in some deeper and unchanging form: as the beloved, as that which does not die. It is the soul of you that I address, as it is the soul of me that will be left with you when this letter is over. Like a moth from its case emerging, fanning its wings: that is what, reading, I hope you will glimpse: my soul readying itself for further flight. A white moth, a ghost emerging from the mouth of the figure on the deathbed. This struggling with sickness, the gloom and self-loathing of these days, the vacillations, the rambling too . . . -- all part of the metamorphosis, part of shaking myself loose from the dying envelope.²³

While there is no doubt that there has long been a basic streak of existentialism in South African life, its bitter history having provided many a tableau of existential chaos -- of vertigo, pandemonium, immeasurable absurdity, multiple disorder; that sense of the world, in short, as "a combination of a slaughterhouse, a bordello, and an insane asylum"²⁴ -- this seems to have led neither to a radical questioning of the very grounds of existence nor to a particularly far-reaching attention to the human condition considered in itself. Hampered by its aesthetic conservatism, the poetry is for the most part prevented precisely from questioning anything too deeply. Thus despite the attempts of Ruth Miller, for instance, to confront the human condition in its naked terror in poems like "Pebble" and "Cycle"²⁵, there would still seem to be a more penetrating, if not chilling, existential truth in a Kafka aphorism -- say, "A cage went in search of a bird"; or "Some deny the existence of misery by pointing to the sun; he denies the existence of the sun by pointing to misery"²⁶ -- than in any number of the poems prompted by similar matters. There is, even at this late stage in the history of South African English poetry, often enough more spiritual depth, and in a sense more poetry, in a random selection from a Simone Weil notebook than in the entire tradition of this poetry:

Monotony is the most beautiful or the most atrocious thing. The most beautiful if it is a reflection of eternity -- the most atrocious if it is the sign of unvarying perpetuity. It is time surpassed or time sterilized.²⁷

Everywhere, in the words of Aeschylus, the human being "suffers unto truth," and the truth that must be recognised is the fact of his or her finitude. Nevertheless, even though other South African poets like Lionel Abrahams in collections like The Writer in Sand (1988) and Don Maclellan in his Collecting Darkness (1989) and Letters (1992) have tried to feel on their pulses the pressure of this finitude, writing a poetry which, even more than philosophy perhaps, is a preparation for death, their work scarcely generates that species of religious insight found in the poems of Thomas Hardy. The latter, in producing a lyric poetry that constantly comes up against those human limits which cannot be overcome, those existential mysteries which cannot be 'solved', nevertheless gives to the reader that kind of wisdom, ordinarily so difficult to articulate, the substance of which is also adumbrated in these otherwise unrelated words of the contemporary German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer:

What a man has to learn through suffering is not this or that particular thing, but the knowledge of the absoluteness of the barrier that separates him from the divine. It is ultimately a religious insight -- the kind of insight that gave birth to Greek tragedy. Thus experience is experience of human finitude. The truly experienced man is one who knows that he is master neither of time nor of the future. . . . Experience teaches us to recognise reality. What is properly gained from all experience, then, is to know what is. But "what is," here, is not that or that thing, but "what cannot be done away with" -- Ranke.²⁸

The inescapable reality of human finitude is obviously no more than one of those existential limits to the crucifix of which each individual life cannot ultimately avoid being nailed. Of course, since human beings are social creatures there is much that they can suffer which justice, equality and fraternity are able to redeem. But since they are also natural creatures there is much else they cannot do anything about: illness, aging, separation and death. There are, in addition, any number of other limiting conditions the contemplation of which can never be alien to a poetry or a literature which aspires to say something for humankind. Leszek Kolakowski's eloquent contemporary redefinition of what used to be called original sin -- here given in terms of those contradictions or paradoxes which people have a perennial interest in ignoring -- deserves to be quoted at length if only because it forcefully enumerates the other kinds of existential reality that almost all South African poetry, particularly the political sort, is constantly engaged in denying:

Our corruptibility is not contingent. We pretend to know this but rarely examine the relevance of this knowledge to our hopes. We pretend to know that nothing is evergreen, that each source of life is eventually exhausted and each concentration of energy finally dispersed. . . . We pretend to know that no consistent system of values is possible and that at every step values that we consider important become mutually exclusive when we attempt to apply them practically to individual cases; tragedy, the moral victory of evil, is

always possible. . . . We pretend to know that creation is a struggle of man against himself and, more often than not, against others also, that the bliss of love lies in hopeful dissatisfaction, that in our world death is the only unity. We pretend to know why our noble motives slide into evil results, why our will towards good emerges from pride, hatred, vanity, envy, personal ambition. We pretend to know most of our life consists in taking flight from reality, and concealing this reality from ourselves. We pretend to know that our efforts to improve the world are constrained by our biological structures and the pressures of a past which has moulded us and which we cannot leave very far behind. All these things, which we pretend to be aware of, compose the reality of original sin -- and yet it is this reality that we attempt to deny.²⁹

It scarcely needs saying that this is a reality no less present in South Africa, in the past as in the present, than anywhere else in the world. Yet to gain an awareness of this, as well as the extraordinary stresses such an awareness can impose on language, one could not turn to any of the poetry contained in Michael Chapman's landmark anthology, A Century of South African Poetry (1981), nor to his later The Paperbook of South African English Poetry (1986), or the still more recent anthology edited by Stephen Gray, The Penguin Book of Southern African Verse (1989). One would have to go to T. S. Eliot or, alternatively, the poetry of Geoffrey Hill. Even the versions of Villon included in translation in George Steiner's Poem into Poem: World Poetry in Modern Verse Translation (1970) will put the modern

reader more firmly in touch with all that is implied by Kolakowski than any South African poet.

Even the predominant empiricism of South African English poetry, militantly secular as it mostly is, never carries with it that sense that we get from a Philip Larkin poem like "Aubade" or "Ambulances", both of them late humanist pieces that have the force of something as nearly radical as reality itself.³⁰ We have no great poems, like Eugenio Montale's "The Prisoner's Dream",³¹ which are at once a radical protest against both political tyrannies and the existential limits, biological and otherwise, which are an unavoidable part of human existence, each aspect being given added resonance by the simultaneous presence of the other, the ceaseless human war against personal extinction being fought in tandem with the other war against an oppressive state. Those who have not insisted, at least once, Albert Camus wrote in The Rebel,

on the absolute virginity of human beings and of the world, who have not trembled with longing and impotence at the fact that it is impossible, and have then not been destroyed by trying to love half-heartedly, perpetually forced back upon their longing for the absolute, cannot understand the realities of rebellion and its ravening desire for destruction.³²

Existential protest of this order, even though traces of it are indelibly present in Olive Schreiner's The Story of an African Farm (this being part of the enduring power of that novel), is simply not to be found in South African English poetry. Not in

Guy Butler nor Charles Eglinton, Ruth Miller nor Sipho Sempamla and Mafika Gwala, is there evidence of a sensibility enraged or outraged in the demands it makes of the world for an unconditioned existence. If there is a sign of any emotional absolutism, it has less to do with Camus' sense of the word "rebellion" than it has to do with that kind of emotional totalitarianism, that "poesy of totalitarianism" as Milan Kundera calls it, which is "the age-old dream of a world where everybody would live in harmony, united by a single common will and faith, without secrets from one another."³³

In literature of any genre no amount of political radicalism can ever succeed in being an effective substitute for the potentially radical consequences to be discovered in the pursuit of a style. Pursuing the demands of his or her art, submitting to the dynamics of a language, the poet is led to discover, and re-discover, that interplay between ethics and aesthetics which is nowhere more intimate than in literature. It is by reaching after new, hitherto undreamed of shades of meaning, for example, that the poet is able to give definition to a new sensibility. This in turn is what allows his or her audience to detach itself from immediate circumstances, from the captivity of time and place, to better judge the value (or otherwise) of these circumstances and to attain a better sense of what life is for. In this sense, aesthetics is one of the forms of moral insurance any society can possess.

This inseparable connection between aesthetics and ethics is, however, weakened to the point of non-existence in all varieties of inferior, stylistically unformed or immature types of writing. By the same token, the connection is renewed in much

work that is stylistically innovatory. Hemingway's early prose -- to take him as one example -- could hardly be said to abound in moralisms, but there is an ethics in it which is so much at one with his aesthetics as to be synonymous. In any of the "Inter-Chapters" in his In Our Time (1925) the apparently simple, slightly a-rhythmical declarative sentences, coming one after the other, are in fact a way of recording not just the brutalities of twentieth-century history, but are a way of regarding all experience as such. His periods operate in a similar fashion. They are a further means to focussing on what is, but also a way of affirming, even declaring, that what is is. In other words, the ethics of the style of an innovator like Hemingway are not be found in his male "code", but in something that cannot be codified: a steadiness (a rigour) in the perceiving eye of the writer. His is a style which says, implicitly but emphatically, that the immoral is to be found in the refusal to recognise (i.e. a refusal to acknowledge) the reality of what is -- that which in Gadamer's quotation from the historian Ranke, "cannot be done away with."

It is in this sense, too, that none of the South African English poets to which we are referring could be said to have a style at all. There are no singular ethical imperatives wedded to their aesthetic imperatives. Their various styles cannot be said to serve that basically spiritual process of detaching the reader from his thralldom to his time and place so as to enable him better to grasp both and perhaps to resist the temptations of his era. What is more, the failure to pursue the questions of aesthetics -- all that we mean by matters of style -- has some possibly even more damaging implications. If we grant that

language is the medium through which life finds its meaning, then the matter of style, being inseparable from the matter of language, is obviously intrinsic to whatever sense we might have of this meaning. A poetry which ignores or displays little awareness of this condemns both itself and its audience to triviality and meaninglessness. If it is not about its own stylistic self, then the chances are that poetry will be about nothing in particular at all.

The possible consequences of what I have called South African English poetry's stylistic conservatism do not stop here. A still further consequence of this, and the related existential weakness, is the indelible sense that the bulk of South African English poetry is almost too comfortable, even cozy, in its transactions with the world; it appears to squat quite contentedly in whatever section of society it situates itself; its very relaxation seems a form of decadence. To say this is not necessarily to call for the extremism that A. Alvarez, for instance, demanded in his Penguin anthology, The New Poetry, in the early nineteen-sixties; nor is to call once again for that hyperaesthesia -- the feeling that "every idea must be directly emblematic of concentration camps, alienation, madness, hell, history and God"³⁴ -- which is scarcely among the more attractive features of the modern mind. But it is to recall, as Alvarez does elsewhere, the kinds of challenge that the nature of much twentieth-century experience has presented to the artist and writer. As the atrocities of our time have grown in size and frequency (in South Africa as much as anywhere else), there has been, Alvarez writes,

the absolute need to find an artistic language with which to grasp in the imagination the historical facts of this century; a language, that is, for the 'destructive element', the dimension of unnatural, premature death. . . . Clearly, books of this order will not be written simply by invoking the atrocities -- a gesture which usually guarantees nothing but rhetoric and the cheapening of all those millions of deaths. What is required is something a good deal more difficult and individual: the creative act itself, which gives shape, coherence and some kind of gratuitous beauty to all those vague depressions and paranoias art is heir to. Freud responded to the First World War by positing a death instinct beyond the pleasure principle; for the artist, the problem is to create a language which is both beyond the pleasure principle and, at the same time, pleasurable.³⁵

Certainly, an acute, indeed traumatised awareness, of the kinds of horror that have had a particularly South African kind of extremism to them, is alive in Mongane Wally Serote's much-anthologised "A Poem on Black and White":

if i pour petrol on a white child's face
 and give flames the taste of his flesh
 it won't be a new thing
 i wonder how i will feel when his eyes pop
 and when my nostrils sip the smell of his flesh
 and his scream touches my heart
 i wonder if i will be able to sleep;

i understand alas i do understand
 the rage of a whiteman pouring petrol on a black
 child's face
 setting it alight and shooting him in a pretoria
 street

Serote's work, however, has often shown an uncertain ability to develop a theme. As the second half of the poem loses the clarity of the moral dilemma expressed in its first half, wandering off into the abyss of the writer's own pain, it can hardly be said to meet Alvarez's test:

pretoria has never been my home
 i have crawled its streets with pain
 i have ripped my scrotal sack at every door i
 intended entering in that city
 and jo'burg city has never seen me, never heard me
 the pain of my heart has been the issue of my heart
 sung by me
 freezing in the air
 but who has not been witness to my smile?
 yet, alexandra's night shadow is soaked and drips
 with my tears.³⁶

Whatever else this may be, it has clearly not found Alvarez's language which is beyond the pleasure principle and also a source of pleasure at the same time. There is desperation here, but it is not a creative desperation.

In the end, it might seem illegitimate to look for the absurdist vision of an Ionesco or the post-modernist one of a Samuel Beckett in the rather different urban (or suburban) nightmare of South Africa. Still, there is a sense in which a demand for something of the stylistic extremism of these writers may have a purpose and point, even in the South African context. Without something like this, we are given poems like those mentioned in this chapter, in almost none of which do we sense a fulfillment of that purpose which Stanley Kunitz is surely not wrong in seeing as one of literature's chief functions and justifications in any corner of the world: "Where else but in the free country of art is it possible to tell the whole unspeakable truth about the human condition?"³⁷

III

In point of fact, all of the above factors, in whatever combination, do nothing so much as contribute to an overriding impression of spiritual malaise and spiritual poverty in the poetry itself. This is perhaps the general feature of this poetry most difficult to talk about, at least without courting intellectual embarrassment, particularly in the context of literary criticism and theory in the late nineteen-eighties and early nineteen-nineties. By now we are all too aware of that almost complete collapse of belief in religious systems and rituals that occurred early in the present century, how this defined the very climate of the 'modern', and how this loss of the supernatural world was felt by many writers to have emptied

life and the world of meaning. We are aware as never before of the degree to which all that is connoted by the religious may be little more than "illusory fulfilments", in Freud's words, "of the oldest, strongest, and most urgent wishes of mankind"³⁸ and that poets and other writers, at this late stage in the twentieth century, may be able to offer in their work no more than the bleak conclusion to which Freud himself comes towards the end of The Future of an Illusion: "Thus I have not the courage to rise up before my fellow men as a prophet, and I bow to the reproach that I can offer them no consolation: for at bottom that is what they are all demanding . . ."³⁹

Nevertheless, even though science might have exiled the soul from the human body, effectively destroying such things as a belief in the divine order of the universe, it is clear that there is something about the human condition that demands a dimension we call religious, whatever it might be, and that nothing has ever displaced the religious presence itself from human life.⁴⁰ It is still possible to proceed on the assumption that the spiritual needs of human beings are not simply the alienated form of their longing for justice and fraternity, that these are an expression of ineradicable psychic drives as well as the consequence of facts about our situation which no amount of social engineering can hope to change.⁴¹ Besides, if the human being is, as the Greek philosophers rightly supposed, a being between god and beast, then any poetry which does him or her justice must necessarily concern itself with a cognitive area extending from biology to theology. Poetry might look like "nothing", Mayakovsky wrote in his last lines before his suicide

in 1930, "like a flower beneath a dancer's heel." But it is also, he affirmed, "man in his soul, lips, bones . . ."42

Even now, it is not too much to ask that a literature answers to a range of needs of this sort, and that, without having to fulfil the role of a substitute faith, it nevertheless mediates between the material and spiritual worlds, offering in itself what Salman Rushdie has called "a secular definition of transcendence."43

Of course, it would be unhistorical in an age of prose to expect of poetry that it should still posit Plato's "world on the other side of the sky" or similar tropes of transcendence, but there is no denying that, as Steiner has said, a rigorously secular poetry is altogether rare and that without the presence of a metaphysics, however vestigial, a poetry tends, precisely, to forfeit that tension between secular and sacred, this world and other, which has so often defined the poetic in the Western tradition. The American critic and editor, Helen Vendler, in the introduction to her choice of poets for The Faber Book of Contemporary American Poetry affirms precisely the loss of the transcendent as a going concern in contemporary American culture:

. . . all these poets write within a culture in which physical science has replaced metaphysics as the model of the knowable. The epistemological shift towards scientific models of verification has caused the usual throes of fundamentalist reaction in American culture, as elsewhere; but there is no significant poet who does not mirror, both formally and in preoccupations, the absence of the transcendent.44

Yet it would be equally easy to demonstrate that the opposite proposition is just as true. Not only is it no coincidence that three of the great English-speaking poets of this century, Yeats, Eliot and Auden, were all "religious" in their very individual ways, but it could be argued that to this day there is no poet of abiding interest, either in America or England, who does not show evidence of a preoccupation with the transcendent, even if it is with its bleak absence. To suggest that such a preoccupation is a thing of the past would be automatically to cut out dimensions of psychological, existential and philosophical interest, to assist in an amputation of the spirit which would register itself at once in a personal shallowness in the individual poet's work and an impoverishment in his or her culture at large. Aesthetic experience cannot but be greatly diminished if and when it becomes divorced from the idea of the spiritual. As George Steiner puts it, succinctly, in his Real Presences:

What I affirm is the intuition that where God's presence is no longer a tenable supposition and where His absence is no longer a felt, indeed overwhelming weight, certain dimensions of thought and creativity are no longer attainable.⁴⁵

Whether any notion of God is tenable or not in South Africa, his presence is seldom felt in South African English poetry. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that of all the barren areas in this poetry over the last few decades, it is precisely that which is designated by words like "metaphysical", "spiritual",

"transcendent" which has been most scorched. In the poetry of same most recent period, there is more than one poem which (as was implied in the argument in Chapter 4) tells the reader how to kill a human being, but almost none as to how he or she might make a good death (as not only the Christian faith would put it.) Just as the language of the soul has been overtaken by the languages of the social sciences, spiritual issues have more often than not been supplanted, perhaps defeated or erased, by the ascendancy of the language of politics. In a brilliant conceit in his essay "French Poetry and the Principle of Identity," the French poet Yves Bonnefoy, noting how common it is to say of English poetry that it "begins with a flea and ends in God," maintains that "French poetry operates in the other direction, beginning, when it can, 'in God' and 'ending' in the love of the most commonplace object."⁴⁶ Extending the metaphor, one might say that South African English poetry moves from a flea to apartheid, from God as redeemer to God as the political weapon of the missionaries. If we do come across the odd poem which tries to respond to political imperatives experienced as personal imperatives as well, then many of the other impulses which might not matter in material or political terms (but which in terms of the whole human personality and its psychic wholeness certainly do matter) usually go begging.

This is evident even in the more obviously religious poetry which has been written in South African English. There is in fact no lack of verse which makes use of themes and symbols supplied by religious tradition. In much of it there is plenty of evidence of a longing for the security of hallowed values; this can be seen, for example, in the following stanzas from Guy

Butler's "To a Statue of the Virgin (Seen near Les Baux,
Provence, July 1947)":

But we are men for whom
All miracles are dead.
Our dry days drag and wander
To various silly deaths.
Blase, or catching our breaths,
We pose, or fidgit, or ponder
Before a padded tomb.

Girl, give us what we need:
Bring taste back to our bread,
Revive the country dance,
Bless the barren bed.
Kindle, if only once,
Such love of heaven and earth
That we may get a glimpse
Of the glorious star above
The sordid stable birth.

Girl, give us what we need:
No, not Time at all
Nor all Eternity,
But simply one split-second,
Outside, beyond to Fall:
One static moment, freed
From the drum-beat of the sea:
A pause between two pulses,

A moment unlit by the sun
 Where nothing has ever been done
 Or ever been left undone . . . 47

Yet when the same poet writes in the first two stanzas of his invocation, "Whoever-Whatever-You-Are",

Come.
 The hour is yours,
 the invitation open and urgent.
 Come.

With whom am I pleading?
 I do not know,
 but, Whoever-whatever-you-are,
 come, come.⁴⁸

there is not much evidence, in the poetry, of soul-making and that which invariably underlies it, genuine spiritual struggle or travail.⁴⁹ Perhaps it is unrealistic to believe that there could be an art of poetry, today, that could continue to carry the full burden of religious meanings. When the symbolic order supplied by Christianity is no longer supported by wide agreement in society, at a time in which the high tide of materialism and consumerism continues unabated, it would require a miracle were such poetry even to appear. If it did, it would be an equal miracle were it to achieve an even partial spiritual efflorescence. In South Africa, no less than elsewhere, modern mass culture, aimed at the consumer, is as busy as ever in

setting up barriers between human beings and the crucial questions of existence, such as their very awareness of themselves as spiritual beings.

No doubt contemporary men and women live within and toward a kind of "secular horizon", governed chiefly by the shifting limits of technological enterprise. Doubtless it is that much more difficult, in the late twentieth century, to draw a picture of the human being in the face of ultimate transcendence, compelled to register dimensions of experience which can neither be evaded nor fully comprehended. Nor would it be a modest demand to ask of any poetry today that it reach not toward a knowledge, as David J. Levy puts it, "of the finite items and processes of the world but to a grasp of the transcendent ground of being -- that which must be in order that any thing can be at all."⁵⁰

Nevertheless, a commitment to any specific religious doctrine or dogma is not what is required or entailed by my particular argument. If the notion of a personal deity no longer has much credibility for poets or others today, it has hardly stopped the more important poets world-wide from seeking out the possible ways in which their art might continue to express the inalienable spiritual impulses of the human being. Even though the first and second generation romantics in nineteenth-century England had demythologised the Christian God, they enthroned in His place the God that was Imagination. To them, all other gods were a semiosis for Poetic Genius; the ancient Hebrew prophets were poets. In the twentieth century, poets like Wallace Stevens have extended the meaning and significance of the imaginative faculty. In the arresting passage which concludes his essay

"Effects of Analogy," Stevens suggests how poetry itself might still promise a kind of transcendence for human beings, how, in the words of his famous statement, "after one has abandoned belief in god, poetry is the essence which takes its place as life's redemption."⁵¹ Alluding to those writers who "speak, with intense choosing, words that we remember and make our own," he defines a kind of secular transcendence, a spirituality without spirit:

Their words have made a world that transcends the world and a life livable in that transcendence. It is a transcendence achieved by means of the minor effects of figurations and the major effects of the poet's sense of the world and of the motive music of his poems and it is the imaginative dynamism of all these analogies together. Thus poetry becomes and is a transcendent analogue composed of the particulars of reality, created by the poet's sense of the world, that is to say, his attitude, as he intervenes and interposes the appearances of that sense.⁵²

The creator of "the necessary angel of earth" was hardly willing to turn his back on everyday reality. Quite the contrary: he insisted that "the poet must get rid of the hieratic in everything that concerns him and must move constantly in the direction of the credible." He insisted, moreover, that the poet "must create his unreal out of what is real," and (supremely) he insisted that poetry "is an interdependence of the imagination and reality as equals."⁵³ In this balance of imagination and reality which was his declared ideal Stevens sought that

"transcendent analogue" which would continue to supply people with a fullness of meaning during a time which was otherwise faithless. Thus for him, as for many other poets working in the tradition of romantic modernism, the spiritual was not a matter of religious themes, but a function of the operations of the imagination. It was this that still held out the hope that a humanly appeasing, indeed enlivening, richness and depth could inhere in poetry, making it possible for it to contribute at least an illusion of spiritual substance.

In literature, it is naturally all that we mean by the imagination which answers to the spiritual needs of the human being. Perhaps the most internationally famous of late twentieth-century novelists, the Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez, was referring to just this, albeit indirectly, when he suggested in a recent interview:

The only reason you go back and read an author again is because you like him. Well, what I like about Conrad and Saint-Exupéry is the one and only thing they have in common -- a peculiar way of approaching reality which it makes it seem poetic even when it may be quite mundane.⁵⁴

In the same vein, we find Eugene Ionesco maintaining: "Writers who try to prove something are unattractive to me, because there is nothing to prove and everything to imagine."⁵⁵ In South African English poetry, however, there is a notable lack of just this imaginative capacity, an inability to take the mundane, to transform it poetically, and to create thereby a legitimate place for the miraculous and for those symbolic

solutions which, though they might not necessarily be objectively true, enable people to adapt better to their world, to find a myth which might give to their lives purpose, structure, meaning. When, earlier in this chapter (and throughout Chapter 3), I spoke of an effect of thinness in this poetry, I was also referring, albeit indirectly, to the kind of imaginative flatness which possesses it. One can better appreciate the dimensions of its imagined world if one remembers that nowhere in this poetry is there anything like the indigenous equivalents, say, of those tigers, mirrors and labyrinths that deepen to infinity the world created by the prose and poetry of Jorge Luis Borges.

It is rare indeed that one comes across a poem like Patrick Cullinan's "Etruscan Girl", in whose concluding three stanzas the act of imagination, its transformative effects, is literally palpable:

And the figure half turns
to stare at me,
as though I
could give a name:
as though death did not
repeal identity,
as though there were
a body there,
a spirit that I must see,
clearly.

And I try to imagine
those who called

the craftsman in,

the maker,

saying to him:

You knew , you knew her well,

make her for us, make her

as we knew her in this life.

And it was

as he had seen her last,

sitting outside the house,

debonair in the morning,

plaiting her hair in the sun,

the hands and fingers quickly

pushing in and out

so closely that

the moment and the movement

fused:

and the maker saw

that they were one.⁵⁶

Wallace Stevens' "necessary angels of the imagination" are actually present here. They are to be found in the force of that metaphor of making (which is Cullinan's metaphor not only for a sorrow but for poetry as well) which presses back against the fact of personal extinction and the disappearance of an entire culture. It is because of this that that gift of verse which, as Jorge Luis Borges puts it in his poem "Elvira de Alvear", ". . . works to change real suffering into / Music and to sound and to symbol," is granted him.⁵⁷

Exceptions like these, however, only go to prove the rule. The great tradition (numerically-speaking) in South African English poetry is that of the secular banal, banally, secularly treated. Overwhelmingly, the poetry remains stylistically wedded to a kind of dilute realism -- that is to say, a realism which is not very real, even on its own terms. In part this might be because local poets have shown little or no inclination -- or have simply not possessed the stamina -- to conceive imaginative worlds of any fullness or depth in the way, say, that Cavafy did with Alexandria, Saba with Trieste, or Jorge Luis Borges with Buenos Aires. Despite Pound's reminder in 1915 -- "The essential thing in a poet is that he build us his world"⁵⁸ -- nobody yet has made an entire city a tone of voice in the minds of his readers, as the Greek poet did with his mythic Hellenic city.⁵⁹

As representative as anybody else in this respect, is the contemporary poet Stephen Gray with his notably topical subject, "Apollo Cafe". It is a poem which begins:

Always I have meant to write of Apollo Cafe
 Apollo Cafe has everything you need
 Open on Sundays at 9.00 for the news
 Open after-hours for bread and milk
 On the corner-stand at 6th and Church
 Johannesburg SA below the ridge
 Always I have meant to write of Apollo Cafe.

There are many Apollo Cafes in this poem
 Each has his own with blue awnings
 And moustaches smoke Winston and Good and Clean

And a catalogue of westerns and braaiwood
 And the greased-over windows of curiosity
 packed with last-minute supergoods
 Each has his own with overpainted frames.⁶⁰

This is a man speaking to men -- with a vengeance. It is the kind of poem in which only the first part of the demand contained in Carlos Fuentes' Rimbaudian imperative -- "say what you mean, literally and in all other senses"⁶¹ -- has been met. In literature you know only what you imagine. Here, however, the act of imagination has simply not taken place. There is no tension between this faculty and the world because the necessity for the former has not even been recognised.

When T. S. Eliot, for instance, said that "poets in our civilization . . . must be difficult,"⁶² he was referring to the need of poetry to employ every manner of conceit, indirection, and evasion. Vulnerable as it was and is to the aggressiveness of the "age of prose", only the most secluded shelter of obscurity and incoherence seemed to him to offer the poetic a chance of remaining uncontaminated by the acid-rain of the prosaic, the curse of too much discursiveness. Eliot was, in fact, referring primarily to his own poetry and the poetry to which he was indebted, French Symbolism. In retrospect, there can be little doubt that the strategy of that poetic movement -- ultimately to liberate words in poetry from their prosaic labour to "mean", mean a prosaically polluted object -- was utopian. Yet it had purpose and point; it was based on an acute awareness of the problematic place of poetry in the modern world, and an

equally problematic sense of what poetry could mean in this modern context.

Dennis Brutus is quite obviously deaf to such a problematic in this further example, the fourth poem in his Letters to Martha:

Particularly in a single cell,
but even in the sections
the religious sense asserts itself;

perhaps a childhood habit of nightly prayers
the accessibility of Bibles,
or awareness of the proximity of death:

and, of course, it is a currency --
pietistic expressions can purchase favours
and it is a way of suggesting reformation
(which can procure promotion);

and the resort of the weak
is to invoke divine revenge
against a rampaging injustice;

but in the grey silence of the empty afternoons
it is not uncommon
to find oneself talking to God.⁶³

In our time, poetry might well derive from prose -- and not the other way around. But, as Ezra Pound once said, poetry is also

"a composition of words set to music. . . . The proportion or quality of the music may, and does, vary; but poetry withers and 'dries out' when it leaves music, or at least an imagined music, too far behind it."⁶⁴ Brutus's poem, while containing within it almost anything but the reasons why it is so and not otherwise, has left this memory of music behind. Its inadequacy as any sort of poetry can be even more cruelly exposed by juxtaposing the poem with a sentence or two from the criticism of Peter Fuller:

. . . given the ever-present absence of God, art, and the gamut of aesthetic experience, provides the sole remaining glimmer of transcendence. The best we can hope for is that aesthetic surrogate for salvation: redemption through form.⁶⁵

Despite its ostensibly religious theme, there is, precisely, no glimmer of transcendence even in his poem. Even less is there an intimation of Fuller's "redemption through form".

There are obviously a multitude of ways in which any writer, poet, novelist or dramatist, gives to the reader the conviction, palpable if elusive of definition, that his or her work has spiritual depth and resonance. In his notes on the composition of The Plague, Albert Camus made an observation that

characteristically goes far beyond the novel in question:

"Meaning of my work: So many men lack grace. How can one live without grace?"⁶⁶ It is no doubt unlikely that the writer for

whom such a question is meaningless or irrelevant will produce work that has a spiritual resonance.⁶⁷ Any poetry, any writer

for that matter, whose work seems not to know the meaning of

stillness (however transient) and which does not carry within itself any sense, however inexpressible, of a still centre; that is not aware of the human need for grace (and the despair at its absence); that is content to relegate personal love to an inferior domain (as does Nadine Gordimer in Burger's Daughter), always secondary to the supposedly greater responsibilities of history; which displays no real awareness of, or anguish over, the reality of human finitude; which knows no "primordial" word; which is drawn to the natural world and the love of it as a counterweight to despair -- such poetry can never impress us as possessing authentic spiritual dimension and depth. Its author will strike one as having an imagination that is fundamentally atheist -- i.e. fundamentally unimaginative. By the same token, a poetry that condemns its readers to live "without grace" may be said to condemn them to live without poetry.

Still, in the absence of formal religions and their symbologies, the spiritual can be registered in innumerable other ways. There obviously remain dimensions of mystery which no amount of secularisation could ever dispose of. There remains the "unknowable", the sort of experience in which one feels simultaneously very far and very near to it; the apprehension of the mysterious nature of connections between disparate things, of the extraordinary sense that pervades a person when he or she knows that for a moment he or she loves another.

More specifically, poetry is the language art par excellence. As such the poet -- the poet above all -- cannot but come up against the boundaries of language and grow into an awareness, rational or intuitive, of where ordinary language reaches its limits. By virtue of the art itself, he or she

cannot avoid knowing, and experiencing, those boundaries where the devices of ordinary language must drop their normal function and other linguistic means (nonsense statements and so forth) be used to go beyond language. The history of poetry is, in some sense, a history of the development of just such means.

The endeavour might be an impossibly difficult one. But when Wittgenstein made his famous statement -- one must be silent about that which cannot be spoken -- he did not mean that the poet should not attempt through language to show the unspeakable. Wittgenstein, speaking of a poem he admired, said that it "unexpressibly expressed the unexpressible."⁶⁸ A similar point is made by Kant when he asserts that the work of art represents an indeterminate concept -- one that cannot be put into words.

The poet, like Wittgenstein in fact, is generically the one who has been most often hyper-aware of the limits of language, on the one hand, and even more so of all that lies beyond it on the other. Like Wittgenstein too, the poet knows that that which cannot be spoken of, being the source of values, is infinitely more important than that which can. The good poet clearly realises this distinction, knowing through reason the limits of language and striving to go beyond these in his or her work. A bad poet does not know they exist. The prosaic in literature, all too evident in Brutus' poem and much other South African English poetry, is quite commonly the result of an ignorance of the limits of language and a self-imposed confinement within them in the belief that ordinary language can say all there is to be said. (On the other hand, the half-baked mystical shows ignorance of where language ceases to be of use, even though aware of the presence of the "transcendent".)

In his Nobel lecture, delivered in Stockholm on December 8 1990, Octavio Paz suggested another place where the current home of the religious impulse might be located. Having noted that "modern man" has long defined himself as "a historical being", he argues that the underpinnings of such a notion have almost all of them been abandoned by the late twentieth century. As a result:

For the first time in history, mankind lives in a sort of spiritual wilderness and not, as before, in the shadow of those religious and political systems that consoled us at the same time as they oppressed us. Although all societies are historical, each one has lived under the guidance and inspiration of a set of metahistorical beliefs and ideas. Ours is the first age that is ready to live without a metahistorical doctrine; whether they be religious or philosophical, moral or aesthetic, our absolutes are not collective but private.⁶⁹

Far from drawing pessimistic conclusions, he goes on to speak of a search that still persists, despite this collapse of the "metahistorical". This is the search for another kind of transcendent measure. And it is in poetry, above all, that he believes it can be found. "For a long time I have firmly believed that the twilight of the future heralds the advent of the now." And he concludes his address:

. . . just as we have had philosophies of the past and of the future, of eternity and the void, tomorrow we shall have a philosophy of the present. The poetic experience could be

one of its foundations. What do we know about the present? Nothing or almost nothing. Yet the poets do know one thing: the present is the source of presences.⁷⁰

This reorientation, inscribed in a poetry which seeks the "real reality" of the present, in its presences, is just one more way in which a language which goes beyond language may be realised. It is, clearly, Paz's way of describing another form of transcendence possible for the poet and for poetry. Yet if there was, in indigenous form, the beginnings of a similar kind of search in Sydney Clouts -- his poetry may well be re-defined as "a search for the present", a search for presence through the present⁷¹ -- there is, in South African English poetry, really no other example of poets who have tried to find new ways of articulating the experience of moments of eternity in the present. The problem of the mundane remains.

IV

But it is not just the poet himself and his inability to transform this mundane (or at least heighten or deepen it a little) which is all that is at issue. Even a slender acquaintance with South African English poetry drives home the conviction that, somehow or other, its very language, even individual words, characteristically fail to endow the world and the things of this world with presence, resonance, depth. For the most part its words have the substance of communion wafers which have not been consecrated. It is a poetry in which what

Erich Heller calls "the oneness of thing and word, which is the essence of great poetry"⁷², never ever materialises. Even allowing for the fact that its sphere of concern is hardly a primordial world but one which is by now all too often profaned by mass tourism, consumerism, the pollution of the natural world and fake political prophecies, it is, on the whole, a poetry which could not be further removed from a famous dictum like that of Gerhard Hauptmann: "Poetry evokes out of words the resonance of the primordial word."⁷³ On the contrary, it would seem mostly to be a poetry which would qualify for and deserve the appellation that Heidegger gave to all that was, in his view, specifically not poetry, namely Gerede or (loosely) "empty chatter".

There would be something quite outlandish in comparing traditions as different as German and South African literatures were it not for a need to account for a signal absence in the latter, at least in its tradition of English poetry: its apparent ignorance of any central existential mystery ("That the world is, is the mystical," Wittgstein has written⁷⁴), or what might be called, via Heidegger once more, the "music of being". Nothing could sound more remote from the South African English poet's sphere of attention, in the past as in the present, than Heidegger's notion of the poet and the poetic calling, concerned as he is with the "first words":

the poet is -- pre-eminently -- the "Shepherd of Being". In the midst of a nihilism and waste of spirit of which his own vulnerable social and psychological status make him the most acute, the most endangered of witnesses, it is the poet who,

supremely, perhaps even alone, is guarantor of man's ultimate Heimkehr ('homecoming') to natural truth, to a sanctified hearth in the world of beings. It is the poet's calling -- literal, soul-consuming, imperative to the point of personal ruin -- to bring creation into the neighbourhood of the divine.⁷⁵

Yet remote as such a role might seem in the South African context, it highlights a lack -- a felt absence -- which operates corrosively on any reader of this poetry and compels him or her to ask how it is that this poetry should seem to have lost, forgotten, or forfeited some fundamental dimension in its very language -- and why, as a further result, its very being should have the appearance of something truncated, even mutilated.

Indeed the point can be reinforced by quoting a foreign poem where some intimation of the "primordial word" and the "music of being" is palpably intimated. There is a sense in which, even in translation, the following poem by the (then) East German poet Johannes Bobrowski embarrasses all South African English poetry:

The Wanderer

Evening,
the river sounds,
the heavy breath of the woods,
sky full of
shrieking birds, coasts
of darkness, old,
above the fire of stars.

Human have I lived
 forgetting to count
 the open doors. I have knocked
 at the closed doors.

Every door is open
 The host stands with outspread
 arms. Come to the table.
 Speak: The woods sound,
 the fish fly through the
 breathing river, the sky
 trembles with fires.⁷⁶

This is a poem which actually slows down time, which palpably deepens that backdrop of silence against which the words sound, and re-sound, with depths at once new and ancient, nominating what is holy, calling it forth from its hiddenness (as the Heideggerian might say), and in doing so reminding us of essences permanently associated with human life. The myth-embodiment presences are here, in the language, no less than they might have been to Brobowski's wanderer and his host in their remote historical time. There is an empowering strangeness.

A similar presence, a fullness of being, is made flesh in the words of Rilke's "Evening", here in a translation by Randall Jarrell:

The evening folds about itself the dark
 Garments the old trees hold out to it.

You watch: and the lands are borne from you,
One soaring heavenward, one falling;

And leave you here, not wholly either's,
Not quite so darkened as the silent houses,
Not quite so surely summoning the eternal
As that which each night becomes star, and rises;

And leave you (inscrutably to unravel)
Your life: the fearful and ripening and enormous
Being that -- bounded by everything, or boundless --
For a moment becomes stone, for a moment stars.⁷⁷

Poems like these restore to the world, to existence itself, a gravity, an intensely centred serenity, which invests things with reality: which makes reality real. Rilke exhibits a linguistic mastery that resides in hearing and using words with their own deep powers, yet in mutual resonance. On the other hand, in the Guy Butler poem referred to above, "Whoever-Whatever-You-Are", it is evident that his spiritual disinheritance is, one might say, even reinforced by the language of the poem; it is, in every sense, at the furthest possible remove from Rilke's Gesang und Dasein. Poems like Rilke's, on the the contrary, constitute a kind of grace, the fulfilment of a distinctively human possibility. In its wondering, meditative quality, these words resume the possibility of becoming world: at least we are offered the possibility of experiencing them as such.

With examples like Bobrowski's and Rilke's in mind, a phrase like Heidegger's "forgetting of being" will perhaps not appear an

empty, remote, or irrelevant when one returns to South African English poetry. If no topic could be so unlikely as, say, "Being and South African Poetry," even terms such as these from very different philosophical and poetic traditions help to point to a factor in the absence of which the poetry itself cannot but ring hollow. William Barrett, writing of philosophy exclusively, says something which is just as applicable to poetry in general:

A philosophy may give the most copious and minute account of details in the foreground, but so long as Being is either dismissed or passed over, we feel a great emptiness in the background, and the words of the philosopher sound without depth or resonance. There is the nagging and unshakeable sense that something is missing, which is just the sense from which our desires for explanation start in the first place. A philosophy that lacks any idea of Being appears to us then as itself deficient in being.⁷⁸

The same thing could be said of any poetry. This can be further illustrated by referring to an example from the American tradition, that of Ezra Pound. Despite his apparent love of battle of all sorts -- Pound must be the noisiest character in the history of English-language poetry -- and in spite of his conscious support of the life of action rather than that of contemplation⁷⁹, there are repeated moments in the linguistic chaos of The Cantos when Pound, as if in spite of himself, turns away from such noisy concerns as his economic propagandising against usury and is given over to moment of beauty, of being. Pound has claims to be a great poet not only because of his

technically revolutionary breaking of the pentameter, but because of his constant turning away from the exigencies of the world of history towards such moments. This counterpoint is apparent even in a late fragment, "Canto CXX" (1969):

I have tried to write Paradise

Do not move

Let the wind speak

that is paradise.

Let the Gods forgive what I

have made

Let those I love try to forgive

what I have made.⁸⁰

In short, although Pound by temperament was all too inclined -- indeed overwhelmingly so -- to place his every emphasis on action, and on the necessity of the life of action in his historical era, his poetry ceaselessly negates his conscious convictions through its evocation of necessarily fragile but perfectly-etched moments outside of time, and certainly quite distinct from the the swagger and bombast that prevails in many another passage in The Cantos. At such moments Pound's words resonate with another echo, with something of that same empowering strangeness to be found in Johannes Brobrowski. "To pray," Wittgenstein once wrote, "is to think about the meaning of life."⁸¹ In such instances as the above, poetry also becomes a means to thinking about the meaning of life, and embodying it at the same time.

Nor should this be surprising. In a famous work of philosophy which is also tantamount to a theory of poetry, I and Thou, Martin Buber was at pains to emphasise the following:

The life of a human being does not exist merely in the sphere of goal-directed verbs. It does not consist merely of activities that have something for their object.

I perceive something. I feel something. I imagine something. I want something. I sense something. I think something. The life of a human being does not consist merely of all this and its like.

All this and its like is the basis of the realm of It.

But the realm of You has another basis.⁸²

Despite what Buber calls the progressive increase of the "It-world" in our time, there is another word, another type of language the forgetting of which destroys the full potentialities of language no less than it inhibits the full development of relations between human beings and their world. Thus Buber's exhortation -- "in all the seriousness of truth, listen: without It a human being cannot live. But whoever lives only with that is not human"⁸³ -- can be applied to poetry as well. A tradition of poetry which is, similarly, based predominantly on an instrumental (as Buber might put it, an "It") conception of language no more fulfills the potentialities of poetry than a human being fulfills the possibilities of human relatedness when his or her connections with others are of an entirely instrumental or utilitarian sort.

It is a long way from enumerating a poetry's more obvious technical blunders to charging it with a verbal sickness of which it is not even fully aware. But having read through so much material, even by the most frequently acknowledged best dozen or so South African English poets,⁸⁴ having encountered so many lines of verse light years removed from any sense of the numinous⁸⁵, the reader is not unlikely to go grasping after such apparently vague, even unwieldy, formulations as Heidegger's "the forgetting of Being" when trying to account for its effects on him or her. In fact, what South African English poetry offers the reader is the record of what could be called a long process of linguistic immiseration. This is not on the level of vocabulary; as recent dictionaries of South African English reveal, the language would seem to be flourishing in its own distinctive way. The immiseration is on an altogether deeper level, the level of being. However hard to pinpoint, it is something which is there in the marrow of the language, as it were, and is not less present for being invisible to the eye.

This is why, ultimately, this poetry stikes one as being "unhoused" in the most fundamental sense. In fact it often strikes one as unhoused to such an extent that it appears not even to be in touch with its own homesickness. Nor does the impression of verbal malaise vary should the reader turn to the black poets of recent decades. Although Mtshali can enumerate the artifacts to be found in a traditional dwelling in his Zulu culture -- "It is a hive / without any bees / to build the walls / with golden bricks of honey"⁸⁶ -- the language itself fails to build this reality; the actual words of the poem declare that this central symbol of his cultural inheritance is already lost

even as they attempt to assert the opposite. The already tenuous links that language has with its own depths grows even more so when poets, armoured in their political convictions and confidently rhetorical; simply make use of language as a means of clothing their political thought in suitable linguistic terms, forgetting that if words are not arising of their own volition, are being used only in an instrumental fashion -- are not, in short, being listened to as well as manipulated -- the poetry will simply forfeit a resonance, an echo, which often enough makes poetry poetry.

South African English poets might well be alienated as one obvious consequence of apartheid, but there is a deeper sense in which they might also have been dispossessed. Having been placed in historical circumstances in which many of the most important potentialities of language have been forfeit, they might actually be called poets of a language which has forgotten its poetry. In fact this is why I could claim in my Introduction that they were creatures of the void without knowing it. Black or white, South Africa's English-language poets are largely hollow men and women whose work, quite apart from its surface features, is persistently, quite unwittingly, commenting on its own unhoused condition.

Should the reader then go on to conclude that, in the most general terms, South African English poetry is one manifestation of a culture that has long since lost its soul, he or she would seem to be making a kind of cultural-historical generalisation too broad in itself to have much substance. But such impressionistic deductions might not be far off the mark when it is seen how many South African poems are repeatedly, quite

unconsciously, commenting on their own profound deracination, their unhoused condition, their own semi-consciousness, even as they would appear to be concertedly gesturing towards a more obvious evil such as the scramble for gold, the Anglo-Boer War, or the Group Areas Act of the apartheid era.

In any case, if the language of Heidegger is objected to as being absurdly inappropriate in the context of South Africa, not least for its associations with agrarian reaction, there is a less hieratic vocabulary which George Steiner uses in commenting on the same philosopher's essays on the Austrian poet Georg Trakl. It is one which raises substantially the same question:

He [Heidegger] is striving to articulate the paradox . . . through which exceedingly simple, naked words enter into, generate a construct, a music of thought, of insight into the meaning of life which are, literally and demonstrably, inexhaustible. These enigmas of intrinsic gravity, of 'everlastingness', of a sum of significance immensely in excess of its manifest constituent parts, are at the heart of poetry and of man's invention and response to literature.⁸⁷

And the question raised by this is perfectly simple. What South African English poet or poem, we are entitled to ask, possesses these qualities? What work permits us to say that it serves the whole man and woman? Where is the final impression of this poetry not one of spiritual orphanhood or dwarfdom? In the poems of Roy Campbell like "Rounding the Cape", already quoted? In William Plomer's oeuvre?⁸⁸ In Sydney Clouts' One Life (1966) or

Ruth Miller's Floating Island (1965)? In Mongane Wally Serote's No Baby Must Weep (1975)?

All this would seem to lead unerringly to what is apparently the most outlandish single conclusion or judgement in this thesis. For the words we employ in speaking and writing and the way we put them together invariably reflect what is going on -- and also, by implication, what is not going on -- in the politics and culture of any society. In effect, the language of a culture as a whole, its literature and its speaking, will be a portrait of its values. This portrait will be the clearer in the language of a culture's poets; those who use words at the highest pitch of stress and reach, naturally give the clearest evidence of the possibilities -- as well as of the blind spots, the dead areas -- in the society at large.

If all this be allowed, the specific evidence of South African English poetry to date must force us to conclude that the sub-culture is, and perhaps has long been, an example of one which is effectively atheist. And this irrespective of how many English-speaking South Africans have been and are devoutly religious.

The evidence, it should be said at once, is not in any statistics that have to do with church attendance; it is there in the language of these writers. Despite the vast number of poems from Arthur Shearly Cripps and after that draw on religious symbols and moralise in a doctrinal fashion, almost all of them speak most eloquently, if silently, of a culture's progression towards an ever more comprehensive "forgetting of being" -- that "beautiful and almost magical phrase,"⁸⁹ as Milan Kundera calls it, which Heidegger used to suggest the definitive malaise of the

entire modern era. In fact, many South African English poets are what might be called atheists of the imagination. Guy Butler might invoke the Christian God in his Pilgrimage to Dias Cross (1987); Lionel Abrahams the "Kaddish" and the entire Judeo-Christian tradition in his "Lament" on the death of his mother.⁹⁰ But to no avail. Even in Don MacLennan's darkened waiting for the moment of alchemy or Eden which is his great spiritual hunger in a poem like "Unposted Letter",⁹¹ his language, like that of Butler and Abrahams, is exclusively a language of becoming; it too has forgotten that language of being, of "real presences" (as George Steiner would put it) which is, in a sense, prior to all religions as such and which gives to language whatever numinous qualities it might possess. There is, in any event, no deep listening into language itself; the word behind the word -- even those which, in Eliot's remembering phrase, "after speech, reach / Into the silence"⁹² -- are simply not to be heard.

In a profound sense, poetry depends on the remembering of being; it is, one might say, language in the act of recalling the very grounds of our existence. To say that an entire culture embodies an acute instance of the "forgetting of being" is also, I believe, to suggest how far removed it is from poetry and the possibility of poetry. This may well be the most disheartening conclusion of all; but it is borne out by the literature, by that which it discloses and fails to disclose. The pity of it all, of course, is that the capacity which the culture as a whole signally lacks, and therefore requires so deeply, is precisely the one not present in the place where one might justifiably seek it: in the work of its poets.

Towards the end of a study which is itself a long wager on transcendence, Real Presences, George Steiner conjectures as to the character of a future world in which any notion of the transcendent is absent:

It may well be that the forgetting of the question of God will be the nub of cultures now nascent. It may be that the verticalities of reference to 'higher things', to the impalpable and mythical which are still incised in our grammars, which are still the ontological guarantors of the arcs of metaphor, will drain from speech (consider the 'languages' of the computer and the codes of artificial intelligence). Should these mutations of consciousness and expression come into force, the forms of aesthetic making as we have known them will no longer be productive. They will be relegated to historicity. . .

And he continues:

If my general intuition has substance, indifference to the theological and the metaphysical, to the question of whether the confines of the pragmatic and of the logically and experimentally falsifiable are or are not those of human existentiality, will mean a radical break with aesthetic creation and reception. Where it is genuinely immanent -- and I am by no means certain that I know what this would mean -- the poetics, the art of the 'after-Word' and the interpretive responses they will elicit will be essentially different from those we have known and whose after-life

prevails still, though often either trivialised or made mandarin, in today's transitional circumstances.⁹³

It may well be that, without even knowing it, South African English poetry has become an embodiment of this "art of the 'after-Word'." But it should be noted at once that this has come about by default. There is, for instance, an art of the 'after-Word' which is a conscious result of the work of critical negation, specifically that arduous critique of modernity which has recently taken place in the philosophical thought of Western Europe and elsewhere. But that attempted dismantling of Western metaphysical presuppositions which is known as deconstruction is something quite distinct from what has taken place in South African culture. South African English poetry may be said to have arrived at the future, or that version of it which is loosely described as post-modernity, not through any choice or battle against one single, monolithic truth (in favour, say, of difference and a plurality of relative truths), but inadvertently, through its helplessness, unconsciousness, own imaginative blankness. If the chaos of an Oswald Mtshali and other South African poets like Peter Horn suggests post-modernism, one must argue that this is a post-modernism which is not conscious of itself, bereft of the means of articulating its own fractured condition. Only in this sense -- although without itself recognising it -- could this art be called part of that 'wave of the future' to which Steiner alludes.

Thus many of the poets themselves would also seem to be inhabitants of Blake's "Land of Ulro", that "realm of spiritual pain such as is borne and must be borne by the crippled man" or

woman in the modern era.⁹⁴ Yet in South Africa, like everywhere else in fact, the poet is still faced with the demand to give art (or, as Heaney would call it, "song") its due while not ceasing to hear and listen to the claims of history (in terms of his opposition, "suffering"). He or she is still faced with that difficult task of not succumbing to those reductive pressures which attempt to deny the existence of either pole of this opposition. As always, it is the tension between these poles which is important and which, however precarious, however painful, needs to be sustained for the sake of human wholeness (which includes the health of society).

In one or other way it seems to be precisely this tension and precarious balance that South African English poets have had such difficulty and slight success in maintaining. Today it is easy to see, for instance, how even a poet as distinguished as Roy Campbell was inclined to overbalance and succumb to the quasi-Byronic stance of genius amidst the philistines, inflating himself with the rhetoric of his splendid isolation. Sydney Clouts seems similarly to have had uncertain success in balancing the claims of "song" and "suffering", this being perhaps the chief explanation for the bizarre (and ever more bizarre) character of his work. If, as has already been seen in earlier chapters of this thesis, Mongane Wally Serote in A Tough Tale (1987) or Oswald Mtshali in his Fireflames (1980) overbalance in the opposite direction, producing work which is often not separable in character from the crudest propaganda of that state which it wishes to overthrow (their words a semblance of hurled stones or clenched fists), then perhaps this only adds to our understanding of how difficult it has always been to write

poetry, and especially in a vertiginous history like South Africa's since the nineteenth century.

"A great writer," says Joseph Brodsky, "is one who elongates the perspective of human sensibility, who shows a man at the end of his wits an opening, a pattern to follow."⁹⁵ While this is by no means all that a great writer or poet is able to do -- one thinks also of that seriousness lightly treated, and vice versa, that one finds in many of the best of them -- Brodsky's words afford that kind of perspective (what he would call "a plane of regard" again) which enables one to see at once that there never has been any such thing as a great South African English poet. Although his words do not directly lead to it, they might also provide a frame of reference which inclines the South African reader to conclude that, though history has no doubt known countries and eras more inhospitable to poetry than South Africa in the last one hundred and fifty years or so, it is sometimes hard to imagine them.

In the course of his New Bearings in English Poetry, originally published in 1932, F. R. Leavis quotes from Yeats' Autobiographies: "how small a fragment of our own nature can be brought to perfect expression, nor that even but with great toil, in a much divided civilisation."⁹⁶ Almost any scrutiny of South African English poetry reinforces this sentiment and its particular truth. In an ex-colony like South Africa in which, to use Yeats' terms again, there has never been anything like that "Unity of Being" and "Unity of Culture" the loss of which he so regrets, the effects of that lack are plain to see in the poetry itself. "What cripples utopia," Raymond Aron, the French sociologist and political scientist used to insist, "is not our

ignorance of the future, but our knowledge of the present."⁹⁷ Even allowing for chance and talent, the present state of South African society, no less disjunct than before, does not permit one to be overly optimistic about the future development of this poetry and its achievement of a significant (and perhaps healing) wholeness of expression. But one can at least be clear about its past; there is no need to pretend, as more than one critic has done, that stones, and worse, are really bread.⁹⁸ In fact, thinking of South African English poetry as a whole and the manifold difficulties it has faced in this historical context since its beginnings, the image that comes to mind, and indeed stays in mind, is not of a fulfilled body of work but rather that of the mutilated organs of the dying female wildcat that Douglas Livingstone's protagonist stumbles upon in the course of one of the best of all South African English poems, his "Gentling a Wildcat":

Under a tree, in filtered moonlight,
 a ragged heap of dusty leaves stopped moving.
 A cat lay there, open from chin to loins;
 lower viscera missing; truncated tubes
 and bitten-off things protruding.⁹⁹

Notes and References

1. Vivian Smith, "Poetry," Oxford History of Australian Literature, ed. Leonie Kramer (Melbourne: Oxford U, 1981) 350. So far as I have been able to ascertain, there is no evidence that the same figures were known in Cape Town or Johannesburg by the same date.
2. Quoted by Michael Chapman in South African English Poetry: A Modern Perspective (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1984) 58.
3. Ezra Pound, "A Retrospect," Literary Essays of Ezra Pound, ed. T. S. Eliot. (London: Faber and Faber, 1954) 5.
4. R. G. Howarth, "Literary Sisters of the South," Literature in Southern Africa (New York: Modern Language Association, 1970) 11.
5. See Marjorie Perloff, Poetic License: Essays on Modernist and Postmodernist Lyric (Evanston: Northwestern U, 1990) 252.
6. See, for instance, my review of Modern South African Poetry. ed. Stephen Gray. South African Outlook 1368 (1985) 92-96.
7. Brodsky, Less Than One: Selected Essays (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux) 273.
8. Sydney Clouts, "After the Poem," Collected Poems 75.
9. Octavio Paz, "What Does Poetry Name," Alternating Current, trans. Helen R. Lane (New York: Seaver, 1983) 4.
10. Michael Chapman has made much of a developing strand of modernism in South African English poetry, particularly after the

sixties. See, for example, his Introduction to A Century of South African Poetry esp. 23-26. He displays no awareness of the fact that a modernism that appears fifty and even sixty years after its historical apex in Western Europe and the USA is not modernism at all, but rather some less easily definable thing.

11. There is an additional irony that has its roots in this "extroverted gaze". Even at this stage, if one were to ask who was South Africa's best poet on the inner workings of the psyche, of the private space, illuminating the malady of power, both individual and collective, in this country, it would not be entirely frivolous to maintain that Franz Kafka (who died in 1924 and never, so far as I know, ever mentioned South Africa in all his writings) provides far more illumination than that given by any home-grown writer. In fact, his work is an object-lesson in how seldom any writing is politically penetrating, and how still less of it is historically prescient, when it prefers the "extroverted gaze" and avoids the infinitely twisted reaches of our fantasies, the labyrinths of our inner life.

12. Douglas Livingstone, Selected Poems (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1984) 48.

13. T. S. Eliot, Collected Poems 1909-1962 (London: Faber and Faber, 1963) 79.

14. Milosz has also written of the degree to which poetry - - which he defines in his Charles Eliot Norton Lectures of 1981-1982 as a "passionate pursuit of the Real" -- depends for its very health on its drive to achieve a mimesis that is unattainable in reality: "no science or philosophy can change the fact that a poet stands before reality that is every day new, miraculously complex, inexhaustible, and tries to enclose as much

of it as possible in words. That elementary contact, verifiable by the five senses, is more important than any mental construction. The never-fulfilled desire to achieve a mimesis, to be faithful to a detail, makes for the health of poetry and gives it a chance to survive periods unpropitious to it." Czesław Milosz, The Witness of Poetry (Cambridge: Harvard U, 1983) 56-57.

15. See, for example, Dan Jacobson's essay "The Writer in the Commonwealth," Time of Arrival and Other Essays (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1953) esp. 158-159.

16. The phrase is taken from her Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil (New York: Viking, 1963).

17. There is a sense in which this poetry presents, stylistically, the impotence that W. H. Auden was to see among liberal English intellectuals of the late thirties whose very ideological commitments left them dispossessed of any objective criteria with which they might condemn the manifest evil of Hitler. "The English intellectuals who now cry to Heaven against the evil incarnated in Hitler have no haven to cry to," he told Erika Mann's brother Golo; "they have nothing to offer and their prospects echo in empty space." Quoted in Humphrey Carpenter, W. H. Auden: A Biography (London: Unwin, 1983) 283.

18. Nortje's two poems can be found in Dead Roots (London: Heinemann, 1973) 90-91; and The Penguin Book of Modern African Poetry, eds. Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984) 274-275.

19. Dennis Brutus, A Simple Lust (London: Heinemann, 1973) 54-55.

20. Alexander Wat, My Century: The Odyssey of a Polish Intellectual (Berkeley: U of California, 1988) 210.

21. See Charles Eglington's Under the Horizon (Cape Town: Purnell, 1977).
22. Guy Butler and Chris Mann, eds., A New Book of South African Verse in English 105.
23. J. M. Coetzee, Age of Iron (New York: Random, 1990) 129.
24. The phrase is Isaac Bashevis Singer's and is taken from his memoir Love and Exile (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986) 299.
25. Ruth Miller, Poems Prose Plays, ed. Lionel Abrahams (Cape Town: Carrefour, 1990) 56; 89-93.
26. Franz Kafka, Shorter Works, vol. 1 (London: Secker and Warburg, 1973) 86 and 112 respectively.
27. Simone Weil, Gravity and Grace (London: Routledge, 1972) 158.
28. Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, trans. William Glen Doepel (London: Routledge, 1975) 230.
29. Leszek Kolakowski, "Can the Devil Be Saved?" Encounter 53.1 (July 1974): 11.
30. Both poems can be found in his Collected Poems (London: Marvell/Faber and Faber, 1988) 208 and 132 respectively.
31. See Eugenio Montale, The Storm and Other Things (New York: Norton, 1986) 161.
32. Albert Camus, The Rebel (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971) 227-8.
33. Milan Kundera, "Afterword: A Talk with the Author," The Book of Laughter and Forgetting (New York: Penguin, 1981) 233.
34. The words are from a review by Richard Chace, the American scholar, in the nineteen-fifties. They are quoted by

Lionel Trilling, The Opposing Self (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979) 118.

35. A. Alvarez, The Savage God (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974) 204-205.

36. A Century of South African Poetry 341-342.

37. Stanley Kunitz, A Kind of Order, A Kind of Folly (Boston: Little Brown, 1975) 13.

38. Sigmund Freud, The Future of an Illusion, vol. 12 of The Penguin Freud Library (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985) 212.

39. Freud 339.

40. Such, at any rate, is the conviction of William Barrett in his The Death of the Soul: Philosophical Thought from Descartes to the Computer (Oxford: Oxford U, 1987) 123. "There is one central area of human experience that, whether we be believers or not, we all share -- and that is the search for personal salvation. We may understand this salvation differently, and we may not even choose to use the word itself, but the fact remains that this struggle lies at the center of the self."

41. That these needs cannot be fed by ideologies like Marxism has been noted, among others, by Leszek Kolakowski. "A typical feature," he writes, "of Marx's Prometheanism is his lack of interest in the natural (as opposed to economic) conditions of human existence, the absence of corporeal existence in his vision of the world. Man is wholly defined in purely social terms: the physical limitations of his being are scarcely noticed. Marxism takes little or no account of the fact that people are born and die, that they are men and women, young and old, healthy or sick; that they are genetically unequal, and that all these

circumstances affect social development irrespective of class division, and set bounds to human plans for perfecting the world. Marx did not believe in the essential finitude and limitation of man, or the obstacles to his creativity. Evil and suffering, in his eyes, had no meaning except as instruments of liberation; they were purely social facts, not an essential part of the human condition." Main Currents in Marxism, vol.1 (Oxford: Oxford U, 1978) 413.

42. Quoted by Martin Seymour-Smith, Guide to Modern World Literature (London: MacMillan, 1985) 1089.

43. Quoted in Supplement to The Weekly Mail 23 Feb to 1 March, 1990: 6.

44. Helen Vendler, The Faber Book of American Poetry (London: Faber and Faber, 1986) ix.

45. George Steiner, Real Presences (London: Faber and Faber, 1989) .

46. Yves Bonnefoy, "French Poetry and the Principle of Identity," French Poetry Now, ed. Michael Edwards (Isle of Skye: Prospice/Aquila, 1975) 46.

47. Guy Butler, Stranger to Europe (Cape Town/Amsterdam: Balkema, 1960) 55.

48. Guy Butler, Selected Poems (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1975) 83.

49. There is plainly nothing like the spiritual battles fought out in poetic terms in T. S. Eliot's Four Quartets.

50. David J. Levy, Political Order: Philosophical Anthropology, Modernity, and the Challenge of Ideology (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State U, 1987) 134.

51. Wallace Stevens, "Effects of Analogy," The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination (New York: Knopf, 1951) 128..
52. Stevens 129-30.
53. Stevens 29.
54. Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, The Fragrance of Guava (London: Verso, 1983) 46. There seems to have long been a great deal of uncertainty in South African cultural life as to the place, if any, of "fantasy". South Africans understand that combination of horror and laughter that one finds, for instance, in the stories of Herman Charles Bosman, but are on less easy terms with that modified form of "magical realism" that one finds, say, in the novels of Mike Nicol. If there have been those who have been convinced that fantasy has a rightful, indeed necessary, place in any individual's mental economy, then there are even less who have been certain of that fantasy's relation to other types of mental activity. Indeed, an additional thesis could be written on the degree to which a South African rationalism (buttressed by political imperatives) has further limited the imaginative life of the country as a whole.
55. Eugene Ionesco, "Writer at Work," Paris Review 93 (1984): 74.
56. Patrick Cullinan, Selected Poems (Johannesburg: Artists, 1992) 52.
57. Jorge Luis Borges, Collected Poems 1923-1967, ed. Norman Thomas di Giovanni (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983).
58. Ezra Pound, Selected Prose 1909-1965, ed. William Cookson (London: Faber and Faber, 1973) 19.

59. This is surely ironical given the degree to which a tone of inexhaustible longing for home, for place, for rootedness, sounds throughout South African literatures in the last century or so.

60. Michael Chapman, ed., The Paperbook of South African English Poetry (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1986) 185.

61. Carlos Fuentes, "How I Started to Write," Myself with Others: Selected Essays (London: Deutsch, 1988) 25.

62. T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Selected Essays (London: Faber and Faber, 1933) .

63. Dennis Brutus, A Simple Lust 56.

64. Ezra Pound, "Vers Libre and Arnold Dolmetsch", Literary Essays of Ezra Pound (London: Faber and Faber, 1954) 437.

65. Peter Fuller, Images of God (London: Hogarth, 1990) xiv.

66. Albert Camus, Selected Essays and Notebooks, ed. and trans. Philip Thody (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970) 232.

67. It is worth noting, in passing, that one of the reasons why so celebrated a novelist as Nadine Gordimer seems to produce work, whatever its other distinctions, which is spiritually inert, is because such questions clearly have no reality for her. Her profound alienation from such concerns is why she impresses many a reader as being a deeply unimaginative writer.

68. Ray Monk, Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius (London: Jonathan Cape, 1990) 486.

69. Octavio Paz, "In Search of the Present," Times Literary Supplement December 21-27 (1990): 1383.

70. Paz: 1383.

71. Indeed one way of describing the goal of much of Clouts' poetry is to be found in a further quotation from Octavio Paz, in his essay "Breach and Convergence": "The poetry that is beginning now, without beginning, is seeking the intersection of times, the point of convergence. It asserts that between the cluttered past and uninhabited future, poetry is the present. . . . the present is manifest in presence, and presence is the reconciliation of the three times." The Other Voice: Essays on Modern Poetry (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1991) 58.

72. Erich Heller, In the Age of Prose: Literary and Philosophical Essays (Cambridge: Cambridge U, 1984) 82.

73. Quoted by C. G. Jung, "On the Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetry, The Spririt in Man, Art, and Literature, The Collected Works of C.G. Jung, vol. 15, trans. R. F. C. Hull (Princeton: Bollingen/Princeton, 1971) 80.

74. Quoted by William Barrett, The Illusion of Technique (London: William Kimber, 1979) 51.

75. George Steiner, Heidegger (Sussex: Harvester, 1978) 135.

76. Johannes Bobrowski and Horst Bienek, Selected Poems (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971) 68.

77. Randall Jarrell, The Complete Poems (London: Faber and Faber, 1981) 241.

78. William Barrett, The Illusion of Technique 159.

79. In his biography of Pound, Humphrey Carpenter notes that against a passage in his copy of Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics -- "But, strictly speaking, the life of Action has no absolute value: it is not a part of, but only a means to, the

End, which is the life of Thought" -- Pound had written the word "Nuts". See A Serious Character: The Life of Ezra Pound (London: Faber and Faber, 1988) 913-914.

80. Ezra Pound, The Cantos (London: Faber and Faber, 1981) 803.

81. Quoted by Ray Monk, Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius 239.

82. Martin Buber, I and Thou, trans. Walter Kaufmann (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1970) 54.

83. Buber 85.

84. Judging by the implicit consensus created by recent anthologies, this dozen would include names like Pringle, Plomer, Campbell, Prince, Butler, Delius, Eglington, Cullinan, MacLennan, Clouts, Miller, Livingstone, Sepamla, Serote, Nortje . . .

85. Needless to say, the problem of "Being" is one faced by poets everywhere in a world in which Hegel's "poetry of the heart" and "the prose of external conditions antagonistic to it" are ever more at variance, making any restoration of the banished claims of poetic vision exceedingly difficult. As Hegel once wrote: "If the mode of prose has absorbed all the concepts of the mind and impressed them with its prosaic stamp, then poetry has to take on the business of so thorough a recasting and remodelling that, faced with the unyielding masses of the prosaic, it finds itself involved everywhere in manifold difficulties". Quoted by Erich Heller, The Disinherited Mind 154. My point, of course, is that South African English poets do not seem to be even aware of this.

86. Oswald Mbuyiseni Mtshali, "My Zulu Hut," Sounds of a Cowhide Drum (London: Oxford U, 1972) 9.

87. George Steiner, Heidegger 137.

88. It is noteworthy in itself that so few South African poets -- at least in the English sub-tradition -- have produced what the French traditionally regard as the minimum number of volumes for an oeuvre -- three. Far more common, and suggestive of much more than amateurism, is an output which dries up completely after a volume or two.

89. Milan Kundera, "The Depreciated Legacy of Cervantes," The Art of the Novel (London: Faber and Faber, 1988) 4.

90. See Lionel Abrahams, Thresholds of Tolerance (Johannesburg: Bateleur, 1975) 23-33. Its last stanza is representative:

Sh'mai, Israel, hear!

Ignore, ignore!

There leaks into galactic space

by time's lit fissure

man's lord, thy one god, one. etc.

91. See Don MacLennan, Letters (Cape Town: Carrefour, 1992)

92. T. S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton," Collected Poems 1909-1962 (London: Faber and Faber, 1963) 194.

93. Steiner, Real Presences 230-231.

94. Czeslaw Milosz, The Land of Ulro (Manchester: Carcanet, 1985) 32. Milosz goes on to note in the same place: "Blake himself was not one of its inhabitants, unlike the scientist, those proponents of Newtonian physics, the philosophers, and most other poets and artists of his day. And that goes for their

descendents in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, up to and including the present."

95. Joseph Brodsky, Less than One: Selected Essays 320.

96. F. R. Leavis, New Bearings in English Poetry 47.

97. Raymond Aron, Marxism and Existentialism (New York: Harper and Row, 1969) 18.

98. See, for example, Colin Gardner, "Poetry and/or Politics: Recent South African Black Verse," English in Africa 9.1 (May 1982): 45-54. Colin Gardner and Michael Chapman note in their introduction to the facsimile edition of Voorslag that Campbell and Plomer "set in motion for the first time various impulses in South African writing." They conclude: "It is these tendencies -- power and acuteness -- which represent two of the main thrusts of a good deal of South African literature of the last fifty years or so." (Voorslag 15)

99. Douglas Livingstone, Selected Poems 100.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis I have frequently referred to Central and Eastern European writers. On the face of it, this might seem unwarranted; but as I have argued throughout, the writers of these countries, especially those who have had direct experience of the Stalinist experiments in their lands after the end of the Second World War, speak very directly to South Africans of the last three or four decades, whether the latter be citizens, writers, or critics.¹ Besides, South Africa in the last four decades has resembled many an Eastern Bloc country in the oppression under which it has laboured, in the degree of politicisation it has undergone, and in its position of marginality in the greater world.

There is a further respect, however, in which the example of Central and Eastern Europe might provide a useful point of comparison. Towards the end of his essay, "Does Central Europe Exist?", the historian Timonthy Garton Ash, having noted that Central European writers like Adam Michnik and Václav Havel do not offer the rest of the world ideas that are "strikingly new," nevertheless goes on to say:

I do believe they have a treasure to offer us all. At their best, they give a personal example such as you will not find in many a long year in London, Washington, or Paris: an example, not of brilliance or wit or originality, but of intellectual responsibility, integrity and courage. They know, and they remind us -- vividly, urgently -- that ideas matter, words matter, have consequences, are not to be used lightly -- Michnik quotes Lampedusa: 'You cannot shout the

most important words.' Under the black light of totalitarian power, most ideas -- and words -- become deformed, appear grotesque, or simply crumble. Only a very few stand the test, remain rocklike under any pressure; and most of these are not new. There are things worth suffering for. There are moral absolutes. Not everything is open to discussion. . . . These qualities and values have emerged from their specific Central European experience -- which is the central European experience of our time.²

In saying all this, Garton Ash is of course finding a way of attributing value to the cultural work of countries which, in relation to the contemporary Western world, are relatively (and sometimes even hopelessly) backward and deprived. Making use of a paradox that is frequently encountered in the work of others like Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the terrible history of peoples in the (then) Eastern Bloc becomes the spiritual superiority of these peoples, and specifically their writers, over the apparently much more sophisticated citizens in the West. They know something that the West does not know, or at least has forgotten in the midst of its material prosperity. Thus Czeslaw Milosz, in his "Nobel Lecture", can say:

There are moments when it seems to me that I decipher the meaning of the afflictions that befell the nations of the "other Europe," and that meaning is to make them the bearers of memory -- at the time when Europe, without an adjective, and America possess it less and less with every generation.³

It is in such ways, at any rate, that parts of the world which might seem to have nothing to offer to the West are given a specific role, their disastrous recent histories a meaning which can 'speak back' to countries which have been more fortunate. It is often for such reasons, too, that their writers are extolled.

Not surprisingly, there have been any number of attempts to find in South Africa's particular circumstances, its specific fate, a kind of interest -- even more, a distinction -- not to be encountered anywhere else in the world. Perhaps the most common way of doing this is to be found in some of Roy Campbell's work, as well as the much later Soweto poets. Those who cannot boast of great political, military or economic achievements, or a magnificent tradition of art or thought, have most often sought comfort and strength in the notion of the free and creative life of the spirit within them, uncorrupted by the vices of power or sophistication. More recently, critics like Graham Pechey have tried to find this distinction in another area, as is evident in his proposal for a book of essays on South Africa:

South Africa not only offers progressive intellectuals in the metropolis a means of thinking through these implications [of Fanon's statement that "Europe is literally the creation of the third world"]; it is also the very material promise of a different political outcome for the whole of Africa: a freedom at the continent's southernmost tip will herald the finishing of much revolutionary business all the way north to the Sahara. What the proposed book will show its readers is a situation that is a unique conjunction of the West's and the world's past and future --

an unprecedented synchrony of what the West has either forgotten or not yet imagined: in Jacques Derrida's words, "an extreme concentration of all human history".⁴

Bruised and battered South Africa might be, deprived and forsaken in a thousand ways, but it is still, according to Pechey, "a unique conjunction of the West's and the world's past and future". No matter what its other liabilities, it can still be made to represent the last word in spiritual-historical one-upmanship. Or so he would have us believe.

Such a line of argument becomes more difficult to sustain when one turns from historical generalisations to deal with more specific topics like South African English poetry. If, with rare exceptions like some of Douglas Livingstone's work, this body of poetry is not distinguished, in Garton Ash's words, by "brilliance or wit or originality" -- what then could be said to characterise it? What is the nature of its distinction? What does South African English poetry know that other poetries do not know? What, in the end, can the critic isolate which will be of real interest to those elsewhere in the world.

Questions like these, though they have to be asked if the poetry in question is to be taken seriously, do not permit of any straightforward answers. In the most immediate sense, it would seem that the one identifiable distinction of South African English poets is not that they have belonged to any aesthetic avant garde, but that a number of them have had occasion to live, willy-nilly, amongst one of the avant gardes of inhumanity in this century. At the same time, this thesis has already shown that, unlike certain Russians, these poets have scarcely been

able to treat their sometimes uniquely disabling situation as something which, though it might not confer any other kind of distinction, at least enables a kind of insight, a spiritual penetration, an awareness of evil and of the capacity for human goodness, more or less forgotten elsewhere in the world. Dennis Brutus, to put the matter bluntly, is not Alexander Solzhenitsyn.

As I implied in my Introduction, it may be the fate of almost all second- and third-rate countries to have to subsist entirely on secondhand ideas, and to generate ideas which are secondhand even when they appear to be original. Thus even the apparent radicalism of some of South African English poetry would seem to be largely inadvertent, not the result of a conscious programme or critique of values, aesthetic or otherwise, but more the result of a radical cultural deprivation. This becomes more evident when one questions more closely what it is that might be of real aesthetic interest in South African English poetry. The complications in the relationship between this poetry and the country's politics have not, as I have argued throughout this thesis, deepened a debate that has already raged in France and Germany (to take just two instances) in the earlier decades of this century. In fact, the terms of the debate here have tended to be noticeably more crude than elsewhere.⁵ More often than not, South Africa has persisted in a kind of angry ignorance, adding inconsequential footnotes to issues that have long been debated and established as common knowledge elsewhere.

When most of the individual poets are considered, one is struck not so much by their individuality as by the fact that they tend to blur, to run together, into an undifferentiated mass. So few of them are distinctive, their work bearing the

inalienable stamp of itself. So little of it is definitive, with the force (sometimes a ruthlessness) of all that is definitive. Reading the majority of them one is reminded of the novelist Peter Wilhelm who recently remarked upon "[South Africa's] relegation to aesthetics which have sunk out of the First World of significant discourse and into a provincial ghetto which does not even have the grace, like New Zealand, to be pastoral."⁶

If such a comment obviously does not apply to a novelist like J. M. Coetzee, it is also not entirely relevant to a number of South Africa's better English-language poets. Nevertheless, even in the case of these poets it is difficult to avoid a number of reservations. As indicated in Chapter 4 of this thesis, Mongane Wally Serote might naturally incline to a form of latterday epic in order to express the historical sufferings of an entire people, but his work is not free of a kind of spiritual drift (rather than resolve) and a grandiloquent incoherence. Ruth Miller, like many another human being, never knew a greater passion (a word which also means "mortal agony") than the passion of loss. But it is a moot point whether we find in her work a fulfilled instance of what has been called the genesis of all art: the pursuit of the irrecoverable, what the object relations psychologists call 'symbolic repair'. Critics like Michael Chapman have already assessed, both accurately and justly, the limitations of Arthur Nortje's poetry.⁷ In relation to the above (and any other South African English poets one might care to name), one has only to recall some such sentence as George Steiner's characterisation of Jorge Luis Borges -- "he has, that being the mark of a truly major artist, deepened the landscapes

of our memories"⁸ -- to gain a better measure of what they have really achieved.

The general point can perhaps be sharpened by referring to another Central European, the Czech novelist Milan Kundera. In an article of his, "Comedy is Elsewhere", Kundera has protested against the inclination of many a Western critic to label all Central and Eastern European writers as "dissidents". Thus he admonishes them:

If you cannot view the art that comes to you from Prague or Budapest in any other way than by means of this idiotic political code, you murder it no less brutally than the worst of the Stalinist dogmatists. And you are quite unable to hear its true voice. The importance of this art [of the novel] does not lie in the fact that it accuses this or that political regime, but in the fact that, on the strength of social and human experience of a kind people over here [in the West] cannot even imagine, it offers new testimony about the human condition We have got into the habit of putting the blame for everything on 'regimes'. This enables us not to see that a regime only sets in motion mechanisms which already exist in ourselves A novel's mission is not to pillory evident political realities but to expose anthropological scandals.⁹

In the best of the literature of those societies known as totalitarian one is granted a particularly penetrating insight into precisely these "anthropological scandals". In Kundera's own novels, like The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, the many

ways in which personal forgetting might mirror collective forgetting are given, through the Czechoslovak context, a focus so sharp that it is as if such a connection had never yet been recognised in the West. In the hands of Zbigniew Herbert, to take a further example, one finds an equally startling re-definition of certain old words, such that notions like "virtue" are shown to be something considerably more than the platitudes of reactionaries.¹⁰ Dimensions of existence which the West has either ignored or discounted are seen in a context -- Garton Ash's "black light" -- which gives them renewed meaning and may even go so far as to reveal a blindness in the rest of the world. Thus writers like Kundera and Herbert, born in countries with amongst the most undesirable of twentieth-century histories, have been able to escape from the fate against which Václav Havel protests in his "Six Asides About Culture":

Yet something in me rebels as well against the claim that history has condemned us [in Czechoslovakia] to the unenviable role of mere unthinking exponents in suffering, poor relations of those in the 'free world' who do not have to suffer and have time to think.¹¹

In the same vein, we are entitled to ask: what new testimony about the human condition does South African English poetry offer the world? What "anthropological scandals" does it unearth and reveal in a new light? What new words does it give us -- or old words renewed? In what sense is it not just the poor relation of poetries in the rest of the world, its evidence pointing almost

entirely to the impoverishment of the culture from which it springs?

Granted that any literature gains and deserves its initial *raison d'être* by feeding those in the environment from which it has grown. To provide its local readers with images of a world which they can recognise as their own -- such things are not necessarily to be discounted. But, in the end, a purely local value is not a sufficient criterion of worth. If a literature does not offer anything more than this, if it does not offer the world a new word, new testimony about something more than the local conditions in which it was produced, it cannot be said to be adequate fare even for its own.

It is debateable whether South African English poetry does add a new word to world poetry. South Africa might have given the world apartheid, but, as we have seen, the word "apartheid" is not poetry. Although the apartheid era, in particular, has offered many opportunities for human beings to grow acquainted with the farther reaches of the heart, its depths as well as its shallows, with the actual weight of oppression and the real value of liberty, its poets provide few examples of an endeavour to discover what words are essential to them -- what words will not fail them. It is arguable, too, whether their poetry adds very much to our knowledge of what Kundera means by the phrase "anthropological scandals". Is the scandal, one is tempted again and again to ask, not to be found in the limitations of the poetry itself, rather than in any human matter this poetry might possess the power to expose?

Indeed one can extend this sort of question into a potentially infinite series. Does South African English poetry

provide us with a new insight into colonialism, into communities cut off from their roots, without a past or future, peoples whose religion has been reduced to rites without mysticism, cultures where neither civilisation nor revolution has been created? Does it introduce us vividly to the peculiar void in all colonial societies? Does it do what V. S. Naipaul, for instance, does so well in his novels and travelogues: reveal the chaos of societies without intellectual instruments and stripped of their pasts? Does it turn to its own account the flatness and dreariness of most of South African life, the gracelessness and meanness of its dominant cultures? Has it been able, in the manner of a Derek Walcott, to make a new poetry out of the very tension between a language (English) and a part of the world (in his case, the Caribbean) culturally remote from it, evolving a poetic diction (like Walcott's again) of marvellous flexibility, capable of grand, sweeping imagery but also of harsh interruptions and interjections, slang, pidgin and Creole patois and subtle Caribbean syncopations? Of whom in South Africa could it really be said, as Montale once did of Pound, that he was "a man for whom beauty -- his beauty, not that of the crowd -- is the only value that matters"?¹²

As this thesis has demonstrated, all these remain, at best, open questions. If this does not necessarily license the kind of conclusion that W. H. Auden came to in 1947, without ever having visited the country -- "South Africa is the worst country in the world"¹³ -- it nevertheless does suggest the over-all dilemma of South African English poetry. It remains, in a sense, a poetry without a poetic.

No doubt all poetry speaks, directly or indirectly, of the conditions which made it possible -- or not possible. These pages have dwelt, of necessity, largely on the latter. The story they tell may be one of obstacles bravely encountered; but these have seldom been triumphantly overcome. As one era succeeds another in South Africa's history, so one set of problems has replaced another, the damaging effects of each set remaining more or less constant. Meanwhile, the search for the poetic -- the question of what poetry can come to mean in the South African context -- has remained one of the country's more elusive goals. In the tradition of South African English poetry, what may be called great poetry -- that poetry, as Montale defines it, "which arises as if by a miracle and seems to fix an entire epoch and an entire linguistic and cultural situation" ¹⁴ -- has yet to materialise.

Nevertheless, in the most recent years there have been indications that an entirely negative conclusion to this thesis would be unjustified. In 1984 Essop Patel was to declare: "Black poetry, today, is dynamic and alive (unlike white English poetry which is comatose)." ¹⁵ Even if such a distinction could never be seriously sustained, it was indeed ironic that such a claim should be made at almost the exact historical moment when a poet should emerge who would make still more obsolete the racial classification of contemporary South African English poets into whites (largely as irrelevant liberals) on the one hand, and blacks (mostly as cultural freedom fighters) on the other.

The poet in question was Jeremy Cronin. As with several other writers of the time, his poetry was given a new impetus by the emergence of mass democratic organisations, particularly the

United Democratic Front. To many people formerly isolated, the UDF held out the vision of a South Africa no longer compartmentalised along lines of colour and class; and it gave more specific substance to those democratic values which have scarcely been a feature of the country's political history.

Easily the most remarkable poetic expression of this was to be found in Cronin's work. His poem "To Learn How to Speak" has justly become one of the most famous -- if not the most famous -- of all poems written by South Africans in the last decade:

To learn how to speak
 With the voices of the land,
 To parse the speech in its rivers,
 To catch in the inarticulate grunt,
 Stammer, call, cry, babble, tongue's knot
 A sense of the stoneness of these stones
 From which all words are cut.
 To trace with the tongue wagon-trails
 Saying the suffix of their aches in -kuil, -pan,
 -fontein,
 In watery names that confirm
 The dryness of their ways.
 To visit the places of occlusion, or the lick
 In a vlei-bank daw.
 To bury my mouth in the pit of your arm,
 In that planetarium,
 Pectoral beginning to the nub of time
 Down there close to the water-table, to feel
 The full moon as it drums

At the back of my throat
 Its cow-skinned vowel.
 To write a poem with words like:
 I'm telling you,
 Stompie, stickfast, golovan,
 Songololo, just boombang, just
 To understand the least inflections,
 To voice without swallowing
 Syllables born in shacks, or catch
 the 5.15 ikwata bust fife
 Chwannisberg train, to reach
 The low chant of the mine gang's
 Mineral glow of our people's unbreakable resolve.

 To learn how to speak
 With the voices of this land.¹⁶

There are a number of reasons why this poem should be so often quoted and anthologised. One of them is the appeal it makes to all citizens of South Africa to visualise a future in which all voices, in all the various language groups, have their rightful say. Unlike the former national anthem, Die Stem or "The Voice of South Africa" (with all its connotations of a typically monolithic, authoritarian pronouncement), Cronin's poem says quite quietly, no, there's no such thing as the voice of South Africa; there are many voices, let them all be heard.

In his Towards A Sociology of the Novel, the French-Rumanian critic and philosopher Lucien Goldmann was to write:

It seems to me that there is valid literary and artistic creation only when there is aspiration to transcendence on the part of the individual and a search for qualitative trans-individual values.¹⁷

In this particular sense, there is real transcendence in Cronin's "To Learn How to Speak". Even if what the poem invokes does not yet exist, and might never exist, the possibility of the multiple voices of the land being heard is imaginatively embraced, and is embodied in a linguistic "vernacular republic".¹⁸ Moreover, the particular search or quest that the poem enacts does not simply involve the recycling of a few threadbare concepts -- 'blackness' or 'whiteness' -- in a language which is the exclusive possession of just one sub-culture in South Africa. It manages to embody precisely that search for a unitary, if various, South Africa which remains the hunger of many of the country's people. What is more, it effortlessly realises that 'aesthetics of liberation' (which in the true poet's hands also means the liberation of an aesthetic) which has often been spoken of but which few other poets to date have come near to realising.

Equally distinctive, indeed startling, has been Cronin's development of a form of narrative poetry which, while it often implies his personal affiliation to the South African Communist Party, almost never stops there. This is well illustrated in the concluding lines of his "Walking on Air":

Then looking nice, because they let him shave,
let him comb his hair, looking nice then,
chaperoned by smiling, matrimonial police-

men, shaven and combed, John Matthews
 got led out to his wife, and holding her
 hand, they let him hold her hand, he said

-- Do you know why they've brought you?

And she said

-- I do.

And he said

-- Dulcie, I will never betray my comrades.

And with a frog in her throat she replied

-- I'm behind you. One hundred percent.

So back they hauled John Matthews then and there,
 back to the cells,
 that was that, then, but
 all the way down the passage,
 toe-heel, heel-toe, diddle-diddle
 ONE HUNDRED PERCENT
 I mean, he was high
 off the ground, man.

He was walking on air.¹⁹

This is a poem which is, despite its obvious political message, an almost perfect exemplification of all that the theologian Paul Tillich meant by the phrase "the courage to be".²⁰ It is this dimension, which it manifestly possesses, which also makes "Walking on Air" a form of implicit literary

criticism. It embodies the informal critical precept once suggested by Czeslaw Milosz:

Weathered by time, the transitory and the spurious fade into gray banality; but they may also lose their appeal when confronted by a more powerful beauty, one more abundant in being. Works less abundant in being are put to death, not by critics or canonical pronouncements, but by works of greater abundance.²¹

A similar abundance has, in the most recent years, also been offered by the work of the expatriate poet Peter Sacks. As much as Cronin's, the example of his work has helped to undermine the clean lines of that black-and-white thinking evident in Essop Patel's statement. He too possesses the skills necessary to re-evoke the often abolished South African past, and he does so by doing something more than mentioning a litany of heroes (Shaka, Luthuli, Biko) by name. The title poem of his 1986 collection In These Mountains deals on the most immediate level with the extermination of the Bushmen in the Drakensberg mountains in the nineteenth century. Even as the poem laments the genocide suffered by these people, it reconstructs their lives, their mythology, the actual terror of their end, and in doing so becomes an authentic act of reclamation, a means through which a past which has been all but lost may be repossessed. This long poem scarcely descends below the level of fineness to be found in the following section which takes a Bushman painting in a Drakensberg cave as its point of departure:

Unframed, running freely on the walls,
 a herd of eland moves across the stone,
 small figures as one sees them in the distance,
 some receding, others nearer
 leaping, heads thrown back, each body in a long
 repeating curve, the soft V of the neck,
 the mounded ridge above the shoulders sinking
 to a long swayed back rising again
 over the rump; the flanks dun-red,
 the underflanks and legs bone-white
 so that each animal appears uplifted, floating
 on the stone. Near them, human figures
 even smaller, running in full stride
 with sticks and bows, here circling an eland bleeding
 on the ground, hooves in the air, pale head
 wrenched to one side. Others looming in the mist,
 each shrouded in a long kaross over
 the shoulders blanketing the hips, dark
 as dark blood, charcoal, burned manganese.

And here on this side wall the hunter's moon,
 the white-haired moon, holding her weapons
 in her hands, a quiver slung across
 her back, five arrows needle-thin,
 her gleaming belly flecked with ochre,
 darkening legs turned outward at the knee.

'O Moon, give me the face
 with which you, having died, return.'²²

Even in an extended description like this there is an openness towards that which is other and towards those feelings which, though they might not be our own, we cannot ignore without ourselves becoming less human, even inhuman. In Sacks' imaginative powers of recuperation there is, precisely, another instance of Goldmann's "trans-individual values". Although the poet might not, finally, be able to re-forge a link with the spectral presence of a people who have long since been wiped off the face of the earth, his poem enacts its own transcendence through its powers of psychic emigration.

Poets like Peter Sacks and Jeremy Cronin are not the only ones who have been instrumental in breaking down old polarities (both imaginative and critical) in the last decade. There is the beginnings of an indigenous feminist poetry in the work of Ingrid de Kok and a new power in Douglas Livingstone's most recent collection A Littoral Zone (1991), which includes the remarkable allegorical poem "The Wall Beyond Station X".²³ But it is still too early to judge the effect that work like this might have. As mentioned in Chapter 2, Peter Sacks could by now be considered more an American than a South African poet. Jeremy Cronin, presently a prominent member of the executive of the South African Communist Party, has hardly published a poem in the ten years since his Inside first appeared. Reviewing that volume on its publication, Michael Chapman was to caution:

South African literary history, perhaps inevitably, includes many one-off volumes written under the pressure of some extraordinary event or phase in the author's life. The

question is not whether those currently acclaiming Cronin's courage, commitment and 'ideological armour' will allow him to be a poet, but whether Cronin sees himself not only as a survivor in the world but also as a literary survivor.²⁴

The present is by definition a period loose at all ends, perhaps nowhere more so than in contemporary South Africa. It would be pleasing to end this thesis on a note of optimism, pointing to many signs of poetic renewal, but unfortunately this would still be premature. Besides, the history of South African literature (as this thesis in part demonstrates) is so littered with ironies that one cannot but be cautious. Since 1990 the hypothesis of a future society in South Africa, better than any version in its past, has, on some mornings, become more plausible. But this is largely a political and economic hypothesis; it does not authorise deductions of an aesthetic nature.

Notes and References

1. See my essay, "Poetry and Politicisation," Selected Essays (Cape Town: Carrefour, 1990) 9-20.
2. Timothy Garton Ash, The Uses of Adversity: Essays on the Fate of Central Europe (Cambridge: Granta, 1989) 190-191.
3. Czeslaw Milosz, Nobel Lecture, trans. Louis Iribarne (New York: Farrar Strauss Giroux, 1981) 20.
4. Graham Pechey, Proposal for Fire with Your Pens, n.d., n.p., ca. 1990.
5. For instance, there has been no-one who has brought to the issue the intelligence of Paul Valéry: ". . . there are many degrees between a purely literary occupation and political activity. Let us say of the former that it consists in writing to make people think or imagine, and if the latter that it comes down to writing (or speaking) to make people act, and we shall then observe that the two motives cannot be clearly distinguished nor their results clearly separated." History and Politics, trans. Denise Folliot and Jackson Matthews (London: Routledge, 1963) 274.
6. Peter Wilhelm, Rev of Selected Essays 1980-1990 by Stephen Watson, Sesame 12 (1990): 22.
7. See his remarks: ". . . it is rare, however, to find any one poem [in Nortje] that is entirely successful, and the reader is often left with tantalising fragments." South African English Poetry: A Modern Perspective (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1984) 248.

8. George Steiner, "Tigers in the Mirror,"
Extraterritorial: Papers on Literature and the Language Revolution (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975) 40.
9. George Theiner, ed., They Shoot Writers, Don't They (London: Faber and Faber, 1984) 154-155.
10. See, for instance, Zbigniew Herbert's "Mr. Cogito on Virtue," Report from the Besieged City and Other Poems (New York: Ecco, 1985) 26-27.
11. Jan Vladislav, ed., Václav Havel or Living in Truth (London: Faber and Faber, 1987) 126.
12. Eugenio Montale, The Second Life of Art: Selected Essays (New York: Ecco, 1982) 284.
13. Alan Ansen, The Table Talk of W. H. Auden (London: Faber and Faber, 1991) 33.
14. Eugenio Montale, The Second Life of Art 55.
15. Essop Patel, "Towards a Revolutionary Poetry", Momentum (Pietermaritzburg: U of Natal Press, 1984) 87.
16. Jeremy Cronin, Inside (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1983) 58.
17. Lucien Goldmann, Towards a Sociology of the Novel (London: Tavistock, 1975) 24.
18. This is a phrase used by the Australian poet Les A. Murray to suggest the kind of indigenous Australian culture to which he aspires in his own poetry. See, for instance, his Selected Poems: The Vernacular Republic (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1976).
19. Jeremy Cronin, Inside 13-14.
20. See his The Courage to Be (London: Fontana, 1962) 13-40.

21. Czeslaw Milosz, The Land of Ulro (Manchester: Caracanet, 1985) 89.
22. Peter Sacks, In These Mountains (New York: Collier, 1986) 51.
23. See his A Littoral Zone (Cape Town: Carrefour, 1991) 27-28.
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