

THE THEME OF DESPAIR IN A SELECTION
OF ENGLISH SOUTH AFRICAN FICTION:
A STUDY OF MOOD AND FORM IN OLIVE
SCHREINER'S THE STORY OF AN AFRICAN
FARM, WILLIAM PLOMER'S TURBOTT WOLFE,
PAULINE SMITH'S THE BEADLE, ALAN
PATON'S CRY, THE BELOVED COUNTRY,
DORIS LESSING'S THE GRASS IS SINGING,
DAN JACOBSON'S THE TRAP AND A DANCE
IN THE SUN (AND STORIES FROM THROUGH
THE WILDERNESS AND "THE STRANGER"
FROM A LONG WAY FROM LONDON [AND
OTHER STORIES]), NADINE GORDIMER'S
THE CONSERVATIONIST AND J.M. COETZEE'S
IN THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY.

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CEsm 12.

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ABSTRACT

In an analysis of seven major novels and two important novellas in English South African literature, this thesis attempts to highlight a common factor of philosophical despair present in varying degrees of intensity in these works. An interpretation of possible causes for the widespread occurrence of this theme and mood in English South African literature shows that many South African novelists have seen the social and historical circumstances of the country as inimical to the cause of human fulfilment, from the time the literature really began to question the nature of life in the subcontinent, with the work of Olive Schreiner, to the present. A critical study of some of the best and most important fictional works in this literature, furthermore, reveals how the conflict between the quest for human fulfilment and this perceived environmental harshness has resulted in an intense integrity of vision, expressed more often than not as despair, which is the central imaginative link between these writers, locked in their common struggle to find meaning and hope in the lot of the colonial white man--and his descendants--in South Africa. These links are of sufficient tenacity, and have powerful enough manifestations, to form the basis of a literary tradition.

Despair is described by Existential philosophers such as Soren Kierkegaard and Paul Tillich as an unhealthy psychological state. Albert Camus understands despair in terms of an Existential experience of absurdity but develops a doctrine of courageous pessimism, which involves persisting in the face of invincible defeat in the campaign to be human. Despite Camus's notion of Existential perseverance, it is clear that despair is a dangerous state of mind for man to remain in: as Tillich suggests in The Courage To Be, it may well lead to the ultimate triumph of non-being, or death-in-life, over being, or life.

If the focus here has been on the artistic, fictional effects of the manifestations of this mood and theme in the literature itself, this thesis made the assumption from the outset, following the critical lead of the likes of Henry James, D.H. Lawrence and F.R. Leavis, that the business of literature cannot be severed from the moral issues it raises, so that it was felt to be important to pay attention to the doctrines propounded by these writers in their attempt to explain a reality that first provided them with that dangerous potential for despair.

PREFACE

It soon becomes clear, after embarking upon a study of English South African literature, as I did in 1980 while reading for an Honours degree in English at this University, that the literature is permeated by pessimistic outlooks on the situation, past or present as the case may be, in South Africa. The phenomenon seemed so ingrained a part of this literature, that the need to clarify it became a challenge. The project turned out to be a sounding-board for one's responses to issues this topic raised in one's own experience in South Africa, in addition to providing demanding work towards a Masters thesis.

I have many people to thank for their part in this effort. Firstly, to Assoc. Professor Geoffrey Haresnape, I am deeply indebted, since it was he who did all the pioneering groundwork needed for the creation of that course on Southern African Literature (which first excited my interest in the topic of this thesis), and who supervised my shambolic draft work with an academic thoroughness that was as incisive as it was painstaking. Mr Victor Houliston kindly gave me a copy of his Masters thesis so that I could familiarise myself with the MLA format. Mrs Mally Fyfe enthusiastically, efficiently and good-naturedly typed the script of the thesis. I am also grateful to family members and friends who provoked me into finishing the M.A. by constantly asking me how far I had progressed. And lastly, to Hanlie, who cared more than enough, I owe my deepest gratitude.

I wish to make it clear that the fact that the writers studied in this thesis are all white is in no way an indication of any prejudice against writers of other race groups. I originally selected texts for study on merit and then found I was dealing primarily with a certain kind of South African experience to do with the difficulties of the white man's relation to this part of Africa after his creation of what Leopold Senghor called, talking about a different part of Africa, "the colonial fact".

Finally, I would like to quote from Robert Frost's poem "The Gift Outright" and dedicate this thesis to South African writers

whose work is an affirmation of an analogous "surrender", in particular, Alan Paton, Nadine Gordimer, Athol Fugard and J.M. Coetzee:

But we were England's, still colonials,
Possessing what we still were unpossessed by,
Possessed by what we now no more possessed.
Something we were withholding made us weak
Until we found out that it was ourselves
We were withholding from our land of living,
And forthwith found salvation in surrender.

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CHAPTER ONE : CONCEPTS AND METHODOLOGY

INTRODUCTION : AIMS AND SCOPE

The aim of this thesis is to assess the prevalence of a philosophical pessimism in the mainstream of English South African novels. This will entail highlighting in this literature the ubiquity of the philosophical theme of despair as an expression and index of the most extreme pessimistic position. The effects of this phenomenon on the literature itself will then be considered.

The main body of this thesis will be given to providing critical evidence of, and commentary on, the factor of despair in a selection of representative and aesthetically accomplished fictional works (mostly novels) in this field, namely: Olive Schreiner, The Story of an African Farm (1883); William Plomer, Turbott Wolfe (1926); Pauline Smith, The Beadle (1926); Alan Paton, Cry, the Beloved Country (1948); Doris Lessing, The Grass is Singing (1950); Dan Jacobson, The Trap and A Dance in the Sun (1955) and some stories from Through the Wilderness (1973); Nadine Gordimer, The Conservationist (1974) and J.M. Coetzee, In the Heart of the Country (1977).

Stephen Gray, in Southern African Literature: An Introduction, asks whether South African English literature can be said to have a sense of an on-going tradition.¹ An ancillary aim of this thesis will be to decide whether or not this omnipresent factor of despair is the key to the understanding of this body of literature as forming something of a tradition, and, if so, what this would say about the nature of such a tradition. A tradition, as Gray, paraphrasing the argument T.S. Eliot propounded in "Tradition and the Individual Talent", indicates,

¹ Stephen Gray, Southern African Literature: An Introduction (Cape Town: David Philip, 1979), p. 7.

involves the notion of a creative continuum, in which writers of a common literature, "the whole of the literature of Europe" in Eliot's case, participate. Eliot's argument that the artist must "surrender ... himself"¹ to the "living whole"² of all the literature that precedes him, the established "past", presupposes the notion of a collective, historical consciousness, a main current of ideas, philosophy, motifs and "passions", informing the mind of the individual writer:

[The poet] must be aware that the mind of Europe--the mind of his own country--a mind which he learns in time to be much more important than his own private mind--is a mind which changes, and that this is a development which abandons nothing en route, which does not superannuate either Shakespeare, or Homer . . . 3

F.R. Leavis, concerned as he is with "high civilisation",⁴ considers greatness, a profundity of artistic skill and moral and philosophical insight, to be the core of any literary tradition; hence his concept of the "Great Tradition". Like Eliot, he sees writers in the English tradition as in some way deriving fundamental inspiration from the established "past" as well as contributing significantly to become "a constitutive part of the tradition".⁵

In their introductory study of the "literature and language" of Africa, Black Africa, Czechoslovakian analysts Klima, Ruzicka

¹ T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" in English Critical Texts ed. D.J. Enright and Ernst de Chickera (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 298.

² Eliot, p. 297.

³ Eliot, pp. 295-6.

⁴ F.R. Leavis, The Great Tradition, 5th ed. (1948; rpt. Middlesex: Pelican, 1974), p. 25.

⁵ Leavis, p. 29.

and Zima go against the critical grain by asserting categorically that South African writing is a branch of English (in the sense of British) literature. They suggest the writing has its distinctive tradition. This position is both monolithic--Afrikaans literature, for example, could hardly be seen in this light--and shortsighted: a tradition that is distinctive would have to be more than simply a branch of another, more fundamental, literature. To persist with the metaphor, it would need to be a tree that has taken root, despite its origins, in the indigenous soil of its new host country.

Gray, noting that the quest for any "wholeness" in Southern African literature (a category he appears to use loosely, giving rise to conceptual confusion) is "likely to prove chimerical", has his own metaphor.² This literature is like an archipelago, a group of islands with connections below the surface and related to the adjacent landmasses of English literature and the broader British Commonwealth and "increasingly" to the African Continent which provides the literature with its "actual nourishment". South Africa as a "divided land" has produced these islands of separate, yet connected, literatures. Gray analyses the Southern African English "island" only in terms of the "liberal and realist" novel--a limited approach that excludes non-realist writers like J.M. Coetzee and drastically oversimplifies the philosophical and artistic range within this dubious genre. Ezekiel Mphahlele adopts a vague, ethnographic approach. Similarly, Richard Rive, like Mphahlele a writer-critic, skirts the important theoretical issues implied by the concept of tradition by applying blanket political terms to South African literature; for example, in Writing Black he divides the literature into "Liberal writing . . . defined as writing mostly by Whites about Blacks to move Whites out of their socio-

¹ Vladimir Klima, Karel Ruzicka and Peter Zima, Black Africa (Czechoslovakia: D. Reidel, 1976), p. 226. They write, "South African writing . . . possesses what other literatures [of Africa] lack--a tradition extending over several generations."

² Gray, p. 10.

political complacency" and "Protest writing . . . mostly by Blacks articulating their position to a White readership they feel can effect change."¹ This type of analysis reduces literature to the levels of politics and ethnography and thus oversimplifies its complex aesthetic, moral and philosophical nature.

Stephen Watson, more recently, has attempted to isolate the defining feature of this body of English South African literature, which he sees as a "sterile" liberal ideology.² Watson's position is based on premises which view literature as essentially part of politically and economically determined history and culture, whereas Eliot and Leavis picture literature more as an artistic and philosophical phenomenon. Watson's approach is to expose what he sees as the historical and political limitations of the liberal ideology, to argue further that the novel form itself reflects the individualism that is the basis of liberalism, and then to apply these extra-literary criteria holus-bolus to a selection of white South African fiction. To reject, more or less, the novel form per se is to adopt an ideological stance which commits the fallacy of division, whereby characteristics of the novel form are attributed indiscriminately, by implication, to any or all novels.³ Further, this seems methodologically incorrect, as does Rive's approach, since each novel is a unique and dynamic interplay of fiction and philosophy, technique and subject-matter, and ought not to be assessed purely on the grounds of alleged ideological fallacies that have strictly political limitations. This approach serves to split these two closely bound categories, by prejudging works of literature purely on the

¹ Richard Rive, Writing Black (Cape Town: David Philip, 1981), p. 21.

² Stephen Watson, "The Liberal Ideology and Some South African Novelists", M.A. Thesis, Cape Town, 1981, p. 6.

³ This fallacy is outlined in Irving Copi, An Introduction to Logic, 4th ed. (1953; rpt. New York: Macmillan, 1972), p. 99.

grounds of ideological content.

At least three South African writers, Dan Jacobson, Nadine Gordimer and J.M. Coetzee, have had doubts about there being a fully independent and vital English South African literary tradition. Jacobson, in an essay entitled "The Writer in the Commonwealth", wrote in 1961 that the English-speaking South African had then neither a local literature nor a national intellectual tradition to draw on.¹ What they had was imported. Gordimer said in a paper "From Apartheid to Afrocentrism" delivered in 1977 that South African literature, although it had developed both a distinctive black and a distinctive white literature, was still in a transition between artificial "Eurocentrism" and genuine "Afrocentrism".² Coetzee, in an interview with Stephen Watson in Speak in 1978, said that South African literature was not a "great literature" and that the "pure colonial" publishing situation in the country "should give people pause before they start talking about a South African literature".³

This question of whether or not South African and/or English South African literature constitutes a tradition, or "creative continuum", then, has vexed both writers and critics right to the present time. With the emergence of two prize-winning and internationally recognised South African novelists, Nadine Gordimer and J.M. Coetzee, on the contemporary literary scene, along with the considerable overseas and local success of dramatist Athol Fugard, it is perhaps an appropriate time to assess this possibility.

In conclusion, the logic of this thesis is to be that an hypothesis is first proposed - that the mood and theme of despair

¹ Dan Jacobson, "The Writer in The Commonwealth" in Time of Arrival (London: Weidenfeld and Nic., 1962) (and other essays), by Dan Jacobson, p. 161.

² Nadine Gordimer, "From Apartheid to Afrocentrism" in South African Outlook, December 1977, p. 181.

³ "Speaking: J.M. Coetzee" in Speak, May/June 1978, p. 24. Interview by Stephen Watson.

has characterised major English South African fiction from its beginning, a century ago with the publication of its first really significant work, The Story of an African Farm, to the present-- and then evidence is to be sought in selected "case studies" to confirm this, after which the hypothesis will be used as a basis for inductive conclusions concerning the effects and implications of the phenomenon, with special reference to the concept of tradition.

A CRITICAL APPROACH TO LITERATURE

The object of study in a critical literary survey such as this one is, finally, the works of literature themselves. F.R. Leavis's principle that literary criticism and philosophy are "quite distinct and different kinds of discipline" seems sound.¹ Philosophy, according to Leavis, deals in the "abstract" but literature is rather centred in the "concrete", that is, in a "complex experience that is given in the [text]".² Poetry, and literature in general, embodies vital experience and is evocative to the extent that it is vividly linked to "direct vulgar living" or "the actual".³ To reduce literature to the philosophy that may underpin it, therefore, constitutes, in Leavis's view, a devitalisation. Leavis seeks, then, a vital rendition of living human experience in "concrete" and "vivid" literature. (It should be noted that Leavis's concept of literary criticism as explained here is specifically oriented to analysis of poetry and is not entirely sufficient for our purposes, since novels have structural facets unique to their form and so criticism of novels requires, too, the consideration of their peculiar form and structure.)

¹ F.R. Leavis, "Criticism and Philosophy" in The Common Pursuit, 5th ed. (1962; rpt. Suffolk: Pelican, 1978), by F.R. Leavis, p. 212.

² Leavis, pp. 212-3.

³ Leavis, p. 215.

This conception of literature as an embodiment of vital experience presupposes a close relation between form and content in the work, in that the structural and artistic presentation of subject-matter needs to constitute a sufficient correlative for the full effect and depth of the human experience portrayed. A relation between the work and human experience itself, "Life", is also assumed. Leavis writes: ". . . the study of literature is, or should be, an intimate study of the complexities, potentialities and essential conditions of human nature".¹ This explains why Leavis places such an austere emphasis on the moral and philosophical seriousness of the "great" writers in The Great Tradition. It is agreed here that the ontological status of a work of literature is not that of an autotelic "icon"² but has its being in the "third realm" posited by Leavis in The Living Principle in which the reader's mind brings the work to life, as it were, in a dynamic encounter of "essentially collaborative . . . human creativity."³

The kind of "continuity" Leavis advocates here, between writer and reader, literature and life, and tradition and society has been called for by such diverse writers and critics as D.H. Lawrence, Henry James, Georg Lukács and Jean-Paul Sartre.

A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE NOVEL

This thesis argues, then, for the primacy of literature in literary criticism, over and above any political or sociological considerations that may determine either the content of the work or even the writing conditions of the writer. The kind of seriousness of concern "with essential human issues"⁴ sought by

¹ F.R. Leavis, "Literature and Society" in The Common Pursuit, p. 184.

² W.K. Wimsatt's phrase in The Verbal Icon (1954; London: Methuen and Co, 1977). The term refers to art-works that are regarded as absolutely autonomous.

³ F.R. Leavis, The Living Principle (London: Chatto and Windus, 1975), p. 36.

⁴ Leavis, The Great Tradition, p. 19.

Leavis ought to indicate well enough that these broader political and social matters are by no means irrelevant to the serious artist, but this "vital capacity for experience"¹ needs to be "profoundly realised" in the literature as "form".² It is this dynamic interplay of fictional form and serious thematic concern that is of fundamental importance in critical study of the novel.

This criterion has many ramifications. The serious concern of the fine novelist will be revealed in a profound awareness of human experience evident in the intensity with which the chosen world or life-situation, as it may be called, of the work in question, is represented. Every novel centres in such a world or life-situation, that is not simply the setting, such as the Karoo of early missionary culture in South Africa in The Story of an African Farm, or the Dutch-speaking Aangenaam valley in The Beadle or the platteland wilderness of In the Heart of the Country, but a whole society and world of characters acting according to the dictates of the novelist's view of experience, his "world-view". Henry James in his essay "Ivan Turgénieff" asserts this point:

The great question as to a poet or a novelist is, How does he feel about life? What, in the last analysis, is his philosophy? When vigorous writers have reached maturity we are at liberty to look in their works for some expression of a total view of the world they have been so actively observing. ³

James adds, "This is the most interesting thing their work has to offer us". An explanation of what he calls the novelist's "total view of the world" would seem, then, to be central in analysis of novels.

Georg Lukács, a Hungarian Marxist critic, would concur, but for different reasons: "It is the view of the world, the ideology or weltanschauung underlying a writer's work, that counts . . . And it is the writer's attempt to reproduce this view of the

¹ Leavis, The Great Tradition, p. 18.

² Leavis, p.46.

³ Henry James, "Ivan Turgénieff" (1874) in Theory of Fiction (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska, 1972), ed. James E. Miller Jr., by Henry James, p. 21.

world which constitutes . . . the formative principle underlying the style of a given piece of writing".¹

The novel, of all literary forms, seems most able to create a whole world of human experience, a society of people in action. D.H. Lawrence states in his essay "Why the Novel Matters" that the novel is the "book of life", for only in the novel "are all things given full play".² E.M. Forster writes in Aspects of the Novel that this literary form is a "formidable mass", "sogged with humanity".³ James, in "The Future of the Novel", sums up the power and scope of the novel: "The novel is of all pictures the most comprehensive and the most elastic".⁴ Leavis's idea is that fine novels may provide for the realisation of a serious, profound and rich understanding of life.

The novel is not simply a record of this "total view of the world". Leavis saw literature as basically "concrete", not "abstract". The embodiment of this vision of life needs to be a living, experiential rendition of these principles the writer assumes to be true. Nadine Gordimer has made a similar point in The Black Interpreters:

If you want to read the facts of the retreat from Moscow in 1815, you may read a history book; if you want to know what war is like and how people of a certain time and background dealt with it as their personal situation, you must read War and Peace.⁵

War and Peace, Gordimer is saying, shows us what war is like, not as an historical occurrence but as a living experience or "personal situation" of a whole people "of a certain time and background"; that is, the novel evokes the world of a particular

¹ Georg Lukács, The Meaning of Contemporary Realism (London: Merlin, 1972), p. 19.

² D.H. Lawrence, "Why The Novel Matters" in English Critical Texts, ed. P.J. Enright and Ernest de Chickera, p. 289; p. 292.

³ E.M. Forster, Aspects of the Novel, 12th ed. (1927; Bucks: Pelican, 1979), p. 24; p. 39.

⁴ Henry James, "The Future of The Novel", in Theory of Fiction, p. 338.

⁵ Nadine Gordimer, The Black Interpreters (Johannesburg: SPRO-CAS/Ravan, 1973), p. 7.

historical war as it was experienced by people living through it.

To evoke any world in the way Gordimer is suggesting, whether it be the Moscow of 1815 in War and Peace or the Johannesburg of the 1940s in Cry, the Beloved Country, the novelist needs to work from both a general world-picture and a wealth of insight into the specific society that will provide the particular novel with its setting and world. This "serious concern" will then need to be enacted in the "personal situation(s)" that must provide it with the necessary "concreteness".

The most basic aspect of the novel, then, is the world-picture underlying the life-situation created in the novel (what Gordimer referred to as the personal situation of a whole people of a certain time and background), which encompasses not only a society of people but also, in more philosophical terms, the very principles seen to govern that world, which is, one assumes, what James meant by "a total view of the world".

PHILOSOPHICAL PREMISES : EXISTENTIALISM AND A DEFINITION OF DESPAIR

The central term in the argument, despair, which may prove to be a key concept in the quest for a tradition in English South African fiction, should now be defined.

The term despair has both an ordinary lexical meaning and a special philosophical status, namely as a primary concept in one of the most important of modern philosophies--Existentialism.

The word has its roots in the Latin desperare, de negating sperare, to hope, giving "without hope". Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary defines despair as "hopelessness". "Desperate", from the same roots, originally meant "hopeless" but its meaning in present-day usage has loosened considerably to mean something like "in an urgent situation of great need". This is not the proper meaning of despair. To be in despair, according to the founder of Existentialism, Soren Kierkegaard, is to be in a serious state of alienation that threatens the very fabric of the person, his self-relation, that is, his relationship to himself.

That despair is indeed a serious condition of this sort suggested by Kierkegaard is no doubt in part due to the fundamental importance of hope, properly understood, to the human being. Alan Paton, who has become something of a South African guru over the years, sees hope as "inseparable from life".¹

Hope is not a facile expectancy that something good is about to happen but a confidence in the future per se, in time itself, and is therefore an affirmation that life in some ultimate sense is bearable, worthwhile and rewarding. Paton writes ". . . our hope is concerned with the Future and the Now."²

This brings us to the more philosophical sense of the term. Despair cannot be seen only as a temporary state of mind, which comes and goes like a spell of depression or a mood of anxiety or unhappiness. It has its roots in a philosophical vision about the nature of life and time--in its strongest sense it presupposes a pessimistic view that life ultimately has nothing to offer man (which could provide a rationale for hope). It is this stronger meaning of the word that is to be used in this study.

This conception of despair can be profitably linked to the Existential viewpoint that life lacks a definite meaning and purpose, and is therefore alien. M.H. Abrams, in his A Glossary of Literary Terms, offers a solid definition of the Existential world-picture of writers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus:

(They) view each man as an isolated being who is cast ignominiously into an alien universe, (and) conceive the universe as possessing no inherent human truth, value or meaning, and . . . represent man's life, as it moves from the nothingness whence it came toward the nothingness where it must end, as an existence both anguished and absurd .³

¹ Alan Paton, "The Nature and Ground of Christian Hope Today" (1974) in Knocking on the Door (Cape Town: David Philip, 1975), by Alan Paton, p. 286.

² Paton, p. 288.

³ M.H. Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms, 3rd ed. (1941; New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1971), p. 86.

THE EXISTENTIALIST VIEW OF LIFE

Kierkegaard's philosophy initiated and later influenced Existentialism. Sartre, leading exponent of post-World War 2 Existentialism (as opposed to the nineteenth century movement involving Nietzsche and his God-is-dead theology, as well as the theistic Existentialism founded by Kierkegaard), acknowledged his debt to Kierkegaard in Existentialism and Humanism, a popularised tract explaining the main tenets of the philosophy, for the central concept of anguish.¹ Sartre, though, develops Nietzsche's God-is-dead position, as does Heidegger. Jaspers and, more recently, Paul Tillich, represent the theist position in modern Existentialism.

Existentialism stresses the subjective existence of the individual as the basis and essence of human life--this is the starting point of the doctrine. "One must know oneself before knowing anything else",² Kierkegaard said. He also said, "The essential characteristic of human existence is that man is an individual".³ Sartre corroborates this point when he states in Existentialism and Humanism that the Cartesian "I think therefore I am" is "the absolute truth of consciousness";⁴ in other words that the mind that is thinking--the "I think"--is the basis of all consciousness. This proposition puts the individual at the centre of existence. Camus shares this viewpoint: "For everything begins with consciousness and nothing is worth anything except through it".⁵ All that is "worth anything" acquires its value through its relation to the individual mind--"consciousness".

¹ Sartre, Existentialism and Humanism, trans. Philip Mairet, 2nd ed. (1948; London: Eyre Methuen Ltd, 1973), p. 3.

² Alexander Dru, ed. The Journals of Soren Kierkegaard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938), p.17.

³ Soren Kierkegaard, The Concept of Dread, trans. Walter Lowrie (1834; London: Oxford University Press, 1944), p. 26.

⁴ Sartre, p. 44.

⁵ Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, trans. Justin O'Brien, 5th ed. (1942; Bucks: Penguin, 1977), p. 19.

The individual, that is, confers value in life. Sartre says in Existentialism and Humanism, "Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself".¹

Sartre and Camus, then, two leading twentieth century Existentialists, share Kierkegaard's notion of the centrality of the individual in human existence.

A corollary is the importance placed on man's subjectivity, or his self-hood, which Kierkegaard calls "inwardness", which he saw as the basic quality of the true Christian life: "I mean to labour to achieve a far more inward relation to Christianity; hitherto I have sought for its truth while in a sense standing outside it".² Here he says that the objective of the Christian life is really to believe its truths, oneself, not as a matter of doctrine, but as a personal possibility. Truth, goes the well-known Kierkegaardian maxim, is subjectivity.

Sartre agrees:

Subjectivism means, on the one hand, the freedom of the individual subject and, on the other, that man cannot pass beyond human subjectivity. It is the latter which is the deeper meaning of existentialism. When we say that man chooses himself, we do mean that every one of us must choose himself . . .³

The subjective nature of man lands him with the freedom "to choose himself".

These two premisses--that man is an individual, the source of any meaning or value in life, and that his nature is subjective, providing him with the freedom to choose, even his own identity--are the roots of much of that anguish that popular opinion attributes to Existentialism and which Existentialism attributes to the human condition. One consequence of man's having ultimate freedom--to choose himself--is the discovery of a terrible responsibility and an accompanying anguish.

¹ Sartre, p. 28.

² Dru, The Journals of Soren Kierkegaard, p.59.

³ Sartre, p. 29.

Sartre:

...man is responsible for what he is. Thus, the first effect of existentialism is that it puts every man in possession of himself as he is, and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders.¹

Man is faced with a freedom that is paradoxically condemnatory:

Thus we have neither behind us, nor before us . . . any means of justification or excuse. That is what I mean when I say that man is condemned to be free. Condemned, because he did not create himself yet is nevertheless at liberty, and from the moment he is thrown into this world he is responsible for everything he does.²

Sartre calls this freedom "abandonment": "That is what 'abandonment' implies, that we ourselves decide our being. And with this abandonment goes anguish."³

For Kierkegaard, too, freedom brings dread: ". . . dread is the possibility of freedom";⁴ the dread, that is, of confronting, and being confronted by, a vague and unlimited future filled with bewildering possibilities. Karl Jaspers, a German Existentialist and contemporary of Sartre and Camus, noted: "Existence exposes (man) to endlessness; with nothing to stand on, he cannot cope with anything".⁵

A catch-phrase of Sartre's is helpful in a definition of Existentialism: "Existence precedes essence",⁶ for this is the emphasis that all Existentialists have in common--they offer an analysis of human existence in its actual state(s) of being: "For everything begins with consciousness and nothing is worth anything except through it".

¹ Sartre, p. 29.

² Sartre, p. 34.

³ Sartre, p. 39.

⁴ Kierkegaard, The Concept of Dread, p. 109.

⁵ Karl Jaspers, Philosophy (Volume I), trans. E.B. Ashton (London: University of Chicago Press, 1969), p. 121.

⁶ Sartre, p. 26.

When Sartre says that existence comes before what he calls "essence", which is man's identity and conception of himself, he means that man is not given a ready-made identity or purpose or role as a kind of ontological birthright, but has to confront his own nothingness and formlessness and only then to make fundamental decisions (which Existentialists on the whole see as agonising):

What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world--and defines himself afterwards. If man as the existentialist sees him is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. Thus, there is no human nature . . . Man simply is.¹

A further important Existential concept is that of alienation, a prevalent theme in the Existentialist literature of Sartre, Camus, Kafka, Beckett, Bellow and J.D. Salinger and, in modern South African writing, Nadine Gordimer, J.M. Coetzee and Athol Fugard. The concept is close to Camus's notion of absurdity: "This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity".² Camus asks melodramatically, "Does the absurd dictate death?",³ that is, does it make life utterly futile, a matter for despair? The question gives rise to Camus's doctrine of courageous pessimism: "There is thus metaphysical honour in enduring the world's absurdity . . . absurd revolt [is a tribute] man pays to his dignity in a campaign in which he is defeated in advance".⁴

However, there are Existentialist writers who see human alienation as something degrading and maddening without any consolation of "metaphysical honour"; Beckett and Coetzee are the starkest examples here. R.D. Laing's conception of the schizoid personality utterly bereft of human belongingness, unrelated to

¹ Sartre, p. 28.

² Camus, p. 13.

³ Camus, p. 16.

⁴ Camus, p. 86.

the world and to himself, is closer to the mark for these writers. Laing, an Existential psychiatrist, pictures the schizoid in The Divided Self as a person "not able to experience himself 'together with' others or 'at home in' the world, but, on the contrary, he experiences himself in despairing aloneness and isolation . . ." ¹ Laing's notion of the ontologically insecure and existentially fragmented person will prove useful in assessing the position of the central characters in The Grass is Singing, The Conservationist and In the Heart of the Country.

Existentialism, to conclude, is the doctrine that man is essentially isolated or alienated in his existence, since he has to make all decisions for himself without any help or precedent, including basic decisions about his own identity. Further, he feels alone in, and separated from, the world. Existential man lacks both communion and meaning in life. Jaspers points out that man "cannot cope" because he has "nothing to stand on". He is filled with nothingness. His being is therefore radically insecure. His existence is neither guaranteed nor safeguarded. For Sartre it is an "abandonment", ² for Kierkegaard "treacherous" ³ and for Camus "absurd". ⁴

EXISTENTIAL DESPAIR : KIERKEGAARD AND TILLICH

It is now possible to offer an Existential definition of despair, having outlined some features of this philosophy.

Kierkegaard calls despair "the sickness of the self". ⁵ He reasons that despair is really "self-despair", it is "the sickness unto death" because it represents the self's death-wish:

¹ R.D. Laing, The Divided Self, 12th ed. (1960; London: Penguin, 1975), p. 17.

² Sartre, p. 39.

³ Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript, trans. David F. Swenson (1846; Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1944), by Soren Kierkegaard, p. 77.

⁴ Camus, p. 42.

⁵ Kierkegaard, The Sickness Unto Death (1849; Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1944), p. 26.

"For in the fact that he [the despairer] despaired of something, he really despaired of himself, and now would be rid of himself".¹

Such an intolerable existential position occurs, argues Kierkegaard, when a person fails to synthesise potential opposites in the personality. One basic pair of opposites is "possibility" and "necessity". "Possibility" means that which presents itself as a choice, an opening for action. "Necessity" means an unchangeable and integral part of existence: "Inasmuch as it [the self] is itself, it is necessary, and inasmuch as it has to become itself, it is a possibility".² In other words, the self must accept what is "necessary" within it and yet is free to "become" itself according to the possibilities before it.

The despair of "necessity" is brought about by an absence of life-sustaining possibilities, so that life is seen as mere existence, trivial, devoid of hope: "The loss of possibility signifies: either that everything has become necessary . . . or that everything has become trivial".³ Kierkegaard explains that life for the fatalist and determinist has lost its "possibilities" and "for him everything is necessary . . . he has lost his self".⁴ The man in the despair of necessity sees himself as the victim of irredeemable torpor. (The despair of "possibility" is not relevant to this thesis.)

Paul Tillich, a Christian Existentialist theologian, sees despair as the deepest form of existential anxiety. In The Courage To Be, he develops a theory of the "ontology of anxiety". All forms of anxiety, he argues, are related to various threats to being. Threats like fate or the fear of death, or the experience of meaninglessness, work against the affirmation of life that is essential to being. Being, then, is the focus of Tillich's analysis of despair, as the self was the basis of Kierkegaard's version.

¹ Kierkegaard, pp. 26-7.

² Kierkegaard, p. 54.

³ Kierkegaard, p. 62.

⁴ Kierkegaard, p. 62.

Tillich defines being as "living creativity", by which he means a thriving identity. It is "the ground of everything that is not a dead identity without movement and becoming . . . Creatively it affirms itself, eternally conquering its own non-being".¹ For Tillich "Being has non-being 'within' itself", which it must "eternally overcome". If being is a thriving self, then non-being is that which negates the self in any way, which may cause it to lose its creative urge, its sense of living, thriving being.

Anxiety is "the existential awareness of non-being . . . the awareness that non-being is part of one's own being".² It is founded in a fear that one might lose one's self, one's identity, one's purpose--and be left with nothing, or "non-being". Tillich later calls non-being "the threat of nothingness",³ by which he means an absolute loss of confidence and will-power. Anxiety in its "nakedness" is always "the anxiety of not being able to preserve one's own being", which underlies "every fear".⁴ Naked anxiety is an "unimaginable terror".

Tillich distinguishes between three types of existential anxiety: anxiety, that is, that belongs to existence "as such": these are: anxiety in the face of fate and death, anxiety in the face of emptiness and meaninglessness, and anxiety in the face of guilt and condemnation. Fate and death affect our powers of self-affirmation, our being, by making us aware of the contingency of our lives, as regards fate, and their transitoriness, as regards death. The anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness involves a loss of "an ultimate concern . . . a meaning which gives meaning to all meanings . . . a spiritual centre . . . an answer, however

¹ Paul Tillich, The Courage To Be, 7th ed. (1952; London: Collins, 1971), p. 43.

² Tillich, p. 44.

³ Tillich, p. 45.

⁴ Tillich, p. 47.

symbolic and indirect, to the question of the meaning of existence".¹ To live creatively, Tillich states, it is necessary to have "meanings" and to live out those meanings: "Everyone who lives creatively in meanings affirms himself as a participant in these meanings". This is because man "is human only by understanding and shaping reality, both his world and himself, according to meanings and values".² Despair occurs when these anxieties reach an "ultimate" or "boundary-line" situation in which "non-being is felt as absolutely victorious":

The pain of despair is that a being is aware of itself as unable to affirm itself because of the power of non-being. Consequently it wants to surrender this awareness and its presupposition, the being which is aware. It wants to get rid of itself--and it cannot.³

This brings us back to Kierkegaard's point that despair involves an implicit death-wish--that things cannot go on as they are, grim, pointless and intolerable. Guilt can weaken man's moral self-affirmation and drive him further into despair. For Tillich, who believes that man needs to possess a sense that the world is a meaningful "structure" to live creatively, despair is seen as the worst of all existential woes, which it is man's challenge to try to overcome: "In view of this character of despair it is understandable that all human life can be interpreted as a continuous attempt to avoid despair."⁴

To conclude, despair is, in this Existential line of reasoning, a desolate condition in which the despairing person finds life utterly trivial and without "possibility" or hope (Kierkegaard) or can see no meaning to life and so can no longer "participate" in meaningfully shaping reality (Tillich). The despairer thus wishes to be rid of himself, or at least of the circumstances that produced such intolerable misery, which are likely to be seen as immutable, for despair, as was suggested earlier, has its roots in a philosophical vision about the nature of life.

¹ Tillich, pp. 54-5.

² Tillich, p. 57.

³ Tillich, p. 61.

⁴ Tillich, pp. 62-3.

DESPAIR IN THE FICTIONAL LIFE-SITUATION

It remains to link our conception of despair with our chosen critical perspective on the novel.

The novel was seen earlier as an experiential world, embodying in "profoundly realised" form the world-picture of the novelist. Despair, it was argued, could not simply be seen as a transient bad mood, but rather as a deeper existential predicament, in which the despairer is oppressed by either the triviality or hopelessness of life (Kierkegaard) or its meaninglessness (Tillich). Despair, that is, presupposes a world-view that sees the world as either horribly banal, or meaningless.

If a novel inevitably expresses "a total view of the world", as Henry James suggested it should, and if despair amounts to as much as a world-view, then it follows that a novel embracing despair will be fundamentally influenced by it, even as far as its fictional aspects are concerned--characterisation, setting, plot, theme, point of view--the instruments of fictional rendering of vision into form and content. (The study will attempt to note the ways in which the selected novels are affected in these fictional aspects. In this way it might be seen that the theme of despair may be constitutive of a tradition.)

The concept of a fictional life-situation will be useful, it is proposed, for linking the world-view of the novelist and the actual fictional work itself as a living world of characters and events and setting.

The life-situation in a novel is the set of circumstances affecting the characters in it. The term is intended to encompass the notion of a fictional world of characters and their predicament. What one is finally looking for when examining the life-situation in a novel is the quality of human experience evidenced in its world, the "personal situation" of its characters--what it is like to live in that world. In short, the life-situation will reflect the novelist's picture of the world--the total image of human experience reflected through his fictional world.

CHAPTER TWO : SCEPTICAL DESPAIR IN THE STORY OF AN AFRICAN FARM : A COLONIAL BEGINNING

OVERVIEW

Critics agree that The Story of an African Farm is the first major novel in South African English literature. They also see it as Schreiner's only major fictional work.¹ In terms of influence alone, it remains the most important South African novel ever written, although it is no longer the best, and is seen by many critics as seriously flawed.

Stephen Gray calls the works of Schreiner "the first truly South African area of the literature"² and argues that The Story of an African Farm initiated "the liberal tradition in Southern African English fiction".³ Schreiner, writing at a time when "the introductory phases of the colonial search for a settled society were complete", and with "few precedents to fall back on",⁴ discovered "the use of landscape in Southern African realist fiction" and is the literature's "fountainhead."⁵ Gray classifies Schreiner as a major colonial writer, whose characters in The Story of an African Farm, for example, are not quite "African" though "born in Africa and . . . put to death by Africa".⁶

¹ Richard Rive, for example, writes, ". . . Olive Schreiner's literary reputation rests largely on The Story of an African Farm . . ."; Rive, An Introduction to Olive Schreiner, The Story of an African Farm (1883; Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1975), p. 20.

² Gray, Southern African Literature: An Introduction, p. 133.

³ Gray, p. 136.

⁴ Gray, p. 139.

⁵ Gray, p. 152.

⁶ Gray, p. 153.

Laurens van der Post writes, "with [Olive Schreiner], English literature in South Africa suddenly becomes profoundly indigenous and the imagination . . . native".¹ Her work is "truly indigenous".² Nadine Gordimer sees The Story of an African Farm as South Africa's first novel "of poetic vision".³ Richard Rive comments, "Opinion today tends to consider the novel as important essentially for South African literature, as the beginning of a national literary tradition . . ." adding, though, that the novel also has a place in nineteenth-century English literature.⁴ Dan Jacobson points out that Olive Schreiner was "the first and for many years the only South African writer to win a substantial reputation and readership outside her own country".⁵ Her influence on "the South African writers who have followed her has been an enduring one".⁶ Uys Krige wrote in 1968 that The Story of an African Farm was still "the most significant novel to have come out of South Africa".⁷

The fundamental place of this novel in any tradition that may be discerned in English South African literature is thus unquestioned. Gray rightly notes that Schreiner writes in what can be seen as the colonial period of this literature, since the content of her work is not fully Afrocentric (to use Gordimer's term--see p.5). Gray gauges this by the extent to which the characters in The Story of an African Farm are not yet African, their consciousness being somehow rooted in more European modes of thinking. This is a difficult, even impossible, principle to invoke in practice (what is a specifically African consciousness? Is this not too multitudinous a phenomenon to quantify in this manner?). A more satisfactory method for

¹ Laurens van der Post, "The Turbott Wolfe Affair" in William Plomer, Turbott Wolfe (1926; Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1979), p. 145.

² Van der Post, p. 147.

³ Nadine Gordimer, "A Wilder Fowl", in Plomer, Turbott Wolfe, p. 167. Gordimer describes Turbott Wolfe as "the only novel of poetic vision to come out of our country since Olive Schreiner's The Story of an African Farm".

⁴ Rive, p. 15.

⁵ Dan Jacobson, an Introduction to Olive Schreiner, The Story of an African Farm (1883; Bucks: Penguin, 1979), p. 9.

⁶ Jacobson, p. 23.

⁷ Uys Krige, Olive Schreiner: A Selection (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1968); p.4.

determining the place of a work in a literary tradition that has emerged from a colonial historical situation is to use Northrop Frye's ideal of integrated form and content. In his study of Canadian literature, which, he explains, has been predicated upon a fragmented cultural history of North American and then British colonization, Frye notes the following: firstly, the "social imagination" of native Canada has never fully taken root;¹ secondly, the "content" of the literature is vividly original but its forms have been "taken over" from a literary tradition from which the Canadian writer is removed;² thirdly, there is as a result of these two factors, an artificial separation of form and content in much of the literature.³

By accepting both Frye's idea that the national "social imagination" is what forms and produces a literature and Gray's point that Schreiner wrote before the European settler society had really taken psychic root in the African soil, we may conclude that a work like The Story of an African Farm may be expected to manifest the sort of disjunction Frye observed in native Canadian literature between "knowledge and observation", on the one hand and "story" and "plot", on the other.

Criticism of the novel has been pivoted, in fact, on this very supposition. Rive sees the novel as a "remarkable achievement", "in spite of its obvious weaknesses, its clumsy construction, its special pleading, its faulty characterization . . ."⁴ Christie, Hutchings and MacLennan, in their Perspectives on South African Fiction, are also "in spite of" admirers: "In spite of its power and originality

¹ Northrop Frye, The Stubborn Structure (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1970), p. 283.

² Frye, p. 295.

³ Frye writes that often Canadian fiction "contains a good deal of sincere feeling and accurate observation but . . . is spoiled by an unconvincing plot . . . What has happened is that the author felt he could make a novel out of his knowledge and observation, but had no story in particular to tell. His material did not come to him in the form of a story, but as a consolidated chunk of experience, reflection and sensibility". p. 295.

⁴ Rive, p. 20.

the novel has faults . . . The protagonists are 'given' significance by the author's say-so, and not always on their own merits. Thus a dramatic potential becomes explanatory monologue."¹ They allege also that the novel is melodramatic, but "strangely moving"² and "full of a strangely unremitting energy".³ Stephen Watson comments that it is "badly structured" and fragmented by Schreiner's "allegorical and rhetorical interpolations".⁴ Nevertheless the book possesses "great artistic power".⁵ Johannes Meintjes writes, "It is clumsy . . . disjointed, often incoherent and juvenile, but no one could . . . deny the power of the work, nor its strange magic which lingers in the reader's mind".⁶ Meintjes cites Havelock Ellis, Schreiner's psychologist friend, describing the novel as "a revelation, a new gospel" but not really "fine art" or "sound doctrine".⁷ British critic William Walsh condemns the book as "structurally a jumble and emotionally a chaos", as well as "disfigured by . . . Victorian sentimentality".⁸ Structure and narrative line are "incoherent".⁹ Yet the novel has "a brooding influence", an "intense lasting effect . . . on the reader".¹⁰ Uys Krige, whose sense of the significance of Schreiner's novel has already been mentioned, feels the characterization in the novel is split and that Schreiner is not really a novelist at all.¹¹

¹ Sarah Christie, Geoffrey Hutchings and Don MacLennan, Perspectives on South African Fiction (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1980), p. 42.

² Christie, Hutchings, MacLennan, p. 36.

³ Christie, Hutchings, MacLennan, p. 42.

⁴ Stephen Watson, "The Liberal Ideology and Some South African Novelists", M.A. Thesis, Cape Town, 1981, p. 139.

⁵ Watson, p. 149.

⁶ Johannes Meintjes, Olive Schreiner: Portrait of a South African Woman (Johannesburg: Hugh Kearthland Pty Ltd, 1965), p. 58.

⁷ Meintjes, p. 62.

⁸ William Walsh, A Manifold Voice, Studies in Commonwealth Literature (London: Chatto and Windus, 1970), p. 36.

⁹ Walsh, p. 45.

¹⁰ Walsh, p. 46.

¹¹ Krige, p. 9.

These comments testify to a truism of criticism of this famous novel: that The Story of an African Farm is a flawed masterpiece, possessed of a magnificent intensity of vision but spoiled by faulty construction and bad structuring. Further, there is a distinct analogy between this position and Frye's observations about colonial Canadian literature:

What the Canadian writer finds in his experience and environment may be new, but it will be new only as content: the form of his expression of it can take shape only from what he has read, not from what he has experienced . . . A writer who is or feels removed from . . . literary tradition tends rather to take over forms already in existence . . . What (happens) is that the author . . . make(s) a novel out of his knowledge and observation . . . invent(ing) a plot to put this material in causal shape . . . to pour the new wine of content into the old bottles of form.¹

Frye's idea of a disrelationship between content and form as an index of a certain rootlessness in the "social imagination" is a useful model for explaining the paradoxical nature of the "in spite of" critiques of The Story of an African Farm. The metaphysically intense "experience" and astute "observation" of Karoo farm life in early South African colonial society that Schreiner "pour(s)" into the novel form is what accounts for the impression it gives of brooding power, while what these critics see as incoherence in the form and structure of the novel is no doubt due, in this model, to her having borrowed the conventions of the English Victorian novel which appear artificial alongside the intense "chunk of experience, reflection and sensibility" that constitutes the material of the novel.

He argues further:

In a fully mature literary tradition the writer enters into a structure of traditional stories and images. He often has the feeling . . . [he] is not actually shaping his material at all, but is rather a place where a verbal structure is taking its own shape.²

¹ Frye, p. 295.

² Frye, p. 295.

At this level of maturity, the writer no longer needs to invent an artificial form but creatively submits to, and engages with, the cultural consciousness or "social imagination" in which "forms" ("traditional stories and images") are available, as it were, to the writer's intuition. Gray stresses that one of the "constants" of the liberal and realist tradition he traces is the use of a South African landscape that is inhospitable to man, a motif that Schreiner herself established as a "major precedent".¹ Gray sees this theme as basic to the "internal continuity"² of this literature and traces its fatalistic influence in "several major Southern African novels that follow Schreiner".³ It may be seen, then, as an example of Frye's concept of forms that inhere in the social imagination. T.S. Eliot, F.R. Leavis and, on the local scene, Laurens van der Post, have expressed views similar to the notions of Frye (and Gray) as regards the growth of a national literature.⁴

It is the contention here, though, that The Story of an African Farm is far more integrated, in Frye's sense of possessing an intuitive blending of content and form, than critics have previously noticed. The corollary would follow that this "colonial" novel cannot be so easily disparaged as it has been in the past by its "in spite of" critics. In addition, it may be found that English South African fiction in general, and Olive Schreiner's masterpiece manqué, in particular, have an independent literary status that Frye might have hesitated to call "immature".

¹ Gray, p. 151.

² Gray, p. 153.

³ Gray, p. 150.

⁴ Eliot talked of the writer's necessary allegiance to the mind of Europe in "Tradition and the Individual Talent". Similarly, Leavis in The Great Tradition argues for a certain indebtedness to preceding authors as a precondition for individual greatness. Van der Post speaks of the relation of writers to the course of the "national imagination" in South Africa in "The Turbott Wolfe Affair", p. 148.

SCEPTICAL DESPAIR AND ALLEGORY IN THE STORY OF AN AFRICAN FARM

Some of the "in spite of" critics have tried to find a unifying factor in the novel that may serve to compensate partially for its "obvious weaknesses" and thus justify their instinctive, if guarded, admiration for it. Rive opts for the farm itself:

Thus Schreiner skilfully maintains a unity in the lives of her characters by using the farm as a converging and diverging point. It becomes alive in all its nuances and moods, so that it breathes, and indeed is a very important character itself in the book to which it gives its title.¹

Walsh disagrees: "It is the intense, suffering consciousness of the author which gives the book its undoubted unity . . . and not primarily the African farm . . .".² For Christie, Hutchings and Maclennan, Schreiner's themes concerning "the gap between illusion and reality . . . art and life"³ cement together parts of the novel: "Thus it is that a number of elements are brought together under the aegis of the central themes of the novel . . .".⁴

Rive's contention, in view of the conspicuous dearth of naturalistic description per se in the novel (notwithstanding the brilliant opening paragraphs), is insupportable. Walsh, though vague on this point, is much nearer the mark, for, as First and Scott have pointed out in their critical biography of Olive Schreiner, the novel is "a combination of mysticism, allegory and realism that allow(s) her to explore states of being and consciousness".⁵ Schreiner's basic emphasis is Romantic rather than Realist, as Christie, Hutchings and Maclennan,

¹ Rive, p. 16.

² Walsh, p. 36.

³ Christie, Hutchings and Maclennan, p. 35.

⁴ Christie, Hutchings and Maclennan, p. 39.

⁵ Ruth First and Ann Scott, Olive Schreiner: A Biography (London: Andre Deutsch, 1980), p. 92.

have shown. These critics, though, fail to crack the chestnut, since their assertion that Schreiner's themes serve to unify the novel reinforces rather than refutes the many objections raised that The Story of an African Farm is structurally imbalanced because of undue authorial intrusion and doctrinal insistence.

What unifies this, the first major South African novel, is neither the portrait of the farm in it, nor its themes, nor, exactly, the consciousness of the author: but the allegorical form of the novel itself. First and Scott suggest that the novel's form is unconventional, breaking with "the exaggerated intricacies of plot that characterised her first novel".¹ This brings us to the main point of the argument: that Schreiner in The Story of an African Farm dispenses with the conventions of the traditional novel and constructs a philosophical allegory that is an entirely apt medium for her preoccupation with "states of being and consciousness". There is no artificial borrowing of traditional forms as in Frye's understanding of the immature colonial novel, but the adequate embodiment in an original fictional form of an authorial consciousness that is rootless for good intellectual reasons (namely, owing to the gap that nineteenth-century scepticism, following the loss of what Waldo's stranger refers to in the novel as "the old faith", cannot easily bridge), rather than culturally fragmented in a deracinated colonial society of insufficient social cohesion and historical depth.

Critics in the past have referred to the allegorical content in the novel as a separate element, usually seen as extraneous. Watson criticized the novel for its "allegorical and rhetorical interpolations", implying that the sections of philosophical speculation (as in "Times and Seasons") and allegory (in "Waldo's Stranger") are irrelevant. Rive writes in a similar vein, "The structural weakness in the novel is the author's penchant for stopping its flow and development with what seems unnecessary interpolations".² Our three critics talk of "clumsy authorial

¹ First and Scott, p. 92.

² Rive, p. 16.

intrusion" and "explanatory monologue", although they acknowledge the link between the Hunter's allegory and the theme of truth and suffering.¹

These critics fail to realize that the real allegory is constituted by the form of the novel as a whole. The Hunter's parable is really an allegory within an allegory. The Story of an African Farm is best understood as a modern, sophisticated and, not to say, secular allegory more in line with Bunyan's The Pilgrim's Progress, Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter and Hardy's allegorical Tess of the d'Urbervilles than with the English realist writers like Dickens and Eliot or even with the romantic work of the Brontë sisters (with whom Schreiner is often compared).

M.H. Abrams offers a clear definition of allegory: "An allegory is a narrative in which the agents and action, and sometimes the setting as well, are contrived not only to make sense in themselves, but also to signify a second, correlated order of persons, things, concepts or events".² An allegory of ideas is one in which characters represent "abstract concepts" and the plot "serves to communicate a doctrine or a thesis". Abrams explains that the typical allegory of ideas personifies "abstract entities" such as "virtues, vices, states of mind, and types of character". Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary defines allegory simply as a narrative that is to be understood symbolically.

To show that The Story of an African Farm is not a novel of ideas as such but a philosophical allegory of ideas in a prose narrative form, it will be necessary to highlight a correlation between the characters and events in the novel and a philosophical scheme of ideas or doctrine. What theses does Schreiner wish to illustrate? How does she represent these points?

In such an allegory, it is ultimately the ideas and thesis that count and characters and events are strictly subordinate to the doctrine and not vice versa. Thus to say, as do the "in spite

¹ Christie, Hutchings and MacLennan, p. 40.

² M.H. Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms (1941; New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1971), p. 4.

of" critics, that such a novel is doctrinaire or prone to sermonising is fallaciously to misconstrue the author's intention and so to misunderstand the novel. The reason that Schreiner places this primary stress on doctrine rather than story, plot or characterisation, is that she appears to adopt the role in the novel of a prophet of the new agnostic religion of "Universal Unity".¹ To expand our argument, then, she has written a prophetic allegory in the novel form in order to convey the essence of what she saw as a revolution in nineteenth-century thought as significant as the Copernican Revolution. The unconventional form of the novel is matched by the (in its time) avant-garde thought and content.

The first step in the argument is that Schreiner's world-view --or, rather, her search for one--determines the basic structure of the novel, its characterisation, plot, setting, themes and point of view. Two observations support this point: first, that the book is permeated by philosophical discourse centring in the movement away from the "old faith", and second, that the two main characters Lyndall and Waldo, are both intellectual rebels who reject the norms current in their society and propose Sceptical alternatives.

Schreiner admitted in 1884 in a letter to Havelock Ellis that she had used her novel to work out her own personal dilemmas:

There is too much moralising in the story, but when one is leading a solitary life, one is apt to use one's work as Gregory used his letters, as an outlet for all one's superfluous feelings, without asking too closely whether they can or cannot be artistically expressed there . . .²

¹ Olive Schreiner, The Story of an African Farm (1883; Bucks: Penguin, 1979), p. 290. This phrase occurs in the chapter "Dreams", which describes Waldo's "epiphany" of spiritual insight following his contemplations on death and the after-life: "For the little soul that cries aloud for continued personal existence for itself and its beloved, there is no help. For the soul which knows itself no more as a unit, but as a part of the Universal Unity of which the Beloved also is a part; which feels within itself the throb of the Universal Life; for that soul there is no death." Waldo believes that immersion of the individual identity in Universal Life is the only "immortality" available to man.

² Vera Buchanan-Gould, Not Without Honour, The Life and Writings of Olive Schreiner (London: Hutchinson and Co. Ltd, 1949), p. 82.

What were her "superfluous feelings"? Biographies and the novel itself provide evidence here. Dan Jacobson describes Schreiner in these terms:

She was . . . a missionary's daughter whose rejection of her parents' beliefs had been all the more painful and guilt-laden, not less so, for having taken place at a very early age . . . she was talented, lonely, neurotic, and afflicted with a variety of psychosomatic ailments; capable of suffering deeply . . .¹

Biographer Vera Buchanan-Gould writes that Schreiner lived at the Mission Station in "barbaric isolation" with no one "to sustain her in . . . times of physical and spiritual anguish".² This may seem an exaggeration but Schreiner's letters testify to the basically suffering nature of her life, owing to emotional unfulfilment, spiritual turmoil, physical ailment and social isolation.

Schreiner, daughter of missionaries who came to South Africa in 1837, rejected Christianity from an early age. Buchanan-Gould states that the death of Schreiner's sister Ellie at the age of two in 1864 when Schreiner was nine, "finally destroyed her belief in a just God, and made her, once and for all, a 'free thinker'".³ It has been argued that Otto in The Story of an African Farm is based on her German father Gottlob Schreiner. It is fairly obvious, then, that Waldo is Schreiner's persona in the novel (as is Lyndall, and, to a lesser extent, perhaps, Em). Waldo eventually discards his gentle father's faith, but, nature abhorring a vacuum, seeks an alternative. This is undoubtedly the central "event" in a novel that stresses the primacy of ideas, over and above material objects, with an almost Platonic relish.

The Story of an African Farm opens and ends on a philosophical note: from the child Waldo's horror of Hell in the first chapter, to the young man Waldo's attainment of peace of mind by accepting the philosophy of Universal Unity after Lyndall's death in the final chapter. Both the chapter "Times and Seasons" that opens Part Two and the lengthy Hunter's Allegory in "Waldo's Stranger" are

¹ Jacobson, p. 11.

² Buchanan-Gould, p.18.

³ Buchanan-Gould, p. 31.

expositions of the central themes in Waldo's spiritual development: the struggle with, and final rejection of, the Judaic-Christian tradition and the mystical realisation of Universal Unity in "Times and Seasons" and the connection between suffering and the search for Truth in the Hunter's Allegory. Such is Schreiner's concern with this metaphysical crisis, and such is the intensity with which her "superfluous feelings" are recorded in the novel, that it is a patent misconception to see these expositions as "interpolations" or "sermons" that are extraneous to the novel's real crux. It is more accurate to say that Waldo, as Schreiner's main persona, in her allegory of ideas, illustrates and embodies the themes expounded a priori in, say, "Times and Seasons", than it is to say that, on the contrary, such a chapter illuminates Waldo's spiritual growth a posteriori. As a personification (of Schreiner's "new spirituality"), Waldo is logically subordinate to the controlling ideas and doctrine of the novel. That Schreiner makes her ideas explicit in addition to representing them allegorically in the form of a symbolic story indicates that the novel is not a pure allegory but rather, in the words of First and Scott, "a combination of mysticism, allegory and realism . . . to explore states of being and consciousness". The novel is a treatise, a roman à thèse, a strange Platonic world of essences, "states of being and consciousness", that gains its basic structure from an allegorical story whose main protagonist is the tormented, soulful Waldo.

The doctrinal content in the novel takes the various forms of intellectual dialogue (involving Waldo, Lyndall and Waldo's Stranger), the Hunter's Allegory, authorial commentary (of the "And it was all play, and no one could tell what it had lived and worked for. A striving, and a striving, and an ending in nothing" type, p.107.) and overt philosophising (as in "Times and Seasons" and "Dreams"). A grave tone, a high seriousness of theme and a general pessimism of thought characterise these sections.

Christopher Gillie in the Longman Companion to English Literature outlines the details of a Sceptical revolution in nineteenth-century thought following the development of science into an independent discipline and the growth of a secular world-view based on Darwin's

theory of evolution which posed a strong challenge to orthodox Christianity and its biblical interpretation of the origins and nature of human life.¹ Gillie writes that science developed to this status in the mid-nineteenth-century at the time of Darwin's Origin of Species (1859) and The Descent of Man (1871).

Moreover the character of scientific discovery was seriously disturbing to 19th-century minds. Instead of providing evidence that the universe is . . . stable . . . it showed the universe to be incessantly changing and probably governed by the laws of chance A large number of intellectuals after 1830 were forced into religious disbelief, or into some form of personal religion,^{which} though it might contain elements of Christianity, was essentially untheological.²

The God-hypothesis, in other words, was found by some such intellectuals to be irrelevant or, more plainly, false. Such names as Nietzsche, Thomas Huxley, Feuerbach, Strauss, Auguste Comte, John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer and English novelists Thomas Hardy and George Eliot, spring to mind as representative of this Sceptical Revolution, as it may be called.

Many of the elements of this Revolution--the rejection of a transcendental God and the glorification of materialism, the new faith in scientific knowledge and progress, the search for an "untheological" religion incorporating Darwin's theory of evolution--are vividly present in The Story of an African Farm. This thesis argues, in fact, that the novel is an allegorical representation of this intellectual Revolution.

This argument, emphasizing the abstract nature of the novel, apparently deviates from the critical ideal of "concreteness" yet Schreiner offers a rendition of the actual spiritual experience of undergoing such an intellectual transformation--through her portraits of Waldo, Lyndall and the Stranger, as well as in her vivid philosophical and psychological analysis of this transformation

¹ C. Gillie, Longman Companion to English Literature (London: Longman, 1972), pp. 171-78.

² Gillie, p. 172.

in "Times and Seasons". The portrait is of an evocative intensity that would satisfy any critic looking for a powerful experiential content in a work of literature. The novel is the record of a profound intellectual, spiritual and emotional crisis. The novel's form, fragmented as it may seem, is the commensurate medium for conveying the nature of this crisis. To look for a traditional pattern, as many critics, such as Rive, Walsh, Krige, Christie, Hutchings and MacLennan, have, in a novel ingenuously attempting to encapsulate a crisis in Western thought of far-reaching consequences, is, it appears, short-sighted.

The ratio of philosophical content over narrative in Part Two (which deals mostly with the novel's strand of tragic suffering, involving Waldo and Lyndall's search for truth and the suffering that accompanies it, whereas Part One is mostly concerned with the strand of farce, burlesque and satire--particularly of Bonaparte Blenkins and Tant' Sannie's cruelty, ignorance and hypocrisy) indicates that Schreiner's purpose is not to write a traditional novel with story and themes. The first two chapters "Times and Seasons" and "Waldo's Stranger" do nothing to further plot or characterisation and are almost purely philosophical. The fourth chapter "Lyndall" is fairly doctrinal once more. This time the focus is not faith or truth but feminism, the other arm of Schreiner's philosophy. The intervening chapter "Gregory Rose Finds His Affinity" serves as a foil for the one that follows, highlighting Rose's crass sentimentality (much in evidence in the letter to his sister) which in turn bolsters Lyndall's credibility as an outspoken critic of false conventions of love and marriage. Lyndall expresses her atheistic and fatalistic views in "A Boer Wedding", a chapter so heavily loaded in favour of her abstract contemplations that the wedding between Tant' Sannie and Piet van der Walt becomes mere background. A lengthy section of dialogue between Lyndall and Gregory reveals her sense of love's incompleteness in "The Kopje". The next chapter "Lyndall's Stranger" consists mainly of a conversation between Lyndall and her lover in which it becomes clear that she is torn

between sexual attraction and intellectual indifference.¹ Schreiner works out some feminist ideas about the nature of sex-roles in this encounter (such as male domination, male selfishness and female narcissism and parasitism). As Lyndall leaves the farm she reaches a point of Kierkegaardian despair in which her very self has become intolerable to her.² The penultimate chapter "Dreams" is composed mostly of Waldo's reflections on the hereafter. The closing chapter expands on some of the central principles of Universal Unity, providing more concrete illustration for them.

The final ratio in Part Two of philosophical content to narrative is 69 pages to a possible 166, more than one third, an unusual distribution indicative of Schreiner's philosophical and prophetic aims.

Waldo, then, stands for Schreiner's nineteenth-century secular truth-seeker, representing the prophetic possibility of a new "untheological" religion. After losing faith in God (which happens in stages, one of which is the abortive sacrifice of the chop, another the experience of abandonment in the fuel-house³) the truth-seeker discovers the existential emptiness of life: "Now we have no God . . . We do not cry and weep; we sit down with cold eyes and look at the world . . . the dead are not colder."⁴ Waldo is in the mould of an existential protagonist attempting to define a meaning and

¹ Schreiner, p. 237. Lyndall tells her lover, "You call into activity one part of my nature; there is a higher part that you know nothing of, that you never touch. If I married you, afterwards it would arise and assert itself, and I should hate you always . . ."

² Schreiner, p. 241. Lyndall cries out at Old Otto's graveside, "I am so weary of myself! It is eating my soul to its core - self, self, self! I cannot bear this life! I cannot breathe, I cannot live! Will nothing free me from myself?"

³ Schreiner, p. 125. "That was a dreadful night. When he clasped his hands frantically and prayed: 'O God, my beautiful God, my sweet God, once, only once, let me feel you near me tonight!' he could not feel Him. He prayed aloud, very loud, and he got no answer . . ."

⁴ Schreiner, p. 149.

purpose in an existence without essence.

Lyndall, who is the first of a series of dark portraits of bitterly lonely and unfulfilled women in English South African fiction (Johanna in The Beadle, Mary Turner in The Grass is Singing, Magda in In the Heart of the Country and Rosa Burger in Burger's Daughter, among others), represents Schreiner's feminism. Schreiner herself was a pioneer feminist and her treatise Woman and Labour has been described as "the Bible of the Woman's Movement".¹ First and Scott interpret the pessimism of Lyndall's death as suggesting "punishment for the threat of deviance from the right moral path".² First and Scott also see Gregory Rose as a symbolic part of the feminist scheme in the novel, representing the "androgynous resolution to the problem of sexual difference".³ Effeminate Rose (his very name indicating this), who dresses up as a woman to nurse the dying Lyndall, dissolves the rigid barriers defined by sexual conditioning and enables the two people to meet "in a fantasy world . . . where seemingly eternal opposites are brought to an end . . .".⁴ Rose is simply inadequate in the role of male (conditioned as an assertive or aggressive one as evidenced by Lyndall's stranger who symbolises male chauvinism) and paradoxically achieves greater fulfilment in his "role" as a woman.

Tant' Sannie and Em must also be seen as representatives of various aspects of the female situation. Tant' Sannie is a caricature of the mercenary husband-hunter Schreiner saw as the opposite of her ideal woman. The grossness of her mindless subservience to the convention, and not to say, convenience, of marriage is most apparent in her exploitation of the simple-minded little Piet van der Walt:

"Then it's he! Then it's he!" said Tant' Sannie triumphantly: "Little Piet van der Walt, whose wife died last month - two farms, twelve thousand sheep. I've not seen him, but my sister-in-law told me about him, and I dreamed about him last night!"

¹ Meintjes, p. 135.

² First and Scott, p. 104.

³ First and Scott, p. 106.

⁴ First and Scott, p. 106.

Here Piet's black hat appeared in the doorway, and the Boer-woman drew herself up in dignified silence, extended the tips of her fingers, and motioned solemnly to a chair. The young man seated himself, sticking his feet as far under it as they would go, and said mildly:

"I am Little Piet van der Walt and my father is Big Piet van der Walt."

Tant' Sannie said solemnly, "Yes."

"Aunt," said the young man, starting up spasmodically, "can I off-saddle?"

"Yes."

He seized his hat, and disappeared with a rush through the door.

"I told you so! I knew it!" said Tant' Sannie. "The dear Lord doesn't send dreams for nothing. Didn't I tell you this morning I dreamed of a great beast like a sheep, with red eyes, and I killed it? Wasn't the white wool his hair, and the red eyes his weak eyes, and my killing him meant marriage?"¹

Em is the docile, domestic woman who is too timid to question conventions, in contrast to the more dynamic, and more miserable, Lyndall. Lyndall, Rose, Tant' Sannie and Em, then, personify different aspects and types in the Woman's Question.

Waldo, Lyndall, The Stranger, Old Otto, the hypocritical Blenkins and Tant' Sannie, represent the other main issue raised in the novel: that of truth. The Stranger is cast as is Bazarov in Fathers and Sons as a nineteenth-century nihilist: "I am a man who believes nothing, hopes nothing, feels nothing."² The Stranger's anonymous status symbolises the intellectual rootlessness he represents: "We of this generation are not destined to eat and be satisfied as our fathers were; we must be content to go hungry."³ It is clear that he means religious or spiritual hunger:

¹ Schreiner, p. 201.

² Schreiner, p. 159.

³ Schreiner, pp. 172-3.

To all who have been born in the old faith there comes a time of danger, when the old slips from us, and we have not yet planted our feet on the new. We hear the voice from Sinai thundering no more, and the still small voice of reason is not yet heard. We have proved the religion our mothers fed us on to be a delusion; in our bewilderment we see no rule by which to guide our steps day by day . . .¹

The Stranger adds, "This is the time of danger". It is precisely this "time of [spiritual] danger" that Schreiner has evoked in The Story of an African Farm, vividly and intensely embodying the nineteenth-century intellectual disorientation felt in the hiatus after the Sceptical Revolution. Old Otto is the paradigmatic "turn-the-other-cheek" Christian who is duped by the mercenary opportunist Bonaparte Blenkins masquerading as a pious protestant. The false piety of both Blenkins and Tant' Sannie is juxtaposed in Schreiner's allegorical scheme with the sincerity and deep solemnity of Lyndall and Waldo's search for truth as well as with the earnest religious soul of the author herself who, then, may also be seen as a character in the novel. The allegorical narrative and separate sections of philosophy may then be seen as part of the same philosophical scheme involving the two questions of truth and feminism. The authorial presence is an embodiment of the controlling ideas of the novel as are the allegorical characters.

As for vividness, it is Schreiner's understanding of the close relation between ideas and experience, religion and life, her almost Platonic Idealism combined with a passionate knowledge of suffering and the Existential angst that lends to her characterisation of Waldo, in particular, and her philosophising, in general, a sense of the solemn depth and acute poignancy of human life.

¹ Schreiner, p. 171.

CONCLUSION

Sceptical despair afflicts Waldo's Stranger and Lyndall in The Story of an African Farm. The Stranger relates his nihilism to spiritual alienation in the "time of danger". Lyndall's alienation occurs on three levels--metaphysically, she rejects God and has none of Waldo's love of nature to sustain her through the desolation this rejection brings to her life ("We are sparks, we are shadows, we are pollen, which the next wind will carry away. We are dying already; it is all a dream."¹); socially, she experiences isolation as a woman in a male-dominated society ("But we are cursed, Waldo, born cursed from the time our mothers bring us into the world till the shrouds are put on us."²); emotionally, she is unable to establish a close relationship with anyone, except for her platonic friendship with Waldo ("When I was a baby, I fancy my parents left me out in the frost one night, and I got nipped internally - it feels so!"³). She further acknowledges she has no conscience ("I have no conscience, none."⁴), which indicates that she shares the Stranger's nihilism.

Schreiner depicts the crisis of nineteenth-century scepticism with intensity, seriousness and real feeling:

For so the living soul will cry to the dead, and the creature to its God; and of all this crying there comes nothing. The lifting up of the hands brings no salvation; redemption is from within, and neither from God nor man: it is wrought out by the soul itself, with suffering and through time.⁵

¹ Schreiner, p. 217.

² Schreiner, p. 188.

³ Schreiner, p. 187.

⁴ Schreiner, p. 209.

⁵ Schreiner, p. 242.

Schreiner prophetically describes the sceptical rejection of the God-hypothesis as an awakening:

We must have awakened sooner or later. The imagination cannot always triumph over reality, the desire over the truth. We must have been awakened. If it was done a little sharply, what matter? It was done thoroughly, and it had to be done . . .

Now we have no God. We have had two: the old God that our fathers handed down to us, that we hated, and never liked; the new one that we made for ourselves, that we loved; but now he has flitted away from us, and we see what he was made of - the shadow of our highest ideal, crowned and throned. Now we have no God.¹

It is Waldo who represents this awakening, Lyndall and the Stranger the despair of loss of faith. Waldo has a new God:

For Nature, ever, like the old Hebrew God, cries out, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." Only then . . . when the old idol is broken, when the old hope is dead, when the old desire is crushed, then the Divine compensation of Nature is made manifest.²

Schreiner describes her characters' inmost thoughts and emotions--as well as her own, as an authorial character in the novel--with a pathos that would be maudlin if it were not so seriously considered. This is her interest, as First and Scott intimated (see reference 5, p.27): the consciousness and states of being of her characters.

The fictional consequences are obvious: a de-emphasising of plot and narrative line, a style that is more expressionistic, revealing subjective states of mind and emotions of characters rather than realistically depicting scenes and incidents, and a corresponding weakening of a sense of the immediate setting and environment as a factor.

Evidence has already been provided that exposition often takes precedence over plot, and ideas over events in the novel.

¹ Schreiner, p. 149

² Schreiner, p. 298.

The opening chapter exemplifies its stylistic bent. The first paragraphs depict the farm surroundings bathed in a singular, dream-like moonlight:

The full African moon poured its light from the blue sky into the wide, lonely plain. The dry, sandy earth, with its coating of stunted "karroo" bushes a few inches high, the low hills that skirted the plain, the milk-bushes with their long, finger-like leaves, all were touched by a weird and an almost oppressive beauty as they lay in the white light.

In one spot only was the solemn monotony of the plain broken. Near the centre a small, solitary "kopje" rose. Alone it lay there, a heap of round iron-stones piled one upon another, as over some giant's grave . . .

Sleep ruled everywhere, and the homestead was not less quiet than the solitary plain.

In the farm-house, on her great wooden bedstead, Tant' Sannie, the Boer-woman, rolled heavily in her sleep . . . she dreamed bad dreams . . . she dreamed that (a sheep's trotter) stuck fast in her throat . . .¹

This description of the farm is one of the very few in the novel. The immediate setting is given little narrative attention other than in these two opening paragraphs. It is overshadowed by the grander, eternal Nature, the sky and stars Waldo and Lyndall seem enthralled by. This is why Rive's argument that the unifying factor in the novel is the farm itself is untenable. In this extract, Schreiner delves into the consciousness of her (sleeping) characters after only two paragraphs of terse, elegant description of external reality. Tant' Sannie's dream is highlighted and later Schreiner depicts the metaphysical tortures of the boy Waldo imagining Hell: "'Oh, God, God! Save them!' he cried in agony. 'Only some; only a few! Only for each moment I am praying here one!' He folded his little hands upon his head. 'God! God! Save them!'"

Even the geographical features of the Karoo in the passage seem coloured by a restless human consciousness. The moonlight is "weird" and "almost oppressive". "Weird" connotes strangeness of

¹ Schreiner, p. 35.

form, which implies a judgment on the part of the observer that the scene differs from what is normal--the description, that is, is not transparent or objectively "realistic". Likewise "oppressive" suggests a heaviness impinging upon human consciousness. The kopje is likened to a giant's grave--once more, a description that suggests evaluation rather than straightforward perception--the style is "metaphoric" rather than "metonymic".¹ The emptiness of the Karoo seems death-like.

Further, there is no sign in the novel that the setting has a determinative effect on the characters in the way that oppressive heat, squalor and poverty affect Mary Turner in The Grass is Singing. The actions of the characters emanate more from inner conflicts, especially in the case of Waldo. There is a reference to a drought at the beginning of Chapter Two, yet nowhere in the novel is mention made of the effects of this drought upon characters. It is as if they are living in a material vacuum. Heat, drought and dust do not impinge on their lives.

It is the consciousness of her characters that interests Schreiner most, not least of all her own. She does not share the realist's concern for depiction but yields rather an expressionist interest in the thoughts, feelings and dreams of characters. This seems an appropriate style for the emotive topic of a deep spiritual crisis which Schreiner herself, as well as many nineteenth-century intellectuals, experienced.

A consideration of the integrated nature of this novel, its blending of allegorical form and philosophical content, its expressionist style and emphasis on consciousness and being rather than on plot and narrative, its introduction of the authorial consciousness as a character working in conjunction with other

¹ This is David Lodge's distinction developed in The Modes of Modern Writing (London: Edward Arnold, 1977). Lodge argues that metaphors link up two different contexts and therefore provoke the reader to make an imaginative leap, whereas metonymic description confines itself to depiction of objects within the same context, involving no such dislocation. Lodge further contends that metaphors are more characteristic of modernist writing (of which expressionism is a part) whereas realist writing tends to be metonymic.

characters who fit into an allegorical scheme of ideas concerning Scepticism and Feminism, may lead to the conclusion that The Story of an African Farm, though written in colonial times, as Gray has noted, exhibits little of the artistic immaturity Frye sees as endemic in colonial literatures.

CHAPTER THREE : THE SATIRIST'S DESPAIR IN TURBOTT WOLFE :
A COLONIAL APOCALYPSE

OVERVIEW

Criticism to date of Turbott Wolfe, Plomer's first and only "African" novel,¹ shares the sort of ambivalence of the "in spite of" critics of Schreiner's The Story of an African Farm. Again, it is the author's intensity of insight and depth of observation that is commendable "despite" obvious structural weaknesses. Once more, the work is acknowledged as a landmark in South African fiction. It would appear that criticism of these two flawed, but strangely revelatory, novels is determined to affirm Northrop Frye's propositions about colonial literature as eminently applicable to early South African literature.

Plomer's two literary friends at the time of Voorslag and the publication of Turbott Wolfe, Roy Campbell and Laurens van der Post, are in this category. Campbell, in his Voorslag review "The Significance of Turbott Wolfe", hails Plomer as South Africa's "first really brilliant satirist"² but notes that the novel is "chaotic in structure" and "anarchistic in outlook".³ Van der Post contends that although Turbott Wolfe is "a book of revelation"⁴

¹ Nadine Gordimer has defined "African" writing as that done by writers looking at the world from Africa, and not vice versa (The Black Interpreters, p.5.); that is, work possessing a fundamentally "Africa-centred" vision. After the publication (in England) of Turbott Wolfe in 1926, Plomer left South Africa for good, finally settling in England in 1929 after a sojourn in Japan. His African fiction comprises work featuring such an Africa-centred consciousness (and an African setting), namely Turbott Wolfe and short stories in I Speak of Africa (1927) and The Child of Queen Victoria (1933). His two best known African short stories are "Ula Masondo" from I Speak of Africa and "The Child of Queen Victoria" from the collection of that name.

² Roy Campbell, "The Significance of Turbott Wolfe" in Turbott Wolfe (1926; Johannesburg: Ad. Donker (Pty) Ltd, 1929) by William Plomer, p. 123.

³ Campbell, p. 126.

⁴ Laurens van der Post, "The Turbott Wolfe Affair", in Turbott Wolfe, p. 145.

and "a kind of compass"¹ in South African literature, it commits the satirical fallacies of "abstraction, magnification and oversimplification".²

Ezekiel Mphahlele, despite admiration for the "warmth and sincerity" of Plomer's prose,³ finds Turbott Wolfe too overt a protest.⁴ Further its characterisation is suspect.⁵ Nevertheless, its "intellectual interest is more intense than ever before in South African English fiction writing".⁶ Christie, Hutchings and MacLennan state that Turbott Wolfe has had "immense significance for English-speaking South Africans"⁷ but is "a direct and vitriolic", that is, an unsubtle, criticism of society.⁸ Michael Herbert sees the novel as having "piercing insights into so many nuances of the South African predicament" but remaining polemical rather than truly artistic.⁹ Stephen Gray concurs, describing it as "undeniably polemical".¹⁰ John Robert Doyle, Jr., is harsh, too (as was Plomer

¹ Van der Post, p. 162.

² Van der Post, p. 136.

³ Ezekiel Mphahlele, The African Image (London: Faber and Faber, 1962), p. 219.

⁴ Mphahlele writes that Plomer wrote best "when he was not protesting outright" (p. 110) but that, "Few of the minor Wolfish white characters in Turbott Wolfe . . . live the(ir) conflict convincingly." By contrast, what makes "Ula Masondo" succeed "is that its protest is merely implied." (p. 111).

⁵ Aside from the "Wolfish white characters" who fail to convince, a character like Caleb, for example, is "vaguely drawn" (p. 125).

⁶ Mphahlele, p. 124.

⁷ Christie, Hutchings and MacLennan, Perspectives on South African Fiction (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker (Pty) Ltd, 1980), p. 70.

⁸ Christie, Hutchings and MacLennan, p. 71.

⁹ Michael Herbert, "Turbott Wolfe and the Critics" in Turbott Wolfe, p. 171.

¹⁰ Stephen Gray, Southern African Literature: An Introduction (Cape Town: David Philip, 1979), p. 196.

himself who felt in retrospect that his first novel was "crude and immature"¹), concluding that the author has not focused his "scattered materials".² Nadine Gordimer described Turbott Wolfe in 1965 as "the only novel of poetic vision to come out of our country since Olive Schreiner's The Story of an African Farm."³

Critics on the whole see the form and content of the novel as somewhat divided: an intellectually vibrant vision is incompletely realised, owing to "chaotic" structure, a "polemical" and "vitriolic" tone, stereotyped characterization or satiric oversimplification.

Although Frye's argument concerning the disjunction in early Canadian literature between an artificially invented plot and the writer's "consolidated chunk of experience, reflection and sensibility" may be partially applied to Turbott Wolfe, South African critics of the novel have failed to see the basic continuity between Plomer's material, his impressionistic analysis of white South African colonial society, and the satiric form and style of the novel. Lacking the established forms inherent in the historical, collective consciousness or "social imagination" in the notion of tradition envisaged by Eliot, Leavis, Frye and Gray, Plomer, an early colonial writer, pioneered certain precedents in this literature--such as the exposure of colonial white hypocrisy, grossness and cruelty, the theme of miscegenation, especially in the light of cultural incompatibility between white and black, the use of apocalyptic vision and the idea of a social protest novel--contrary to Gray's contention that Turbott Wolfe generated no real successors.⁴

¹ William Plomer, Double Lives (London: Jonathan Cape, 1943), p. 160.

² John Robert Doyle, Jr., William Plomer (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1969), p. 64.

³ Nadine Gordimer, "A Wilder Fowl" in Turbott Wolfe, p. 167.

⁴ Gray writes, "One wonders, on the other hand, if Turbott Wolfe perhaps produced any direct successors. Curiously enough, not. . . . In the context of the long continuum of realist fiction in the twentieth century in South Africa, Turbott Wolfe is oddly out of place", "Turbott Wolfe in context" in Turbott Wolfe, p. 195. Gray evaluates the influence of the novel in terms of his conception of tradition in English Southern African literature, which is, as already pointed out (p.3) a drastic over-simplification of the relation between major novels in this area.

THE SATIRIST'S DESPAIR IN TURBOTT WOLFE

Plomer offers an account of the novel in his autobiography Double Lives:

My impulse was to present, in fictional form, partly satirical, partly lyrical, partly fantastic, some of my impressions of life in Africa and to externalise the turmoil of feelings they had aroused in me. I had no intention of drawing a self-portrait or of giving a naturalistic account of African life . . . To speak of it as a novel is perhaps a misnomer: it was a violent ejaculation, a protest, a nightmare, a phantasmagoria

. . .¹

Plomer seems to share Gray's critical bias in favour of the realist novel--the latter disqualifies Turbott Wolfe from a place in what he sees as the only discernible tradition in English South African fiction simply on the grounds that it is not "a rationalist realist novel",² a judgment that says more about the inadequacy of Gray's concept of tradition in this literature than it does about this revolutionary work. Plomer condemns the impressionistic nature of his novel as somehow inartistic: ". . . To speak of it as a novel is perhaps a misnomer: it was a violent ejaculation, a protest, a nightmare, a phantasmagoria . . .". Both Plomer and Gray overlook the possibility that its experimental form may constitute the most coherent and apt one.

What binds Turbott Wolfe into a cogent unity is its satiric form, just as the philosophical allegory of The Story of an African Farm welded different elements into a coherent scheme. There is little in Plomer's phantasmagoric novel that does not serve the end of satirising what Gordimer called "the hypocrisy of white supremacy" in her review of Turbott Wolfe.³

¹ Plomer, Double Lives, p. 160.

² Gray, "Turbott Wolfe in Context", p. 196.

³ Gordimer, "A Wilder Fowl", in Turbott Wolfe, p. 165.

Matthew Hodgart defines satire as "the process of attacking by ridicule" and cites the definition given in Webster's New World Dictionary: ". . . vices, follies, stupidities and abuses etc., are held up to ridicule and contempt."¹ Ronald Paulson in The Fictions of Satire states that satires "take a moral stand, make a judgment, and place or distribute blame".² The subject matter of a satirist is "the corruption of an ideal".³ Michael Rosenblum alleges that satirists are "moralists first and only incidentally artists . . .",⁴ seeing their main function as rhetorical, to "move [the] audience".⁵ Gilbert Highet agrees--satire, he argues, evokes the complex emotional reaction of "amusement, contempt, disgust and hatred".⁶ Its aim is to shock, startle or dismay the reader into realising a truth.⁷ M.H. Abrams's definition of satire in A Glossary of Literary Terms combines the perspective of Hodgart and Paulson that satire is a moral attack with that of Rosenblum and Highet which sees the rhetorical effect as primary:

Satire is the literary art of diminishing a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking toward it attitudes of amusement, contempt, indignation, or scorn. It differs from the comic in that comedy evokes laughter as an end in itself, while satire "derides"; that is, uses laughter as a weapon, and against a butt existing outside the work itself. That butt may be an individual . . . or a type of person, a class, an institution, a nation, or even . . . the whole race of man.⁸

¹ Matthew Hodgart, Satire (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969), p. 7.

² Ronald Paulson, The Fictions of Satire (Maryland: The John Hopkins Press, 1967), p. 4.

³ Paulson, p. 9.

⁴ Michael Rosenblum, "Pope's Illusive Temple of Infamy", in The Satirist's Art (London: Indiana University Press, 1972), ed. H. James Jensen and Malvin R. Zirker, Jr., p. 30.

⁵ Rosenblum, p. 31.

⁶ Gilbert Highet, The Anatomy of Satire (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), p. 150.

⁷ Highet, p. 20.

⁸ M.H. Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms, p. 153.

Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary offers this definition: "a literary composition . . . essentially a criticism of folly or vice, which holds up to ridicule or scorn - its chief instruments [are] irony, sarcasm, invective, wit, and humour."

There are different types of satire, different stylistic devices the satirist may use as well as different butts of satiric wit and scorn. Turbott Wolfe, as a novel rather than a formal satire, is an indirect satire, one "cast in the form of a narrative instead of direct address, in which the objects of the satire are characters who make themselves and their opinions ridiculous by what they think, say, and do, and are sometimes made even more ridiculous by the author's comments and narrative style."¹ Abrams adds that "any narrative or literary vehicle can be adapted to the purposes of indirect satire".

Satiric devices like wit, lampoon, travesty, burlesque and irony are used to make the satirist's victim "lose 'face'"² for the essential method in satire is reduction: "The degradation or devaluation of the victim by reducing his stature and dignity".³ The most effective way of "humiliating" the victim is by "contemptuous laughter".⁴ These devices or "aesthetic features" transform the "criticism of the world" into art, so that the reader, "may identify himself with the satirist and share his sense of superiority",⁵ thus reinforcing the humiliation of the victim by establishing both a position of moral superiority, which by juxtaposition highlights the folly or corruption that is the topic of the satire, and by gaining the reader's support.

Further Hodgart sees an element of fantasy as "present in all

¹ Abrams, p. 155. Abrams defines formal satire as that in which the satiric voice speaks directly in the first person as in Pope's Moral Essays.

² Hodgart, p. 11.

³ Hodgart, p. 115.

⁴ Hodgart, p. 11.

⁵ Hodgart, p. 11.

fine satire".¹ "The satirist," he contends, "does not paint an objective picture of the evils he describes, since pure realism would be too oppressive. Instead he usually offers us a travesty of the situation . . .".² Thus, if Turbott Wolfe can be shown to be "wholly satirical" (rather than episodically satirical),³ it may be possible to refute objections raised by such critics as Stephen Gray, Laurens van der Post--who feels that satire "oversimplifies" reality--and Plomer himself. These critics see the non-realistic nature of the novel as an artistic shortfall, whereas an impressionistic and non-realist technique may be integral to the satiric form itself (as in Gulliver's Travels, Animal Farm and Candide, for example), as Hodgart suggests, and by no means a sign of incoherence.

Wolfe relates a series of disconnected experiences as a manager of a trading station in Lembuland (an imaginary name for Zululand, where the Plomers ran a native trading station in the early 1920s) to narrator William Plomer. Clearly, Wolfe is an autobiographical persona. Plomer completed the novel when he was twenty-one and Wolfe in the novel is ordered to Africa "by some fool of a doctor" at an age when he had "hardly recovered from the aftermath of adolescence".⁴ Wolfe on his death-bed is "no great age". Plomer described himself at this time in Double Lives as "a solitary and emotional youth who had not reduced his thoughts to order but had reacted convulsively to his surroundings . . .".⁵ Wolfe, too, is isolated: "I came to feel as though circumstances had driven me with cunning deliberation and relentless activity to a point of complete isolation. I found myself with no friend, no passion, no anchor whatever."⁶ Wolfe,

¹ Hodgart, p. 12.

² Hodgart, p. 12.

³ Hodgart, p. 12.

⁴ Plomer, Turbott Wolfe, p. 9.

⁵ Plomer, Double Lives, p. 161.

⁶ Plomer, Turbott Wolfe, p. 9.

further, is characterized by an extreme sensitivity and a romantic, erratic personality, so that his impressions of Africa are likely to be as convulsive as Plomer's had been:

He was dignified in a curious way perhaps peculiar to very intelligent people. All the time that he was talking he seemed profoundly excited, and now and then his gestures became, like his narrative, erratic, but there was with him an assumed grace, perhaps because of the fine culture that he had and because of the intense natural sensitiveness of his nature.¹

Wolfe and the young Plomer are thus similar in terms of age, sensibility and circumstances. The contrast between the "tawdry" and "ridiculous" room where Wolfe is dying and his grace and dignity as a person--an Existential dissociation of actor and setting--is pursued throughout the novel and reflects what was clearly Plomer's own experience of cultural alienation:

An adolescent déraciné (so far as I had any roots), I was in a state of physical and emotional turmoil, and the society in which I moved was equally wanting in naturalness and glamour; on the whole it was boring and second-rate.²

Plomer was also revolted by race prejudice and the colour bar, and this disaffection deepened both his isolation and his sense of indignation. In an article "Several Revolutions", in which he summarised his impressions of South Africa, Plomer wrote that during his seven year period of residence in South Africa (in which Turbott Wolfe was written), "Something began to simmer deep down in my unconscious self. . . . It was a protest of my whole being against the generally accepted ideas of white South Africa."³ This revulsion was coupled with a natural admiration for, and sensual appreciation of, the native Zulu people:

¹ Plomer, Turbott Wolfe, p. 9.

² Plomer, Double Lives, p. 120.

³ William Plomer, "Several Revolutions" in The Twentieth Century, April 1959, p. 389.

The most primitive were generally the most dignified Their physical beauty was conspicuous, for many of them went about all but stark naked, and their mere presence was to me deeply and agreeably disturbing

. . .¹

Wolfe, too, shares the young Plomer's natural negrophilism and instinctive dislike of racism:

And seeing continually incessant lines of natives trooping in and out of the store I turned my feelings, in escape from the unclean idea of Flescher and Bloodfield, far too much into sympathy with the aboriginal. I found myself charmed with unending euphonious conversations in Lembu, simple and intimate. My eye was training itself to admire to excess the over-developed marvellous animal grace of each Lembu individual.²

I began to learn the hard lesson that in Lembuland it is considered a crime to regard the native as even so high as a mad wild animal.³

Two further factors linking Wolfe and the young Plomer are their dislike of Christianity and their deterministic philosophy. Plomer in Double Lives wrote of his beliefs during his stay in Entumeni, Zululand, ". . . I was beginning to feel an increasing distaste for many of the manifestations and results of Christianity", adding that he was "if anything, a determinist".⁴ One of the main facets of Wolfe's critique of the white "misruling race" (as he called it in his autobiography) is the rejection of Christian missionary culture. Drawing inspiration from a Laurentian kind of primitivism,⁵ Plomer, through his persona Wolfe, condemns "the missions", as well as "the poor whites and the towns", for killing off the "fine rare savage" and replacing this commendable specimen with the Europeanised native.⁶

¹ Plomer, Double Lives, p. 146.

² Plomer, Turbott Wolfe, p. 20.

³ Plomer, Turbott Wolfe, p. 19.

⁴ Plomer, Double Lives, p. 158.

⁵ Plomer says in Double Lives that he loved the work of D.H. Lawrence, praising him for his "revolutionary newness of vision" (p. 122). Lawrence held vitalistic views which emphasized sensuality and natural spontaneity.

⁶ Wolfe writes of Nhliziyombi, "she was a fine rare savage, of a type you will find nowhere now: it has been killed by the missions, the poor whites and the towns", p. 30.

Plomer's determinism is reflected in Wolfe's metaphor of the malignant architect controlling each abortive event of his life:

My life seemed to be then a structure that had grown steadily without the least deviation from the architect's plan - every stone was being put in place, every malicious ornament. Lack of money; perhaps an extreme sensitiveness; a deep-rooted immovable cowardice; sudden flowers of courage - all these seemed due to an invisible constructor of my life, who must have been Gothic, so intent was he upon his work, so nice with satire.¹

Wolfe sees the gods, whoever they might be, as schemers plotting human destruction and misery in devious fashion. The individual seems to be impotent in the face of deterministic forces: "I came to feel as though circumstances had driven me with cunning deliberation and relentless activity to a point of complete isolation". After establishing himself as a fatalistic determinist, Plomer, through Wolfe, proceeds to present his derisive socio-political picture of South African society, "an obscene civilisation".

From these leads from Double Lives and Turbott Wolfe it is possible to deduce, then, that Plomer wrote his novel under the sway of three factors, which he has embodied in Wolfe's character and narrative: a growing dislike for Christianity, a negrophilism coupled with a distaste for white racist civilisation, and an inherent fatalism. A consequence of Wolfe's--and Plomer's--determinism is a stress on the powerful impact of the environment on the individual. Wolfe determines early on to analyse the "polyglot" society he finds himself in:

It came upon me suddenly in that harsh polyglot gaiety that I was living in Africa; that there is a question of colour.²

¹ Plomer, Turbott Wolfe, p. 10. .

² Plomer, p. 13.

I began to learn the hard lesson that in Lembuland it is considered a crime to regard the native as anything even so high as a mad wild animal. I was so surprised that I began to seek with keenness for information about the relations between blacks and whites in those parts. I set myself to find out all that I could about the blacks and whites themselves, about their points of view; and about missions and missionaries. I began to ask everybody questions without number, travelling farther afield.¹

Wolfe immediately fixes attention on prevailing colonial codes, institutions and psychological factors--"their points of view". The result is that at the end of the novel a composite picture of the Lembuland society, on all the levels of social behaviour, economic practice, political administration, cultural mores and psychological identity, has emerged. Laurens van der Post rightly notes, "For the first time in our literature, with Turbott Wolfe, a writer takes on the whole of South African life"² (emphasis added).

The analysis, however penetrating, remains impressionistic; it has already been noted that the young Plomer reacted "convulsively" to his surroundings and that Wolfe is attributed with the same sort of extreme sensitivity. Wolfe's erratic nature, observes Plomer--Wolfe's friend in the novel, that is--at the beginning of the novel, lends to his narrative an erratic quality,³ which in turn adds a strong experiential flavour to the novel, despite what the older Plomer--and other critics--may say as regards the novel's allegedly chaotic form and structure. The chaos of the experience depicted--Plomer described his time in South Africa in retrospect as "a complete and violent revelation made to me when young"⁴--is represented in an impressionistic structure that is admirably

¹ Plomer, p. 19.

² Van der Post, "The Turbott Wolfe Affair", p. 148.

³ Plomer, p. 9.

⁴ William Plomer, At Home: Memoirs (London: Jonathan Cape, 1958), p. 244.

suitable in a story about the fragmentation and alienation of an English gentleman in an ungentlemanly society.

Plomer establishes in the opening chapter several facets vital to the success of the social satire that is Turbott Wolfe: (i) the moral superiority and integrity of the "satiric voice", Wolfe himself--"He was dignified in a curious way perhaps peculiar to very intelligent people . . . an assured grace . . . the fine culture . . . the intense natural sensitiveness of his nature"; (ii) the disjunction between protagonist and setting and the consequent alienation; (iii) a close relation between impressionistic form and the theme of cultural and psychological fragmentation; (iv) the sense of a Cosmic Satirist as the architect of Wolfe's life, which will later provide for a powerful effect of hopelessness and despair, and (v) Wolfe's determinism that leads to a stress on environmental factors, which in turn yields an analysis of society that is tinged with both insight and indignation.

The main themes of Wolfe's socio-political analysis are figuratively foreshadowed in his first diary entry, depicting a visit to a fairground in the slums of Dunnsport (Durban, perhaps?):

Schönstein's Better Shows

It is the steam-organ's function to bewitch the merry-go-round with noise: wailing and palpitating, to drive the prancing figures faster and faster; to produce a final din, brandishing a tune like an insult; and then of a sudden to leave the scene silent and deserted.

The merry-go-round, brightly lit and brightly coloured, is garishly desolate, while the empty voice of the dago who summons people to ride upon it is as its own voice, articulate, pleading for a tawdry misery to be soothed. The clamour is dead that drugged the brain and excited the nerves, so one man throws away a cigarette, and another turns with a shrug. Another talks in confidence with one of the dollish women who sell tickets for side-shows, sitting here and there, each in a kiosk like a monstrous hood, dark without a light within.

Above them the great wheel towers and clatters with coloured lights, its passengers two by two in little cars soaring pathetically into the night, lapsing swiftly to earth, people obsessed with an illusion; now as they appear leaning out to watch a dispute at one of the games of chance, where a cheapjack with custard-yellow hair and a false button hole is at blows with an Indian

youth because of sixpence. After a moment the game proceeds, electric light upthrown on vivid faces - white, yellow, black - set like masks, or moving like the faces of marionettes.

Estoric movements stir the crowd, at one place ribald, watching a gross European in one of the swing-boats with a girl sitting facing him, her back to those watching . . . Even when she is on the ground he holds fast her hand, and suddenly stoops to kiss her. Quickly she turns her head - the idle crowd breaks out with lascivious comment, seeing her to be not white - and the kiss falls on her neck . . .

Bawdy laughter. A sally in the darkness. A pursuit by the crowd. And after a time the man saunters back to his friends, fluttering one hand high above his head in lewd farewell. Is it a flag on a ruin, that hand? A portent, preceding a half-caste world?¹

This fairground picture seems to be Wolfe's metaphor for colonial life in South Africa: the Africa beneath the "harsh polyglot gaiety" of its different peoples and cultures is forbiddingly silent and dark, seemingly pregnant with chaos and violence: the wailing steam-organ's tune is "like an insult", ugly, strident and offensive, yet it hardly penetrates the silence of the forbidding African night: ". . . and then of a sudden . . . leave(s) the scene silent and deserted". The gaudy colours, like the dinful sounds, do not disguise the essential unreality of the fairground: "the merry-go-round, brightly lit and brightly coloured, is garishly desolate, while the empty voice of the dago . . .". The scene is "desolate" --without real substance or life. The dollish ticket-sellers in their dark, hooded kiosks reinforce the motifs of unreality and underlying darkness. Plomer contrasts the harsh din of the steam organ with the deserted silence of the African night and the garish colours with the darkness "within". The purpose of the contrast is to highlight the superficiality, emptiness and unreality of the fairground in relation to the dark and desolate African beyond. Thus the escapism of the fairground activities is "an illusion" which soothes the "tawdry misery" of existence. The people are like "marionettes", just as the ticket-sellers are "dollish". The activity

¹ Plomer, Turbott Wolfe, pp. 13-14.

of the crowd is sluggish despite the frenetic motions of the fairground machines--the clamour "drug(s)" the brain, the passengers in the wheel towers soar "pathetically into the night", the crowd is "idle". (The artificiality and unreality of the machinery in this passage recalls Conrad's image of impotent European technology perched somehow incongruously on the African continent in Heart of Darkness, a motif used in as recent a South African novel as Stephen Gray's Caltrop's Desire.)

The theme of violence, which occurs throughout the novel (Soper's castration story, the ugly confrontation between D'Elvadere and Soper, Friston's drug-induced fit of insanity and later his murder, as well as the general atmosphere of emotional and physical violence prevailing in the colony) and which constitutes a central element in Wolfe's final vision of Africa (see p. 64) is hinted at in the aside noting that the cheap-jack and ^{the} Indian youth are fighting over sixpence and in the surging movements of the crowd. The noises, actions and colours of the scene share something of this latent violence, being harsh, obtrusive and discordant. It takes a small incident--a sneak kiss that disregards the colour bar--to ignite the volatile atmosphere. A man, "a gross European", has kissed the neck of a woman who turns out to be "not white"--the crowd's emotions are stirred indicating how close to the bone is "the question of colour" to them (which Wolfe earlier saw as the essential issue of this society). Later Wolfe describes the colour bar as a "great forbidding law".¹

The kiss and the subsequent reaction have obvious Freudian connotations, symbolising the conflict between sexual desire across the colour bar and the inhibitions and reservations that repress such impulses. Wolfe himself is later on torn by a Freudian conflict after falling in love with Nhliziyombi. Freud's themes of the primacy of sexual instinct in human behaviour and socially conditioned repression are features of Plomer's determinism in the novel:

¹ Plomer, p. 34.

I felt myself to be like a scientist who watches some enormity of nature through a microscope - I was an entomologist observing the titanic and elemental lusts of beetles infinitesimal in a tiny background, where . . . the dynamics of sex were rending hearts.¹

I supposed myself to be in a very similar position to a monk in love with a nun. You may take it as a just enough image, and though I was not in any way ascetic I fully believe that the girl Nhliziyombi was as chaste as I was reputed to be. You can imagine . . . the tortures that a man suffers when he is in love against his conscience.²

As the kiss symbolises the theme of miscegenation, so the raised hand at the end of the passage represents either a flag on a "ruin" that Wolfe imagines may occur in the clash between "European" and "not white", or a portent of a new world of half-castes, the alternative to a clash--a blending. Wolfe's vision of Africa is pivoted throughout between these two poles, the apocalypse of destruction, on the one hand, and the apocalypse of a new and better world, on the other. (Apocalyptic visions of the final end of South African society appear frequently in English South African fiction--the beatific vision of comfort and hope in Cry, the Beloved Country, of universal destruction in The Grass is Singing, of violence, madness and nullity in In the Heart of the Country and of pacifistic abnegation in Waiting for the Barbarians.)

The style of this passage mirrors its thematic content. The language is richly eloquent, if not elegant, and yet is shot through with Conradian despair: "The merry-go-round, brightly lit and brightly coloured, is garishly desolate, while the empty voice of the dago who summons people to ride upon it is as its own voice . . . pleading for a tawdry misery to be soothed . . .".

The style functions in a manner analogous to the bright lights, showy colours and noisy din in the fairground, which are a means of endowing a meaning or value, however artificial, to an otherwise empty existence, of soothing a "tawdry misery". The elegant language

¹ Plomer, p. 69.

² Plomer, p. 33.

embellishes the Conradian theme of the illusory nature of colonial life in Africa and the unreality of its technology in a continent too vast, and, perhaps, too dark and primitive for its mode of civilisation. Certainly the fairground is characterised by an air of ridiculous incongruity as is the French warship in Heart of Darkness.

Throughout Turbott Wolfe, Plomer's sophisticated satirical style serves as an affirmation of the gentlemanly code of ethics that underlies Wolfe's English outlook on the African colony: it indicates his sensitivity, intelligence and social refinement, confirming his "superiority" as a satirist over what he is satirising. In this diary entry the language is eloquent and evocative, and the tone is serious, gloomy and intense. The eloquence itself and the moral seriousness of theme and content point to an aesthetic which underlies Wolfe's satiric critique of the colonial society--he is appalled by its ugliness, its obscenity, its barbarity. The language and whole stylistic effect of the novel, its wit, humour and neat burlesque, as well as its coherent satiric form, point to an alternative ethic Plomer sees as preferable and superior. There is something graceful about the man Wolfe and his way of seeing things (and saying things) that is lacking in all in this society but the primitive Lembus whom he instinctively adores.

Plomer traces the "corruption of (his) ideal" through the intense but disjointed experiences of his sensitive English gentleman getting to know Africa--and white colonialism. Plomer allows characters to satirise themselves before Wolfe's prying, worldly-wise eyes, presenting them as either gross, as in the case of the white farmers and poor whites, or committed to folly or weakness, as with the missionaries (with the exception of Nordalsgaard, who is nevertheless a defeated man). Plomer does not use a tabula rasa innocence for his central character, as Sol Plaatje, Peter Abrahams and Alan Paton, for example, do in Mhudi, Mine Boy and Cry, the Beloved Country: Wolfe comes to Africa already predisposed to a cynical determinism and to the satiric spirit:

My life seemed to be then a structure that had grown steadily without the least deviation from the architect's plan - every stone was being put in place, every malacious ornament . . . But the cruel building was suddenly ruined. I was inflamed with the sun of a new day. Perhaps you remember-? I was suddenly ordered to Africa by some fool of a doctor.¹

Nevertheless, Wolfe's excitement is aroused, if not his hope (" . . . I sailed . . . with more excitement than hope")² and he is anxious to learn about Africa: "There would be the unavoidable question of colour. It is a question to which every man in Africa, black, white or yellow, must provide his own answer".³ When the whole enterprise has failed Wolfe tells Caleb of the guarded expectations he had had of Africa: "My life, Caleb, is like a bucket with no bottom. Nothing can fill it. Once I thought Africa could fill it, but I doubted."⁴

Wolfe brings with him, other than his determinism, satiric temperament and guarded expectations, a sophisticated English sensibility which will later inhibit his growth in the society, since it leads to the split between sexual attraction and cultural reticence, leaving him at the end tormented and repressed as well as alienated from his own kind, who fail to measure up to his ideals of gentlemanly conduct and liberal, democratic sentiment.

Wolfe's fears about miscegenation--despite his leanings in that direction--are socially conditioned by this background, as are all his perceptions of colonial South African society and Plomer questions the appropriateness of such an outlook in this society.

I was in love with Nhliziyombi not only against my conscience, but against my reason; against my intellect; against my plans; against myself. But where do these things stand before love? . . . the vital thing was that to abandon myself to being in love with this so lovable woman would be to run counter to my vanity . . . I saw I should be sacrificing my own opinion of myself.⁵

¹ Plomer, p. 10.

² Plomer, p. 11.

³ Plomer, p. 17.

⁴ Plomer, p. 109.

⁵ Plomer, p. 33.

That is, to commit miscegenation for Wolfe would be to go against the grain of his conditioned self, his social "vanity". Is it not his law-abiding sense of decency which also inhibits him? ". . . There appeared to be a great forbidding law, like all great forbidding laws, subcutaneous . . ." ¹. This law is, of course, the colour bar. There may also be a latent homosexuality:

Is it truly because I am afraid of myself that I am afraid of loving her? Is it not perhaps that I am afraid of her? How could I touch, perhaps to injure, that frail divine humanity, or human divinity? I could not give myself reason; but suspected that I was cheating myself. They were disarming, those wide Egyptian eyes. No, I said to myself, I dare not touch her. ²

Wolfe's inability to consummate his affections for Nhliziyombi, owing to Freudian repression, cultural vanity, law-abiding decency and, perhaps, latent homosexuality, forms the basis of his eventual rejection of the Young Africa society, despite a theoretical sympathy for their ideal of the future Coloured World. In his confession to Caleb, he declares near the end of his stay that Young Africa "was a monstrous farce". ³ The conception of Eurafrika (a new world born of the contact between European colonialism and native Africa), symbolized by the "goddess" Mabel van der Horst, ⁴ is finally rejected when Wolfe opts decisively for the Freudian super-ego and his own English sense of "cricket":

¹ Plomer, p. 34.

² Plomer, p. 35.

³ Plomer, p. 109.

⁴ "Yes, but as she walked away in her springing stride, with fine legs and buttocks, and a royal back, out of the early morning shadows . . . she was no less than a goddess . . . of the future . . . What was her name? Her name was Eurafrika." (Turbott Wolfe, p. 105). The name Eurafrika is a blend that neatly suggests the concept. Mabel van der Horst, though, is clearly admired by Wolfe for sexual reasons, as was Nhliziyombi. Wolfe's deification of the two women is no doubt related to what some critics see as his latent homosexuality.

Then this idea of miscegenation. How can I believe in it? It is a nightmare. This girl could not really mean to give herself to an African. She would be cutting herself clean off from her own world.¹

The concept strikes him now as irrational, culturally untenable, profoundly disconcerting. The death of Friston, the collapse of Young Africa and the exit of Wolfe, all emphasize its disastrous consequences. Its impracticality is symbolised by Olaf Shaw, Nordalsgaard's ignominious monument "a middle-class, half-caste, second rate".²

Wolfe is now in what Stephen Gray sees as the epitomal predicament of the English South African: a position of not-belonging.³ This is not simply the fault of his bondage to a Freudian repression: moral blame is also laid at the feet of the colonial society: "I think if you go into the question thoroughly you will find that ultimately, our civilisation is obscene."⁴

Many of its white inhabitants are "vulgar" (Flescher, Bloodfield and Schwerdt) and "unclean", the descendants of the Voortrekkers at Aucampstroom strike Wolfe as gross--words like "obscene", "vulgar", "filthy", "unclean", "gross", "indecent", "violent" and "brutal" are frequently used, indicating Wolfe's aesthetic disgust as well as his snobbery. He judges their manners, character and behaviour from the point of view of the refined Englishman. His descriptions highlight the ugliness and unpleasantness of life in Lembuland in relation to values that respect standards of beauty, grace and decorum in man's lifestyle. Wolfe also admires strength, vitality and voluptuousness, qualities he finds, for example, in Mabel van der Horst and D'Elvadere (and

¹ Plomer, p. 85.

² Plomer, p. 60.

³ Stephen Gray, Southern African Literature: An Introduction, p. 151. "The evidence of these works is that all these authors concur with Schreiner that the land itself dries the vital juices out of its inhabitants . . . Thus . . . the literature of this kind has as a basic tenet the theme that its characters do not--and cannot--belong."

⁴ Plomer, p. 31.

to a lesser extent in the charismatic Nordalgaard), but not in the Fotheringhays, who are lost in nostalgic reverie, or the Boers of Aucampstroom whom Wolfe condescendingly regards as poor whites. It is perhaps spurious, as Roy Campbell suggests, that Wolfe treats the "aboriginals" in the story with unqualified sympathy--Nhliziyombi, Zachary Msomi, the "kaffir intellectual" and his cousin Caleb Msomi--yet is totally disdainful of nearly all the whites. This may be a consequence of satiric enthusiasm, those who do not serve as promising vehicles of disgust are regarded with a corresponding adulation. The whole thing is an over-reaction, as Plomer himself suggested it was.

Plomer magnifies the vices and follies of the society in order to justify his indignation and reinforce the degradation of the satiric butt through the reduction that Hodgart sees as the basic method of satire: to get the better of it by asserting a superior code that shows up the society's blatant inadequacies. Thus he often resorts to caricature, as in the portraits of Bloodfield and Flescher, in which physical appearance is a crude index of character. Even Nhliziyombi and Mabel van der Horst are seen as admirable on the basis of their magnificent proportions. Wolfe's concept of social grace, though, of the dignified bearing and manners of people, redeems this method from superficiality, since grace of bearing is a more ready symbol for an inner dignity than appearance per se. Bloodfield's deplorable manners are a better index of his deplorable mentality than his hen-like head. The irony of comparing the racist white farmers to animals, a recurrent device in the novel,¹ cleverly reverses the racial stereotype current in Lembuland that a native is nothing "so high as a mad wild animal"². This bolsters a method that would otherwise be crude. The aim is to make the characters condemn (or, more rarely,

¹ Bloodfield has "pig's hair" and a hen's head (Turbott Wolfe, p. 18); Soper's eyes are like a sheep's (p. 72); Mrs Fotheringhay is "to her husband as the partridge to the dodo" (p. 22); Flescher is compared to a mountebank (without a mountebank's style) (p. 19).

² Soper, "Hell, they're no better than animals". (p. 74)

to recommend) themselves, which is the technique of indirect satire. This reduction technique leads to superlative language, derogatory descriptions and an insulting contemptuous tone:

I went to look at Flesher. I may be a coward myself, but I have never seen a man with smaller courage and less manliness about him. Everything to do with him was mean and puny and contemptible. He wore a beard and strutted like a mountebank (but without a mountebank's style), carrying his five feet of wretchedness as though . . . the responsibilities of a continent were transported about on those two thin legs.¹

The hyperbolic language is offset by the appealing bluntness of the satirist's contempt and the witty burlesque of the caricature.

The impressionistic nature of Wolfe's "phantasmagoria" of colonial African society is also counterbalanced by a structured picture of the society which the novel as a whole yields. Plomer's satire, taken in toto, that is, represents a comprehensive and coherent assessment of this society. It is divided into whites, native Lembus and half-castes like Olaf Shaw. The whites comprise the farmers, racists and hypocritical miscegenators, the "gross" poor whites, like the Dutch at Aucampstroom, who represent the decay of the pioneer spirit, and the European missionaries, Nordalsgaard, Fotheringhay and Friston. Mabel van der Horst is also poor white in this classification but her strength of character and bold progressiveness recommend themselves so forcibly to Wolfe, despite his qualms about her manners, that she emerges as one of the most favoured of the whites, along with Nordalsgaard and D'Elvadere. Plomer's satire of the white colonial society is thus based on three criticisms: of racism, of the pioneering spirit which has decayed and of the failure of Christianity.

CONCLUSION

One by one, Wolfe's disappointments have mounted, in the people, in the society, in himself. Plomer, who foreshadowed Wolfe's final

¹ Plomer, p. 19.

disillusionment by introducing him lying on his death-bed in sordid circumstances, brings Wolfe to the point where his satiric temperament excludes him from everything in the society but that which, for him, "an improbable and ineffectual Englishman",¹ is unattainable. The stumbling-block proves to be a seeming incompatibility between his English reticence and culture and the "harsh polyglot" reality of South African society. In favour of the theory of miscegenation, he is too mindful of social pressures and too sexually timid to put his beliefs into practice. Miscegenation is powerfully at work in the society: the missionaries, the Dutch, the "last surviving pioneer", the progressives and the white racists all indulge. Only Fotheringhay, Chastity Wolfe, who wishes to indulge, and Friston, who believes in indulging, but, like Wolfe, lacks the courage to indulge, refrain. His personal aversion to the practice of miscegenation causes him to lose faith in the positive apocalypse of Eurafrica. The apocalypse of destruction reared its head in an early premonition:

I was losing my balance. I remembered that every civilized white man, who considers himself sensitive, in touch with native peoples in his daily life should hold in his heart an image of the failure of Gauguin . . . I found myself all at once overwhelmed with a suffocating sensation of universal black darkness. Blackness. I was being sacrificed, a white lamb, to black Africa.²

Wolfe ends by being vanquished by . . . what? The picture of Nordalsgaard on his wedding day before leaving Africa, is telling:

He had gone out, this old man . . . with a deliberate, elegant, mincing step to conquer Africa, to conquer the world, to conquer time. It was not a wreck: you could not call it a failure, this. It was defeat.³

¹ Plomer, Double Lives, p. 160.

² Plomer, Turbott Wolfe, p. 20.

³ Plomer, p. 59.

Africa, then, has defeated Nordalsgaard who nevertheless is no "failure". Is it Africa itself that is too much for the white man?

Now (Tyler-Harries) was associated in my mind with a whole host of others. He was with those who had been broken or beaten or besotted with the almighty violence of Africa, that violence that was the tropical thunderstorm raging on the roof; which was the grace of Zachary; the beauty of Nhliziyombi; and even the trustworthiness of Caleb. I could see plainly that Tyler-Harries was in the same category as the Schwerdts, whose beastliness had been turned against them by witchcraft: as the Fotheringhays, who had been drugged with Africa, so that their brains could not cope with it, caressing only the ghosts of memory and tradition: as Flesher and Bloodfield and their kind, whose vulgarity only emphasized the colossal disastrous significance of their background: as Nordalsgaard, whose conquests were like land reclaimed for a time, and afterwards choked with weeds.¹

Wolfe here exonerates the whole of his satiric gallery of fools and nasties, by drawing out the logical consequences of his deterministic premise that the individual ultimately is fashioned by the environment, which is therefore to blame for the beastliness of the Schwerdts, the ghostliness of the Fotheringhays, the vulgarity of Flesher and Bloodfield and the defeat of Nordalsgaard.

Plomer thus turns the tables and becomes himself the object of cosmic satire. This deepens the satiric despair to a point of irredeemable hopelessness, in which the apocalypse of destruction, of the whole colonial enterprise, is ascendant, as it seems to be in the allusion in Friston's poem to Heart of Darkness: "Fear has withered swiftly since/HORROR was written on the sun".

¹ Plomer, p. 52.

CHAPTER FOUR : REDEMPTION FROM THE DESPAIR OF SIN IN
THE BEADLE

OVERVIEW

A.C. Partridge, pronouncing judgment on the "impotence" of South African literature in English, objected in a 1950 review that the literature offered "few notable milestones".¹ Few critics since have given Pauline Smith's work the cold shoulder. Geoffrey Haresnape's critical work on Smith in the 60s put her on the map, his admiring tone setting a precedent foreshadowed by the 25 South African writers who signed a scroll in 1959 expressing their esteem for her work. Christie, Hutchings and MacLennan see The Beadle as ". . . the first, and perhaps still the only, masterpiece of South African fiction".² Ridley Beeton, in "Pauline Smith and South African Literature in English", quotes, and agrees with, Raymond Sands, who saw The Beadle as "the best of the South African novels in English".³ Dora Taylor writes that Smith's work "has a disciplined purity" which gives it "a sure place" in the literature.⁴

The theme of despair proved useful in the two preceding chapters in analysing the degree to which The Story of an African Farm and Turbott Wolfe are works of art in which subject-matter and formal presentation are integrated. The theme's utility stemmed from its

¹ Partridge, A.C., "The Condition of South African English Literature", Standpunte 4(4) 1950, p. 46.

² Sarah Christie, Geoffrey Hutchings and Don MacLennan, Perspectives on South African Fiction (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1980), p. 42.

³ Beeton, R., "Pauline Smith and South African Literature in English", UNISA English Studies II(I) 1973, p. 44.

⁴ Taylor, D., "Karoo Frustration - A Study of Pauline Smith", Trek 7(II) 1942, p. 14.

importance in the world-views fashioning these works.¹ An equally cogent relation between the writer's philosophy and the fictional form of the novel is discernible in The Beadle. There may be tragedy and suffering in Smith's novel--Jacoba's unhappy life and then her death, the bitter relationships prevailing in the Steenkamp household, the shadow of Klaartjie's sin and death that falls darkly over the beadle's life, Andrina's experience of being jilted and ostracised, all illustrate this--yet the final message is one of redemption. This can be seen by looking at fictional factors like plot-structure, thematic development and characterisation. Clearly, then, a study of how the potential despair of human experience is seen to be redeemed in this story ought to bring the reader close to whatever formal excellence the book may possess.

In the fictional life-situation of The Beadle man is able to develop purposefully through suffering. Geoffrey Haresnape has noted this.² The only piece of unrelieved tragedy in her work is the short story "Desolation", and, perhaps, "The Father", both from The Little Karoo, a work far more sombre than the novel. The fictional world of The Beadle, though fallen, is not so hostile as to exclude hope of betterment whereas this is not true of The Story of an African Farm, Turbott Wolfe and later South African novels of an Existentialist character, like The Grass is Singing and In the Heart of the Country.

The Beadle is, in fact, a fundamentally Christian novel, despite its strong critique of "Old Testament" Christianity --the false righteousness--of Johanna and the beadle. What Smith sees as the more ideal Christian attitude is founded on the New Testament God of

¹ In Schreiner's novel, the theme of despair is a basic element in the issue of scepticism that affects not only the characterisation of Waldo, Lyndall and The Stranger, but is also instrumental in the adoption of the philosophical form of the novel. In Turbott Wolfe a deterministic metaphysic frames the goings-on in the story, while Wolfe's satiric disgust grows into insurmountable despair as the antics of the white colonists confirm his view that the civilization is obscene and Wolfe's identity crisis is precipitated by the complexity of the racial situation.

² Geoffrey Haresnape, "A Study of the Works of Pauline Smith", M.A. Thesis, Cape Town, 1960, pp. 28-9. He writes, "The Beadle has, as one of its basic themes, a conception that human individuals may develop and social and family difficulties be resolved or become meaningful only in the slow fulness of time and the seasons".

Love, an attitude exemplified in the sympathetic portraits of Mevrouw van der Merwe and Oom Hans Rademeyer.¹

The novel challenges other early South African novels, which tend to be more pessimistic, for a foremost position in this pioneer period of South African fiction. Along with Cry, the Beloved Country, it offers a philosophical alternative to the mainstream of despair in the tradition of English South African fiction.

THE DESPAIR OF SIN AND ITS REDEMPTION IN THE BEADLE

There is no shortage of misery in the story of The Beadle. The Steenkamp home is characterised by unhappy human relations: the beadle is throughout oppressed by his guilt complex, Johanna, remote and isolated in her unnatural sternness, is unable to form any real human bonds with her sisters, Jacoba lives and dies in an atmosphere of unhappiness and oppression, Andrina is forsaken by her cavalier English lover and later repudiated for her sins and the past is clouded by tragedy and guilt.

Pauline Smith's fiction is permeated by an awareness of the grief and tragedy of life. Sickness, disease, sin and death pervade The Little Karoo (of its ten stories, only one of them, "The Sinner", does not involve death and sickness as prominent elements in the story).

How is it, then, that a sense of hope prevails in her work?

¹ Given that Pauline Smith seems nowhere to have offered an explicit statement of her religious views, it seems as valid to infer that she was a Christian believer as it is to deduce the opposite as Geoffrey Haresnape and others have done. The factors in favour of such an inference are: (i) her diary testifies that she went to church regularly (and a Dutch Reformed one at that); (ii) she stated that the story of Adam and Eve was "true" to her, even if not literally so (see her 1905 diary, entry dated 19 September); (iii) the Old Testament exerted a powerful and lasting influence on her imagination, as revealed in her fictional work; (iv) Smith stated that her socialism was derived from Christ's message (see her 1905 diary, entry dated 19 October, in which she writes "He wants to know if I am a socialist. And as all Dutchmen are good Christians I put my socialism down as Christianity and reminded him of Christ's advice to the rich young man".); (v) she fashioned her fiction in terms of the Christian vision and so must have been profoundly sensitive to it.

Lyndall was unable to tolerate a society geared to the supremacy of men and Turbott Wolfe found the "obscene" white South African society too much to bear. Both characters experienced absolute despair caused by oppressive social systems. Only Waldo in these two novels saw beyond the nature of the society in which he lived to a more transcendent realm in which meaning could be found.

A transcendent meaning is part of the Christian world-view. Christianity pictures the world as created by God, as fallen due to man's sin and as redeemed by the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The life-situation in The Beadle is conceived in terms of this faith. The redemption from sin of the beadle and Andrina is its central theme. Despair in the novel--the bitterness and disillusionment that plague the beadle and Johanna and which drastically affect Jacoba, causing her emotional collapse and death--is relative to this theme of redemption and is seen as a function of sin. It was said in Chapter One that a novelist's world-picture is the most basic aspect of a novel. Smith's Christian perspective is evident in nearly all the aspects of The Beadle.

In the Christian philosophy the Fall of man brought sin into the world. The most important consequence of this was to separate man from God as dramatised by the expulsion from paradise. Thereafter man lived in a fallen world of sin in which the "natural self", to use Paul's term,¹ is "prisoner of the law of sin".²

Fallen man, though, may be redeemed, through Christ: ". . . because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death".³ In Christianity, Christ is the Redeemer, whose sacrifice atones for man's sin: "For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering".⁴ Redemption, then, has two facets--a fallen or unredeemed state of sin, and a means of redemption, in this case, a Redeemer.

¹ The Holy Bible (New International Version), (Cape Town: Bible Society of South Africa, 1978), Romans 6:19, p. 194.

² Romans 7:23, p. 196.

³ Romans 8:2, p. 196.

⁴ Romans 8:3, p. 196.

Two further Christian themes are important in The Beadle: repentance, or confession of sins with a view to turning away from a past evil, and forgiveness. Repentance--"From that time on Jesus began to preach, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near'"¹-- involves the recognition by the sinner of his sins. It is significant that the beadle can only experience spiritual growth after he has confessed his sins to the congregation in the Thanksgiving service at Harmonie. Forgiveness is a basic Christian principle: "Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven".² The pattern is reciprocal--the sinner, who has been forgiven, is expected to forgive, who is not judged, not to judge. The judgmentalism and the lack of forgiveness of Johanna and the beadle are central causes of the unhappiness, bitterness and stagnation prevailing in their household.

The Christian theme of redemption is illustrated in the short story "Ludovitje" from The Little Karoo. The boy's faith gives him a meaning and joy that transcends his life-long sickness and disability. His spiritual charisma proves infectious and his father's black labourers are always enchanted by his singing and lay-preaching. The head labourer, Maqwasi, is converted and preaches the Word of God after Ludovitje's death. This simple story expresses the transcendental principle of the Christian faith that the immediate, material circumstances of life are relative to a higher meaning that can make joy possible in the most straitened of situations.

The Beadle is rooted in and pivoted on the Holy Bible, in that its themes are Christian in content and also Biblical in their development following the movement from the Old Testament, in which God revealed Himself to many of the Jewish prophets as righteous to the point of being wrathful, punishing man severely for his sins, to the New Testament, with its gospel of forgiveness, mercy and love. The style of The Beadle shares too the simplicity and solemnity of Biblical language, carrying also a strong moral tone:

¹ Matthew 4:17, p. 4.

² Luke 6:37, p. 80.

Harmonie church stood close to a poplar grove on the left bank of the Aangenaam river, and a little beyond the church, on a slight rise, was the brown, mud-walled house where Aalst Vlokman, the beadle, lived with Old Piet Steenkamp's daughters, Johanna and Jacoba, and their niece Andrina . . .

All this small world - the sights, the sounds, the very smell of it - Aalst Vlokman loved with a bitter, brooding intensity for which he had no words and which brought no comfort to his soul.¹

The statements are simple and clear. Smith's style has been described by critics as "austere".² The utterances are pithy and the sentences are constructed in a straightforward, building-block way to reinforce the impression of forthrightness attached to the statements. This early sketch of Vlokman is also spiced with spiritual insight which indicates Smith's moral concerns in the novel.

If The Story of an African Farm is more the philosophical novel of ideas, The Beadle, like Turbott Wolfe, is a novel of characters: their development is its whole raison d'être. It is noteworthy that the main characters, bar one, the Englishman, are defined in spiritual terms. Even Nind, not spiritual at all, is something of an understated devil-figure in the story, who, like Alec in Tess of the d'Urbervilles, seduces a "maiden", leaving her with an illegitimate pregnancy frowned upon by the community. Geoffrey Haresnape sees Nind as the serpent in the grass of the Edenic Harmonie world.³

Smith stresses several times Nind's absolute lack of principle:

The young man was determined to prove to himself, to his relatives over the mountains, and to the world in general, that happiness lay for him in complete freedom of action . . .⁴

¹ Pauline Smith, The Beadle (Cape Town: A.A. Balkema, 1979), pp. 7-8.

² Arnold Bennett was the first to use this epithet in his introduction to the 1925 edition of The Little Karoo. "Austere", seemingly most apposite, has been used in reviews ever since.

³ Geoffrey Haresnape, Pauline Smith (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1969), p. 119.

⁴ Smith, p. 27.

(Nind) was ordered back to the pure dry air of the Little Karoo, and in a sudden whim had written to Mevrouw van der Merwe and begged her and Mijnheer to accept him as a pupil-farmer . . . the young man, impetuous, selfish, craving for change, for amusement, for sympathy, was on his way down the valley in the weekly post-cart.¹

While the Englishman prided himself upon being a free agent, Andrina knew herself to be entirely in the hands of her God.²

The present - with its right to that complete freedom of action which he had exercised in coming to Harmonie and which he would not hesitate to exercise again, when need arose, to take him from it - alone was his. And in the present, with Andrina's acquiescence, he would take his pleasure.³

(Andrina's) gentle abandonment had not been the 'easy come, easy go' of the prostitute. It had come from some depths which he had never fathomed. But just because he had never fathomed those depths he felt himself morally free to ignore them.⁴

Nind entitles himself to "complete freedom of action", which proves to be tantamount to amorality. Smith explicitly disapproves of him--he is "stupid and gay"⁵ and "idle"⁶. Nind chooses to stay in the outside room at Mevrouw's "which was never locked"⁷ where "he felt himself free to develop other interests than those of a pupil-farmer under Mijnheer's guidance".⁸ This symbolises the freedom that is his main principle: "Was it not to prove his complete freedom of action that he had left his strait-laced Princetown cousins and come to the Aangenaam valley?".⁹ The unlocked door represents this careless freedom.

¹ Smith, p. 18.

² Smith, p. 133.

³ Smith, p. 117.

⁴ Smith, p. 139.

⁵ Smith, p. 18.

⁶ Smith, p. 140.

⁷ Smith, p. 116.

⁸ Smith, p. 49.

⁹ Smith, p. 42.

Nind's amorality contrasts sharply with the religious values and codes of the Aangenaam valley community:

Of the slow-moving thoughts of the Dutch, and of all that made the coming Sacrament so great a social and religious event in the lives of the Aangenaam valley people, the young Englishman, with no feeling for, and no interest in, the history of any race but his own, understood but little . . . And in the Aangenaam valley, as in every other South African community, the Dutch retained their own direct Biblical interpretation of life.¹

Smith disliked the condescending attitude adopted by the English towards the Dutch and clearly Nind is an embodiment of all that she thought was contemptible in the English.² That Nind is amoral and set apart by his pagan, selfish nature from the mores of the community, and, like the wounded beast who symbolises Satan in Revelation, is partially invalidated, emphasises the diabolical side Smith gives to his character. The subtlety of his seductiveness, and his unscrupulous exploitation of the young innocent Andrina lend to his character an insidiousness that is remarkably understated, although his portrait lacks, admittedly, the sinister overtones of the devil-figure in Tess. Smith allies his paganism to his selfishness, again indicating her Christian bias:

All that was most selfish and possessive in him was excited by her beauty and gentleness and by the strange, unquestioning abandonment of her shy young body to his caresses . . . Her beauty, her grace, her gentleness were gifts direct from the gods. And to the gods would he give thanks for them.³

Andrina is a pagan gift which he can use as he pleases. He does not consider her spiritual welfare. He is not responsible for the consequences of his actions. Indeed her vulnerability and innocence

¹ Smith, p. 27.

² Geoffrey Haresnape writes, "Pauline Smith's truthfulness . . . enabled her to see the dignity and spiritual worth of the country Afrikaners at a time when it was fashion amongst many English-speaking South Africans to think of them as backward and stupid", Pauline Smith, p. 140.

³ Smith, p. 109.

are more of an enticement to an unprincipled sexual possessiveness than to a protective interest and concern. It is the beadle who realises that the Englishman constitutes a "moral danger" and that Andrina is courting "disaster".¹

The other main characters in the novel, (excluding, that is, the comic sub-plot involving Tan' Linda and Jan Beyers), are all deeply religious, for good or for ill: Andrina, Jacoba, Johanna, the beadle, Mijnheer and Mevrouw van der Merwe and Oom Hans. The two main characters, the beadle and Andrina, grow towards redemption in Christ. The climax of their relation is their reconciliation through Christ. This redemption comes through suffering. This suffering comes about through sin. What, then, does Smith see as "sin" in their lives?

The beadle understands only sin and does not know forgiveness:

In Andrina's eyes was that same half-spiritual, half-sensuous joy which had once shone in Klaartje's . . . And in his tortured heart there was for a moment nothing but pity. But pity had so long been a stranger to his heart that she could find no lodgment there.²

Andrina understands only forgiveness and does not know sin:

In her shyness, her gentleness, as in her beauty, the beadle saw nothing but danger for Klaartje's child. And in the weeks before the Sacrament, as he listened to her low answers in Mevrouw van der Merwe's Bible class, it seemed to him also that Andrina had no saving sense of sin.³

The faith of each is seen as lacking a fundamental quality. This leads, in the beadle's case, to despair, and, in Andrina's, to near-tragedy.

Vlokman from the start is an unhappy man:

¹ Smith, p. 58.

² Smith, p. 52.

³ Smith, p. 10.

The beadle - one of Mijnheer van der Merwe's bijwoners - was fifty-six years old and unmarried. He was a short, strong-willed, friendless man with small brown eyes and a small, reddish beard, and always in the evenings when his work was done he would sit, silent and alone, smoking his pipe on a low plank bench in front of the house . . . But into all that he did there came a strange bitterness of spirit which drove men from him, and in the long Aangenaam valley there was no man who called him friend, no child who called him Oom.¹

The characterisation shares the qualities of the narrative prose as a whole, with an emphasis of fullness and exactitude of detail. This has lead critics like Haresnape, Eglinton, Wilhelm and Baraitser to see Smith as basically a realist writer, although Dora Taylor and Christie, Hutchings and MacLennan see her work more in the category of pastoral romance, despite elements of realism in her style.² Everything from the beadle's socio-economic status--a "bijwoner"--to details of his person and life--size, age, marital status, appearance, habits, temperament and disposition--is encapsulated in this compact description. Further, there is the correlation between appearance and character,³ with a suggestion of determination and meanness in the small brown eyes, for example, and of the narrow-minded fierceness of his character in the small reddish beard. The "strange bitterness of spirit" that comes "into all that he (does)" is presented as an epitomal feature of his character. Here Vlokman seems almost like a "type"--representing a single quality or trait, namely bitter self-righteousness (as it becomes clear). Baraitser in her unpublished M.A. thesis "Arnold Bennett and Pauline Smith: A Study of Affinities" argues that Smith was influenced

¹ Smith, p. 8.

² cf. Geoffrey Haresnape, Pauline Smith (pp. 139-40); Eglinton, C., "'Quaintness' in Pauline Smith: Observations on her Style and Dialogue", English Studies in Africa 3(1)1960, (p. 53); Wilhelm, C., "The Style of Poverty: the Language of Pauline Smith's Little Karoo", English Studies in Africa 20(2)1977, (p. 75); Marion Baraitser, "Arnold Bennett and Pauline Smith: A Study in Affinities", M.A. Thesis, UNISA, 1976; Taylor, D., "Karoo Frustration - A Study of Pauline Smith", (p. 14); Christie, Hutchings and MacLennan, (pp. 55-6).

³ Geoffrey Haresnape has pointed this out, "A Study of the Works of Pauline Smith", p. 251.

by the realist concept of a "type" character.¹

Smith has an interesting view on spiritual repression that is analogous to Freud's notion of sexual repression. Freud believed that civilisation had forced man to repress, through the workings of his conscience or ego, the natural desires, predominantly sexual, of his libido. Freud thought that this repression was likely to cause neurotic and even hysterical behaviour. Smith in The Beadle is not entirely free from either the Freudian emphasis on sexuality as the dominant factor in human relations--the two main characters, Vlokman and Andrina, have both had illicit affairs, and Klaartje's tragedy is nearly repeated when Andrina's illegitimate pregnancy is discovered--or from this notion of psychic repression. This results in logical inconsistency when Smith attempts simultaneously to embody her Christian message (see p.86).

Her point of view in The Beadle is that an over-zealous sense of righteousness, which suppresses forgiveness and mercy, leads to unhappiness, obsessiveness and general spiritual perversity:

And in his tortured heart there was for a moment nothing but pity (for Andrina). But pity had so long been a stranger to his heart that she could find no lodgment there. Fear and suspicion swept her aside and it was in a voice harsh with anger that he asked:

"And what does he say to you then, the Englishman?"

"Aalst Vlokman," cried Andrina in alarm, "are you ill?"²

The beadle's "pity" is analogous to natural impulses in Freud's model (although clearly of a different order), while fear and suspicion, functioning like the ego, sweep the beadle's instinctive response aside. He is dominated by lower emotions and is unable to bring his spiritual intuition of "pity" to fruition. His behaviour becomes distinctly monomaniacal:

¹ Baraitser writes that Bennett was strongly influenced by the Russian and French realist writers--Turgenev, Chekov, Dostoevsky, Balzac and Flaubert--in the period in which he "tutored" Smith (after 1909). Chekov's idea of character as concerned with "what is most typical" influenced him (see Baraitser, Summary of her thesis). Smith, too, used "types" (p. 90).

² Smith, p. 52.

The Englishman was not nearly ill enough to please the beadle, whose fears and suspicions, now that Andrina remained day and night at the homestead, were driving him to a sort of madness.¹

This obsessiveness is equivalent to the neurotic behaviour in the Freudian picture. The Freudian theme of repression, transformed onto this spiritual plane, is symbolised by the locks at Mevrouw's home, which are referred to several times in conjunction with Andrina:

In the morning, while Classina October lighted the fire and boiled the kettle, Andrina, to whom the keys had been entrusted by Mevrouw, unlocked the pantry door, unlocked the coffee-canister and "gave out" the coffee for the coffee-urn . . .²

Though various keys had to be used before Andrina could make the Englishman a cup of coffee, no key was needed for the outside room, which was never locked.³

Andrina was thus to be in sole charge of the house. The keys of the larder and the post-office, said Mevrouw, smiling, were now hers.⁴

(Andrina) went into the larder to get the little red cakes which the Englishman loved. They were kept in a deep, brown canister which she had to unlock.⁵

Andrina carried a small, square, gaily painted tin canister, called a "trommeltje", with padlock and key attached. In the trommeltje, in which the rusks were to be put, were little red cinnamon cakes for the miller's children.⁶

Andrina is the key-bearer at Mevrouw's. As something of a rebel in her Calvinist community in her innocence, she is symbolically associated with the opening of locks. It has been noted that Nind's outside room in the luxuriant garden is unlocked, suggesting a moral carelessness. Clearly the keys, if not phallic symbols, stand for some sort of sexual freedom. The unlocking action represents entry into a forbidden world of freedom and disobedience. Here the Freudian analogy is apt. The locks suggest the codes that prohibit such sexual freedom.

¹ Smith, p. 49.

² Smith, p. 115.

³ Smith, p. 116.

⁴ Smith, p. 120.

⁵ Smith, p. 124.

⁶ Smith, p. 36.

If Andrina is symbolically free, the beadle is severely "repressed", locked in a spiritual struggle that leads to despair. Tillich saw that despair could batter the capacity of being to live creatively, once meaning in life had been lost.¹ He thought the anxiety of guilt could deepen man's despair.² The beadle, despite his position as a leader in the church, is deeply unhappy, his life clouded by guilt and bitterness. Ironically, he lacks the most essential Christian qualities; there is thus a contradiction between his worldly and spiritual positions that proves intolerable.

The beadle starts to lose his grasp of reality, obsessed with his fear that history will repeat itself, that Andrina is a reincarnation of Klaartje.³ He cannot see her as an individual in her own right. The boundary lines of reality lose their exactness, the past all but obliterates the present. He lives in an "evil dream" ("Within the church, his mind held by the thought that the Lord had refused his sacrifice, Aalst Vlokman went about his duties like a man groping his way through an evil dream"⁴), he is like a man in "a trance" ("No longer now did he waste his time in his lands by gazing out across the world at nothing. He wasted it by creeping up from his lands to gaze like a man in a trance at the dry brown earth which hid Jacoba from his sight."⁵), he is like "a drunken man" ("Out in the winter sunshine the beadle, like a drunken man, moved slowly forward, halted and moved forward again, and found himself at last back in the church land."⁶).

The news of Jan Beyers's engagement to Betje Ferreira is the last straw. The beadle, in his obsession to "save" Andrina, magnifies this out of proportion; he is now at his lowest ebb:

¹ Paul Tillich, The Courage To Be 7th ed. (1952; London: Collins, 1971).

² Tillich, p.58.

³ "Andrina looked up at him and in the movement of her head, as in her eyes, her hair, the soft faint flush which tinted her cheeks, the beadle saw again the gay and beautiful Klaartje who, dying for a sinner in Platkops dorp, had herself died in sin." (p. 52).

⁴ Smith, p. 92.

⁵ Smith, p. 176.

⁶ Smith, p. 179.

They were mad, all of them - Johanna in her strength of righteousness: Jacoba in her weakness: Mevrouw in the calm serenity which suspected no evil in those around her. And he too, perhaps, was mad. Yes, he too was mad . . . mad to stay on here in the Aangenaam valley where God had refused his sacrifice and where life was now become, under the lash of Johanna's tongue, a daily torture of remorse and anxiety.¹

The beadle is alienated from all and everyone around him. His separation from reality is almost complete--everything is madness, nothing makes sense. Even God has abandoned him. Yet like Waldo, he finds consolation in the eleventh hour of his despair by contemplating the beauty of his surroundings.

He could not leave the valley. The square white church, the lands, the little mud-walled house, the mountains towering up to the clear blue sky, the very sounds, so sharp and so familiar, of the life around him, the very smell of the earth as he dug into it with his spade - these held him fast.²

The beadle's despair is only transcended in Part IV of the novel. His redemption is brought about through confession and repudiation of his self-righteous judgmentalism. Jacoba's death, for which he feels responsible, as it occurred after his cruel reproach, has acted as a catalyst:

If after Jacoba's death it was Aalst Vlokman whom Johanna saw for ever jeering at her in his lands, it was Jacoba, her face drawn with pain, shrinking from him like a child he had struck with a whip, who haunted the beadle. As great as had been his exultation in that moment of cruelty was now his regret and remorse. It was he who, in his own eyes, had killed Jacoba.³

He becomes "like a man in a trance". Jan Beyers's taunts jerk him out of this profound "apathy"⁴ and recharge him with his old sense of mission. He hears that Andrina is looking for her "father", Herman

¹ Smith, p. 122.

² Smith, p. 124.

³ Smith, p. 176.

⁴ Smith, p. 178.

du Toit, in the Losberg district. This threatens his role as Andrina's protector; his life's goal has been to watch over her.

That the beadle's confession takes place at Thanksgiving is significant--his "offering" is his repentance:

"Mijnheer! If they would judge Andrina let them first judge me! If evil be spoken of her let it first be spoken of me. What is Andrina's sin to mine? It is not for Andrina's shame that Jacoba lies now in her grave. It is for mine . . . Klaartje died (too) for my sin when our child was born . . ." ¹

Aptly, the pastor's sermon has to do with the connection between confession of sins and forgiveness.

This is the beadle's turning-point. He is now free of guilt and self-righteousness: "For some time, as if with the burden which had been lifted from his heart a burden had also been lifted from his body, the beadle's pace was a rapid one." ² Symbolically, the end of winter is in sight.

The Christian ethic is to lose the self in order to find the true self (that is, to become selfless). The beadle risks his worldly position to attain spiritual freedom: "In confessing his sin before the church door he had cut himself off for ever from the lands which he had worked for Mijnheer as bijwoner . . .". Yet he remains inspired by his mission of love: "He saw himself now only as an outcast, and all his thought, all his care, was for the child of his sin who was now also an outcast". The degree to which he has repressed his spiritual life is now clear: "All that care that for fourteen years he had wished to shower upon her should now be hers." ³

The beadle is now a confessed believer in Jesus Christ as the "Redeemer":

¹ Smith, p. 181.

² Smith, p. 19.

³ Smith, p. 194.

And with the strength of his still vigorous body he would labour for her and for her child in whichever part of the country they could find a home. God, who had refused all his sacrifices with his sin unconfessed would surely now, for the sake of His Son, the Redeemer of the world, take pity on him and grant him this.¹

It was his "unconfessed" sin that had come between the beadle and God. It was self-righteousness and unrepentant pride that had blocked his confession, and which were therefore the cause of his state of unredeemed sin. As Geoffrey Haresnape explains, "As [Pauline Smith] sees it, self-righteousness leads a man to set too high a standard of perfection for himself and others. He judges them excessively, and this leads him to be dissatisfied with God."²

The beadle's complex of evil repression is now lifted through confession and forgiveness and the old embittered emotions are now dissipated:

To the Englishman he gave but little thought. Though he was the father of Andrina's child the Englishman had, in fact, ceased to exist for Aalst Vlokman. His feelings there, once so acute, and so near to the madness of jealousy and fear, had changed, he could not say how, to indifference. The young man had returned to his own country and married there. And in that far distance he prayed that God might keep him.³

Christ admonished His followers to love even their enemies. The beadle forgives Nind, though the latter has wronged his daughter.

This turn of events is symbolised when Andrina's Sacrament dress, in the past an instrument of Johanna's righteous revenge on the beadle, and the cause of bitterness and humiliation, leads the latter to his daughter.⁴

¹ Smith, p. 194.

² Haresnape, Pauline Smith, pp. 72-3.

³ Smith, p. 194.

⁴ Haresnape is convincing on the symbolic importance of the Sacrament dress. Its flowers, attractive to Jacoba, represent Andrina's "young womanhood" while the black dots, appealing to Johanna, suggest "sin" and the austerity of the latter's life in comparison with the more natural attitude of Andrina. Haresnape points out that the beadle sees the dress first as evil, then as good, depending upon his own spiritual condition; see "A Study of the Works of Pauline Smith", p. 321.

Johanna suffers from the same evil repressive complex:

Forgiveness for Johanna was a painful spiritual exercise in which she seldom indulged . . . Johanna seldom forgave an injury to herself and never forgave one to Jacoba. For Jacoba she had all the contempt of a strong nature for a weak one. But she had also, though she never gave it any recognisable form of expression, a love that was as deep as it was protective.¹

Johanna's love, "as deep as it was protective", like the beadle's pity, is suppressed by her unforgiving righteousness and "contempt": "All her life [Andrina] had been conscious of, and unconsciously oppressed by, Johanna's righteousness". The repressive quality of righteousness untempered by mercy prevents the character from self-realisation. Despair, it has been noted, affects the despairer's self-relation (Kierkegaard), making life a matter of deadlocked hopelessness. Both Johanna and the beadle are spiritually trapped by self-righteousness.

Smith clearly sees this as a destructive sin: "Righteousness with Johanna had proved a terrible weapon for evil".²

Johanna's cruelty is emulated by the beadle soon afterwards. He rebuffs Jacoba after handing her Andrina's letter. Later he blames himself for hastening her death in the orchard. This death later proves to be something of a Christ-like sacrifice, since it leads to the redemption of both her persecutors, whom she forgives with her dying breath (as Christ forgave His).

Johanna's redemption is implied rather than stated. At first she remains untouched by her sister's death, and by the news of Andrina's sin: "God Himself had dealt her this double blow, and proudly, in that sense of personal righteousness which was now her only support in life, she bore it".³

¹ Smith, p. 64.

² Smith, p. 123. See also the scene in which Johanna derives malicious delight from the beadle's suffering when she tells the latter that Andrina has run away, p. 160.

³ Smith, p. 173.

Yet deep in her repressed soul, she is grieved:

Through that wall of pride and righteousness behind which she guarded so jealously her shamed and stricken soul Mevrouw was powerless to reach her. She must leave Johanna to God and to time. And to God and to time, serene in the conviction of their power to heal the wounds of pride and sorrow alike, she left her.¹

Does Mevrouw's trust in the power of God and time prove justified? At first Jacoba's dying word "forgive" falls on deaf ears: "She would give no ear, in her thoughts, to Jacoba's last broken cry as she lay in her arms".² The last picture of Johanna is of her breaking down by her bedside.³ This giving way to her natural emotions shows some release from repressive righteousness and pride. This comes from Johanna who "never cried".⁴ There is a hint that Mevrouw's faith in the healing power of God will be justified:

. . . that Johanna, robbed of every support for her pride, might come in time, slowly and painfully, to yield that forgiveness for which Jacoba had pleaded so long in vain - [this was a possibility] which did not then exist for the beadle though the future might hold [it].⁵

Andrina's spiritual development is opposite to that of Vlokman and Johanna. Her position is one, not of pride, but of innocence. She has, in the words of the beadle, "no saving sense of sin".⁶ Her spiritual immaturity leads her into her perilous affair with Nind. The names Andrina and Nind are assonantal, thus suggesting their alliance.

Another aspect of this immaturity in her spiritual make-up is her difficulty of conceiving of the divinity of Christ, a problem (for Smith sees it as such in The Beadle) shared by the beadle who had been more spiritually oriented to worship of the Old Testament Jehovah, a "jealous God, visiting the sins of the fathers upon their defenceless children",⁷ before his second conversion, as it were, to

¹ Smith, p. 173.

² Smith, p. 175.

³ Smith, p. 179.

⁴ Smith, p. 64.

⁵ Smith, p. 194.

⁶ Smith, p. 31.

⁷ Smith, p. 31.

the Christian faith:

Of Christ Andrina had never been able to form any definite picture or any definite opinion. His divinity meant nothing to her . . . And the humanity of Christ had not yet been revealed to her by suffering. The young girl was, in fact, joining the church through no religious "experience" . . . and with no religious convictions whatever.¹

The qualifier "not yet" is illuminating. It implies that this will later occur. This is a subtle syntactical foreshadowing device. (A similar use of this device occurs on p. 101--"Andrina had not yet begun to bore [the Englishman]".)

The lack of definition in her religious convictions leads Andrina to equate romantic and spiritual love, and, later, to understand her sexual experience as a spiritual "glory":

With the strange, disturbing, physical response of her quivering body to these passionate caresses there went an exultant, overwhelming, primitive desire to minister to his needs. And in the thought of service to him there was for her now no absolute cleavage between the joy of her body and the joy of her soul. Together they made for her, in the outpouring of her love, in the humility of her spirit, in the innocence of her mind, a glory that had no shame.²

The logic here is odd. Literature dealing with the effects of Calvinism on human behaviour normally stresses the split that is engendered between body and spirit (as in Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter and Paton's Too Late the Phalarope, for example). To blend the flesh and the spirit so completely in this manner is certainly a denial of the Christian logic Smith invokes in the rest of the novel. Indeed, Smith does not in the novel conceive of Andrina's sexual affair itself as a sin, what is sinful to Andrina is her jealousy of Lettice Featherstone: "Here alone, in her jealousy of this unknown woman whom her dear Arry loved, was she conscious of sin . . . for nothing else did she seek forgiveness or feel that she needed it."³ Her love affair has been a manifestation of "an infinite and courageous tenderness".⁴

¹ Smith, p. 32.

² Smith, p. 128.

³ Smith, pp. 182-3.

⁴ Smith, p. 184.

Andrina sees the giving of her body as an act of selfless service. This is a hopelessly idealistic and unreal conception: D.H. Lawrence, who understood the deep psychic significance and necessity of sexuality, would never have pretended it was a species of moral duty.

Further, Smith, who is not reticent about explicitly denouncing her characters' attitudes and actions if necessary, clearly supports Andrina in this. The presentation of Andrina in this section is highly sentimental. It is hardly credible that a girl brought up on Dutch Reformed theology should see sexual pleasure and spiritual delight as identical. There is a distinct unreality and naïveté about her hopeless gullibility and ridiculous adoration of the shallow, effeminate, indolent Nind. It is as if she is Smith's voyeur in a frilly world of sex and romance the authoress herself evidently never entered. The best example of this is when Andrina obsequiously hands Nind his coffee early one morning, seeing her sleepy-looking darling 'Arry as a "dear" adorable child as he stealthily undoes the buttons of her bodice and reaches for "the cool shelter of her bosom . . .".¹

Smith's romanticisation of the affair represents a lapse in intellectual control and in artistic "austerity", in favour of candy-coated sex and schoolgirlish romance. The episode, as an event in the spiritual development of Andrina, is ineffectual, since it leaves unresolved the true nature of her sin, which is not a petty jealousy, as Smith suggests, but an abandonment both to the selfish exploits of a born cavalier and to her own fanciful day-dreaming.

It is Andrina's dawning awareness of the reality of Christian forgiveness in the latter part of her maturation that enables her to overcome what she sees as her sin--her jealousy of Lettice Featherstone:

Christ as the son of God meant nothing to her, yet suddenly His tenderness meant everything and her own troubled heart answered to it with a tenderness that embraced even the Englishwoman for whose sake her child must for ever be fatherless. The burden of her jealousy was lifted from her. Never again, with that shame and burden gone and with this more precious burden of her love in its place, could she be comfortless.²

¹ Smith, p. 117.

² Smith, p. 184.

The "horror" of her sin has been expiated¹ through the living force of Christ's "tenderness".

It is the Christ-figure, Hans Rademeyer, who rescues Andrina from her predicament. Marion Baraitser perceptively notes that Andrina is cushioned here by the soft comforting wool carried in Rademeyer's wagon. The symbolic association is that she is comforted by Christ the Lamb.² After he discovers her at the back of the wagon, she comes to her second spiritual realisation:

Once again was the care of a Heavenly Father made manifest to her. Once again, in the tenderness of this old man, was the tenderness of Christ made real to her.³

Christ, it is clear, is now a living reality for her.

Finally, she obeys what she conceives^{of} as the voice of Christ, disguised as that of Oom Hans:

And was not Christ this old, old man who sat by the side of her bed? . . . Yes, surely it was . . . Christ grown old, grown old . . . What was he saying now?

Old Hans Rademeyer's voice, so tender and compassionate, broke in through her thoughts at last. "Let him come to you now, my little one. Let him come! Look, dry your eyes and I will call him."

She had dried her eyes and raised herself on her pillow when the beadle opened the door.

"Come in then, Ou-pa," she said. "Come in then and see the little grandson that you have, with his round bald head."⁴

"Yes, Oom Hans was like Christ just as Mevrouw at Harmonie was like God . . ."--Andrina's faith is now complete, except perhaps for her failure (spurred on by Smith) to recognise her true sin as something more crucial than a trivial jealousy. Oom Hans was like Christ . . . Mevrouw was like God--the two vital aspects of her

¹ Smith, p. 184.

² Baraitser, p. 73.

³ Smith, p. 192.

⁴ Smith, p. 203.

Christian belief are now one. Significantly, they are one in Mevrouw's conception of God: "Sin would pass, sorrow would pass, but the compassion which had sent the Redeemer into the world to forgive and to heal - this would never pass".¹

Jacoba experiences the most misery and despair. She does not grow to deeper faith as do the beadle, Andrina and Johanna, but is destroyed by the forces of evil.

Her oppression at the hands of the beadle and Johanna, combined with her sickliness, leads to her physical and emotional collapse. It is significant that her illness is often brought about by emotional stress: "Her pain, which for years had come to her with any sharp emotion or unaccustomed strain, was something which Jacoba herself could no longer ignore".² The connection between the atmosphere of oppression in which she has lived and her illness is clear. Like Lyndall in The Story of an African Farm her collapse and death are psychosomatically caused through growing despair. After Andrina, her only source of love in the home, has left for up-country, her sickness is accentuated:

But as the weeks slipped by into months her loneliness and her physical distress had steadily increased, and now, because for several weeks there had come no news from Andrina whatever . . . hope itself had become an anguish to her.³

The beadle's rebuff of her, and the effect of reading Andrina's forbidding letter precipitate her death by heart failure. She lies in physical and spiritual pain, horrified by the "evil"⁴ prevailing in the home. Her message of forgiveness ("But there was still something she had to say to Johanna . . . What was it? This pain? No, no, not this pain . . . Something else, something else . . . She

¹ Smith, p. 172.

² Smith, p. 162.

³ Smith, p. 162.

⁴ Smith, p. 165.

remembered now . . . Forgive . . ." ¹ underlies the significance of her death as a Christ-like sacrifice.

The plot structure, setting and style, as well as the characterisation in The Beadle, reveal Smith's Christian themes.

The novel is constructed on the basis of two interlocking plots. The main plot involves the relations at the Steenkamp household and centres in the themes of self-righteousness and spiritual pride, on the one hand, embodied by the beadle and Johanna, and love, mercy and forgiveness, on the other, represented by Jacoba, Mevrouw and Andrina. The moral to be drawn from this plot, as has been noted, is that self-righteous pride is a destructive sin. This plot also deals with the theme of conscience--the extent to which one ought to be conscious of sin, something Andrina has to learn, and the extent to which one ought not to be conscious of sin, in order to provide room for forgiveness: a lesson the beadle learns.

The focal point in this plot is the purchase of the Sacrament dress and the consequent spiritual battle for control of and influence over Andrina. This battle brings out all the underlying tensions in the home.

The complicating plot, as it can be called, involves Andrina and Nind, Mevrouw, Tan' Linda, Mevrouw Cornelius, Hans Rademeyer and, of course, the beadle. Its main themes are sin, confession, forgiveness and redemption. The two main characters who are important in both plots are the beadle and Andrina. Their relation is the novel's central thread. The focal event in this second plot is the seduction of Andrina.

Each plot develops towards a climax involving redemption from a fallen state of sin through Christ. The fallen state in the main plot comprises the perverse spiritual relations prevailing in the home at Harmonie. It was seen that Jacoba's death, which sets in motion the redemptive process through the force of her forgiveness, is conceived as a Christ-like sacrifice.

The unredeemed state of sin in the complicating plot is Andrina's spiritual blindness. The chief development in this plot is her growth to maturity. Here Hans Rademeyer is pictured as a Christ-figure, bearing

¹ Smith, p. 169.

Andrina to spiritual redemption in his wagon on the wool of the Lamb.

These two plots have a Christian framework.

The reason that Christie, Hutchings and MacLennan accord The Beadle the status of a masterpiece is that "the story grows organically out of the setting, and the setting is characterised by means of the story".¹ A setting is both the time and the place in which a story takes place. As Geoffrey Haresnape has shown, there is a close correlation between the natural cycle and the spiritual events of the story.² He sees Mevrouw's garden as Edenic with the symbolic River of Life running through it. Further, the degree to which a person is in tune with the natural order indicates his spiritual state.³

Both Andrina's love affair and her "second" conversion (see p. 84 for use of this term) occur in spring, the season symbolising respectively sensual and spiritual fecundity. Nind leaves Andrina sometime towards the end of the summer in which their affair blossoms. The beadle's spiritual crisis occurs in winter, as well as Jacoba's death and funeral, and Andrina's flight from Uitkyk. It is already spring again as the beadle makes his way to the Cortes valley with a new lease of life.

There are also spiritual overtones associated with the physical setting:

The Aangenaam, though the longest, was the poorest of Platkops valleys . . . The farms, with their many acres of desolate veld, their rocky mountain-slopes and their widely scattered lands, green only where water was to be found or where water could be led, lay far apart, and a man might ride for many hours seeing no sign of life between homestead and homestead . . .

Harmonie church stood close to a poplar grove on the left bank of the Aangenaam river, and a little beyond the church, on a slight rise, was the brown, mud-walled house where Aalst Vlokman, the beadle, lived with old Piet Steenkamp's daughters . . .⁴

¹ Christie, Hutchings and MacLennan, p. 58.

² Haresnape, "A Study of the Works of Pauline Smith", p. 313.

³ Haresnape, Pauline Smith, p. 131. He writes that the symbolism of The Beadle "seems to state that when a man accepts and conforms to the seasons he has interior peace. Sin and bitter self-righteousness throw him out of gear with the round of nature."

⁴ Smith, p. 7.

The environment is harsh in its barrenness, poverty and desolation. Yet the square, whitewashed Harmonie church, itself a spiritual haven for its people, the Aangenaam river and the poplar grove, stand as oases and are symbolic of the general spiritual fertility of life in the valley. The mill-stream that leads to the river waters the upper lands of Harmonie, and flows through Mevrouw's garden, within which is Jantje's rock and River of Life. Mevrouw is perhaps the most deeply religious character in the story. The garden is also rather disordered in springtime and is linked symbolically with the "spring" of Andrina's sensuality, her blossoming into womanhood, and with the love affair that takes place in the outside-room.

It has been seen that there are broadly two kinds of character in the novel, corresponding to the contrast in the setting between the hard, barren landscape and the oases like the river, the grove, the church and Mevrouw's garden. There are the "hard", brittle characters like the beadle and Johanna, and the "soft" characters like Andrina, Jacoba, Mevrouw and Oom Hans. The spiritual infertility of excessive self-righteousness is echoed in "the many acres of desolate veld" and the richness of love and mercy is reflected in the oases by Harmonie church. The "hard" characters worship Jehovah, and the "soft" the God of the New Testament. There is constant reference to the two Gods in the novel: "(Stephen van der Merwe's) God was not, as He was for his wife Alida, a God of love drawing His people towards Him like little children. He was Jehovah - the God of justice and righteousness . . .".¹ Here husband and wife worship two different Gods. There is a sense in which this distinction finds an aesthetic embodiment in contrasting settings of the Aangenaam.

The setting of the novel is also conceived in terms of Smith's world-view.

Smith's narrative style, too, reflects the spiritual values prevailing in the novel. Many critics have commented on the Afrikaans "feel" of much of the dialogue in the novel.² References

¹ Smith, p. 29.

² Haresnape, Eglington, Wilhelm and Ravenscroft, for example.

are also made to the biblicality of Smith's writing.¹ Marion Baraitser sees the simplicity and biblicality of the style as conveying something of "the austerity of the life-style of her subjects . . .".² Smith wanted to capture the "biblical . . . and the rural simplicity" of Afrikaans.³ There is also a sense that what Geoffrey Haresnape sees as the "order"⁴ of the community in the Aangenaam Valley is echoed in the exquisite proportions of Smith's opening descriptions of the fecund valley and neat, whitewashed structures of the Harmonie community (particularly the Church) against the huge, surrounding backdrop of the Aangenaam hills, Teniquota mountains and Zwartkops range.

CONCLUSION

A.C. Partridge in 1950 thought South African English literature lacked "milestones". He made no mention of the artistic significance of Pauline Smith's work, particularly The Beadle, in the early colonial period of this literature. When the philosophical and aesthetic coherence of this novel is considered, the immaculate proportions of its construction and the cogency of its conceptions, as many critics since have noted, one cannot but conclude that Partridge's assessment of what he called the "impotence" of the literature of English South Africa was based, at least, on a fundamental oversight. The Beadle is a milestone of which any literature would be proud.

Likewise, when the extent is gauged to which Smith's Christian world-view in the novel is integrated into its characterisation, plot,

¹ Haresnape refers to the use of Biblical rhythms and connotations in the speech of The Beadle, pointing out that this links up with the symbolism and themes of the novel (see "A Study of the Works of Pauline Smith", p. 272). Ravenscroft sees the appropriateness of this biblicality of dialogue in rendering the "immediacy" of her characters (see "Pauline Smith", pp. 62-3). These characters, it should be noted, live a life based on Biblical values.

² Baraitser, p. 107.

³ Baraitser, p. 109.

⁴ Haresnape, "A Study of the Works of Pauline Smith", p. 225.

setting, symbolism, and style one is inclined to see a statement like that made by Christie, Hutchings and Maclellan that the premisses of the novel "are not notably Christian" as untenable.¹

It has also been argued that despair in The Beadle, not a negligible part of its picture of life, is a function of sin, notably the sin of self-righteous pride, which for Smith involves a destructive repressive complex. The central point of the novel, though, is that suffering can be redeemed through spiritual growth.

¹ Christie, Hutchings and Maclellan, p. 66.

CHAPTER FIVE : HOPE AND THE DESPAIR OF FEAR IN
CRY, THE BELOVED COUNTRY

OVERVIEW

Cry, the Beloved Country is perhaps the most famous and popular South African novel of all. It has attracted the kind of interest and popularity in English South African culture, and overseas too, that a Dickens novel generated in Victorian times. It has been a prolific success--Paton writes in his autobiography that the book has kept him alive ever since its publication.¹ The book is now a Penguin Modern Classic, a status that is not merely a measure of its popularity.

It strives, in many ways, to be South Africa's Grapes of Wrath.² In Towards the Mountain, Paton admitted that Steinbeck's novel had influenced the writing of his novel:

In Stockholm I read for the first time John Steinbeck's Grapes of Wrath, and would soon adopt his style of rendering conversations . . . The novel made a deep impression on me and undoubtedly strengthened the urge to write.³

The book, wrote Paton, was "triggered" by the reading of Steinbeck's novel which the former read just before he fell under "the grip of powerful emotion" as he started writing the opening lines of what would become Cry, the Beloved Country while on an educational tour of prisons and reformatories in Europe and America.⁴

¹ Alan Paton, Towards the Mountain (Cape Town: David Philip, 1981), p. 301.

² John Steinbeck's Grapes of Wrath was published in 1939. As a powerful and indignant critique of America's capitalistic society of the 1930's, it evoked widespread shock and interest.

³ Paton, p. 269.

⁴ Paton, p. 268. Paton at the time had been Head of Diepkloof Reformatory in Johannesburg (for delinquent black juveniles) for 13 years.

Grapes of Wrath is one of the most impressive social protest novels of modern times. Evidently its intellectual vigour and moral force inspired Paton to write his own protest novel. His subject would not be the America of the Depression but a desolate South Africa of the 1940's--time of rapid detribalisation and, as in Grapes of Wrath, extensive migrant labour, producing an explosive social situation of escalating crime, strikes, boycotts and the like. The migration described in Cry, the Beloved Country would not be to a mythic Golden West but to the great city Johannesburg, corrupted by evil,¹ drawing black and white South Africa into its flytrap of vice.²

Paton has stated that his novel contained a strong element of protest: "My story, begun in Norway and Sweden, was becoming a cry of protest against the injustices of my own country".³ A social protest novel, as Grapes of Wrath shows, ought to present an exposé of the wrongs prevailing in a society and, by implication, a solution to the problems these injustices give rise to. Steinbeck, for example, saw the ideal for America as a switch to socialist economics and openly advocates state-run businesses in the book.

Criticism of the novel, on the whole, has not assessed the book on its own terms, as an archetypal story of significance as a social protest, which has undoubtedly played a part both in the evolution of the South African novel and in the spread of awareness amongst South Africans of social problems in a way analogous to the effect of, say, Oliver Twist, on its nineteenth-century English audience.

¹ Alan Paton, Cry, the Beloved Country 14th Edition (1948; Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1971), p. 183: "And that led [Mrs Lithebe] on to talk about Johannesburg, and the evils of that great city, and the sinfulness of the people of Sophiatown and Claremont and Alexandra and Pimville."

² Paton, Cry, the Beloved Country: "When people go to Johannesburg, they do not come back", p. 11; "All roads lead to Johannesburg", p. 12; "No second Johannesburg is needed upon the earth", p. 149.

³ Paton, Towards the Mountain, p. 272.

Stephen Gray is way off the mark in Southern African Literature: an Introduction when he tries unsuccessfully to subsume Cry, the Beloved Country under his arbitrary rubric of the liberal-realist tradition in English South African literature dominated as he sees it by the motif of a "monstrous, unformed, inimical and crushing" landscape à la Schreiner in The Story of an African Farm.¹

Ezekiel Mphahlele feels Paton's novel falls flat "under the load of the author's monumental sermon".² The characters in the novel are ready-made types designed to convey a didactic message with the least possible fuss. Lewis Nkosi agrees that Paton's characters are manipulated, and adds that the general tone of the novel is sentimental.³ Stephen Watson correctly outlines the aims of the novel, to expose "the social consequences of the destruction of the tribal system by the whites" and to reveal "some of the tragic consequences" of this social disintegration through "the personal sagas of the Rev. Stephen Kumalo, James Jarvis, and their respective sons", while providing "an example of moral and spiritual growth through suffering", but criticises

¹ Stephen Gray, Southern African Literature: an Introduction (Cape Town: David Philip, 1979), pp. 149-50. Gray's view that Schreiner's image of the South African landscape as a vastly daunting and oppressive wilderness is the central determining motif of this liberal-realist tradition constitutes a hopeless generalisation. It has been argued in Chapter Two (see pp.41-2) that Schreiner, in fact, was not significantly interested in the immediate, material environment of the Karoo, and was concerned rather with contemporary philosophical issues. The Karoo is simply not a vivid or convincing presence in The Story of an African Farm. What daunts the characters in the novel is the question of the meaning of existence. Schreiner, further, is more of an expressionist than a realist writer (as are William Plomer, Doris Lessing and J.M. Coetzee) and so can hardly be considered the fountainhead of the illusory liberal-realist tradition Gray is trying to trace. Nor can Paton be seen as harbouring a Gothic conception of the rolling green hills of the Umzimkulu valley. The opening and closing chapters of the novel are sufficient to refute this idea.

² Ezekiel Mphahlele, The African Image (London: Faber and Faber, 1962), p. 131.

³ Lewis Nkosi, "Sex and Politics in Southern African Literature" in Papers on African Literature, Sheffield University Seminar Series, 1976, ed. Christopher Heywood, p. 2.

the whole tragic form of the novel on the grounds that it completely mystifies the social and political issues raised in the novel.¹ The novel is a "tear-jerker . . . lacking in reality".² C.J.M. Nienaber sees Paton in the novel as too much the commentator, and not the artist.³ Christie, Hutchings and MacLennan, though aware of the novel's contribution to the genre of social realism in South African literature,⁴ argue that it is not always structurally integrated⁵ or "particularise(d)".⁶

Edward Callan takes a more sympathetic stance in Alan Paton, finding Cry, the Beloved Country to be both a challenging moral fable and a successful work of art. Paton, according to Callan, combines the realist strategy of incorporating material from "the actualities of South African life"⁷--the building of Shanty Town, the bus boycott, the discovery of gold at Odendaalsrust--with more expressive techniques like evoking "a climate of fear" as part of the "total situation" of South Africa and "hitting upon a lyric and dramatic framework that . . . incorporate(s) more than the realistic 'slice of life' ordinarily offered by novels of social purpose".⁸

Callan's view that Paton's conception of "the truth" of the South African situation goes beyond a mere cataloguing of social conditions to penetrate "the less tangible but no less real problems

¹ Stephen Watson, "The Liberal Ideology and Some South African Novelists", M.A. Thesis, Cape Town, 1981, p. 187.

² Watson, p. 201.

³ C.J.M. Nienaber, "Literêre Oorskatting van Cry, the Beloved Country" in Standpunte 10(2), 1955, p. 17.

⁴ Christie, Hutchings, MacLennan, Perspectives on South African Fiction, (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1980), p. 101.

⁵ Christie, Hutchings, MacLennan, p. 103.

⁶ Christie, Hutchings, MacLennan, p. 105.

⁷ Edward Callan, Alan Paton (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1968), p. 52.

⁸ Callan, p. 54.

of the sensitive, subconscious springs of racial attitudes that, tinged with 'the bondage of fear', inhibit the inclination to restore"¹ may go some way to answering the objection of critics Christie, Hutchings and MacLennan that the novel sometimes fails to "particularise" its social truths.²

The novel sets out to personify South Africa as a Great Person in a state of distress: the title, Cry, the Beloved Country, indicates Paton's expressive, emotive orientation. What Callan sees as a masterful use of Choral Voices in Chapters 9, 12 and 23 further shows that Paton definitely intended to go beyond the merely "particular" and present a more metaphysical picture of South African society.

Stephen Watson's ideological reservations about the viability of such an approach, that metaphysical love, for example, is no antidote for social problems like crime and detribalisation,³ do not hold water, since they presuppose a rigid value-judgment that any conception of South African society other than a materialist one cannot supply solutions to material problems (which can only be solved through material means). Watson's reasoning here is

¹ Callan, p. 53.

² Christie, Hutchings and MacLennan, p. 105. They write: "The most important demand we can make of a novel's social realism is, after all, that . . . it offers us a recognisable and a minutely particular human truth . . . The best things in Cry, the Beloved Country owe their strength to such particularity, and where it fails, it fails to particularise."

³ Watson, p. 194. He states, ". . . the problem has not been caused by a lack of love in South Africa and therefore to prescribe an antidote of love for it is simply naive and completely beside the point."

fallacious.¹ If the novel is fully understood on its own terms, then, some, not all, of the criticisms raised here become redundant and a view of it as a fine, coherent work of literature with a major place in the tradition of English South African novels, is made possible.

¹This reasoning, as it is represented above, commits at least three fallacies. Firstly, it is an example of begging the question. Watson argues that the solution to South Africa's problems as they are presented in the novel must be material because of the material nature of these problems. Yet he does not attempt to show that the problems are indeed material as he suggests, and instead assumes this to be the case. There is no logical development between the premise of the argument--that the problems are material--to the conclusion--that the solution ought to be material. The reasoning is thus circular. Watson does not fully define the nature of these problems and commits the fallacy of division, whereby statements about the problems taken as a whole are assumed to be necessarily true of the problems in all their individual components. To say that crime and detribalisation in Cry, the Beloved Country, for example, are purely social, material phenomena, is to commit this fallacy. Crime is also, in its psychological aspect, an individual moral deviation, as well as an index of instability in prevailing social circumstances. Detribalisation is shown by Paton to affect both the black community as a whole and separate black communities like Ndotsheni and individual families like the Kumalos. The restoration of Ndotsheni is real enough even if it is not a universal restoration throughout South Africa. The retrieving of Absalom's girl from a sinful life in Johannesburg is a valid individual solution but not a social solution. Crime is seen by Paton in Cry, the Beloved Country to be both a moral and psychological as well as a social phenomenon. This is surely realistic enough, after all, since a society is as made up of the individuals in it as it is of its institutions. Lastly, Watson commits the fallacy of false causes, seeing the causes of crime, for example, as purely social (a product of detribalisation), when the causes of Absalom's crimes are circumstantial--he did the wrong things at the wrong time--as well as socially conditioned. To see something as a cause of a given effect simply because the former occurs before the latter in time is fallacious. The situation that gives rise to Absalom's crime is caused by the phenomenon of detribalisation but what causes the crime itself is something both more complex and more individual than this. [These fallacies are discussed in Irving Copi's Introduction to Logic, 4th Edition (1953; New York: Macmillan, 1972).]

HOPE AND THE DESPAIR OF FEAR IN CRY, THE BELOVED COUNTRY¹

The personification of South Africa in the title, a technique used regularly in the novel, points to Paton's overall perspective on society: he stresses the collective Mind of the land, its fears, guilts and suffering:

Have no doubt it is fear in the land. For what can men do when so many have grown lawless? Who can enjoy the lovely land, who can enjoy the seventy years, and the sun that pours down on the earth, when there is fear in the heart?²

"Fear in the land" is equated with "fear in the heart", the individual is seen as a microcosm of the Great Being, South Africa. Paton personifies the land in order to express his sense of a real bond shared with it. He reveals deep compassion for the suffering of his "beloved country". In an essay written in the year after the publication of Cry, the Beloved Country, "Why I write", Paton indicated that he tried in his novel to capture the quality of this national suffering:

¹ Paton in Towards the Mountain states that this phrase "came from the book itself" (p. 293), although he quotes the wrong passage to illustrate this, since the sentence appears in an earlier section than the passage Paton cites (which appears on p. 72). The phrase originally occurs as follows:

Cry for the broken tribe, for the law and the custom that is gone. Aye, and cry aloud for the man who is dead, for the woman and children bereaved. Cry, the beloved country, these things are not yet at an end. (p. 66)

The news of the murder of Arthur Jarvis has just been read out at the Mission House after Kumalo has experienced several disappointments in Johannesburg (the theft of his money on his arrival in the city, the discovery that his sister Gertrude has become a liquor seller and prostitute, the fruitless search for his son, the visit to the girl living in degrading circumstances in Pimville) and this is the last straw. The title of the book, then, is linked to the theme of moral destitution prevailing in South Africa at the time of detribalisation.

² Paton, Cry, the Beloved Country, p. 67.

When one surveys this history, and the country in which this history was made, one is filled with a compassion for all the races that have been caught up and involved in this situation that is apparently without solutions. One feels compassion for those who struggle to hold what they have, and those that struggle to get more than they have . . . and all this compassion is caught up and made one in . . . compassion for something that is greater than them all, namely the vast and beautiful country that suffers it all . . . Yet it is not easy to capture the deep and solemn undertones of all this suffering and put them into words.¹

Paton's conception of his country is mystical--he sees it as "greater" than "all" its peoples, as a Being who "suffers it all"--as well as unique in English South African literature.² Watson's failure to note the importance of this conception in the whole scheme of the novel may account in part for the one-sidedness of his objections. The social conditions themselves are not the whole truth of the matter as Paton sees it. As Callan has pointed out, Paton tries to evoke an "atmosphere or mood, which, while unmeasurable, may nevertheless supply part of the truth of a total situation".³ This atmosphere is the "climate of fear" pervading the book.⁴

Fear, then, is the predominant emotion of this Great Person: "It is fear that rules this land", asserts Msimangu.⁵ In a talk "The Nature and Ground of Christian Hope Today" given in 1974, Paton described South Africa as "fear-corrupted".⁶ In his "A Speech in America", 1960, he called the country "a land of fear".⁷ The effect of widespread fear in a society is that it destroys "the rational life", he argued in an article "The Challenge of Fear" written in 1967,

¹ Alan Paton, Knocking on the Door (Cape Town: David Philip, 1975), p. 78.

² I cannot think of any other English South African novel that adopts this mystical personification technique.

³ Callan, p. 53.

⁴ Callan, p. 54.

⁵ Paton, Cry, the Beloved Country, p. 25.

⁶ Paton, Knocking on the Door, p. 291.

⁷ Paton, p. 155.

making it difficult to bring about a society based on a rational sense of justice.¹

The theme of fear recurs throughout Cry, the Beloved Country:

Cry, the beloved country, these things are not yet at an end. The sun pours down on the earth, on the lovely land that man cannot enjoy. He knows only the fear of his heart.²

Who knows how we shall fashion such a land? For we fear not only the loss of our possessions, but the loss of our superiority and the loss of our whiteness . . . Is it not better to hold what we have, and to pay the price of it with fear?³

We shall be careful, and knock this off our lives, and knock that off our lives, and hedge ourselves about with safety and precaution. And our lives will shrink, but they shall be the lives of superior beings; and we shall live with fear, but at least it will not be a fear of the unknown.⁴

Cry, the beloved country, for the unborn child that is the inheritor of our fear. Let him not love the earth too deeply . . . For fear will rob him of all if he gives too much.⁵

It is only as one grows up that one learns that there are other things here than sun and gold and oranges. It is only then that one learns of the hates and fears of our country.⁶

Yes, God save Africa, the beloved country. God save us from the deep depths of our sins. God save us from the fear that is afraid of justice.⁷

For it is the dawn that has come, as it has come for a thousand centuries, never failing. But when that dawn will come, of our emancipation, from the fear of bondage and the bondage of fear, why, that is a secret.⁸

¹ Alan Paton, "The Challenge of Fear", in Saturday Review, 9 September, 1967, p. 20.

² Paton, Cry, the Beloved Country, p. 67.

³ Paton, p. 71.

⁴ Paton, p. 71.

⁵ Paton, p. 72.

⁶ Paton, p. 150.

⁷ Paton, p. 191.

⁸ Paton, p. 236.

A universal fear seems to be part of the land itself. This fear is also reflected in the lives of the individual characters. Kumalo's journey is one of fear:

"At first it was a search. I was anxious at first, but as the search went on, step by step, so did the anxiety turn to fear, and this fear grew deeper step by step. It was in Alexandria that I first grew afraid, but it was here in your House, when we heard of the murder, that my fear grew into something too great to be borne."¹

Father Vincent explains to Kumalo that fear is "a terrible journey".² Kumalo is set up as a prototypical man of faith going on his journey of the soul through fear. He is also South Africa in microcosm going on its journey of "fear". His search, then, has a symbolic importance.

The novel, in fact, is a story with a mythos as well as its "slice" of South African life, although there is no sense in which Cry, the Beloved Country is a romance, in Northrop Frye's phrase, where a hero "whose actions are marvellous" moves in a world "in which the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended".³ Christie, Hutchings and MacLennan are at least partially right in their classification of the novel as a work of social realism but this ought to have been conceived in a much more guarded fashion, since the full effect of the novel can only be felt when the law of verisimilitude is invoked when assessing the plausibility of the story and the literal journeys of both Kumalo and Jarvis, but suspended when determining the symbolic effects of the novel.

¹ Paton, p. 94.

² Paton, p. 96.

³ Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 33. Frye sees the romance as presenting an idealized world, not entirely mythic (the hero is still a human being, even if possessed of supernatural powers) but in no way mimetic. A mythic fiction is about a divine being, according to Frye.

Frye classifies fictional modes according to the "power of action" afforded the hero. Kumalo is old, humble, simple but capable of very strong feeling. If he is not a romantic hero, nor is he an ironic one "inferior in power or intelligence to ourselves, so that we have a sense of looking down on a scene of bondage, frustration, or absurdity".¹ His status is that of "one of us" in the "low mimetic mode"² yet his basic moral innocence and courageous perseverance stamp him with something of the archetypal hero of romance. In the mythos of the story, its archetypal plot,³ Kumalo undergoes a ritual purification of his faith through exposure to harsh circumstances which test that faith to breaking-point. Into the spiritual resolution on the top of the Emoyeni mountain overlooking the Umzimkulu valley, one reads a universal moral about Faith overcoming Fear.

If Cry, the Beloved Country is no romance, it nevertheless draws on the romantic myth of the quest for a lost golden age:

¹ Frye, p. 34.

² "If superior neither to other men nor to his environment, the hero is one of us: we respond to a sense of common humanity, and demand from the poet the same canons of probability that we find in our own experience. This gives us the hero of the low mimetic mode . . .". Frye, p. 34.

³ "Human action (praxis) is primarily imitated by histories, or verbal structures that describe specific and particular actions. A mythos is a secondary imitation of an action, which means, not that it is at two removes from reality, but that it describes typical actions, being more philosophical than history," Frye, pp. 82-3. Frye, further, writes, "Narrative is studied by the archetypal critic as ritual or imitation of human action as a whole, and not simply as . . . imitation of an action . . . the archetypal analysis of the plot of a novel or play would deal with it in terms of the generic, recurring, or conventional actions which show analogies to rituals . . .", p. 105. Frye later offers a definition of mythos as "a structural organizing principle of literary form", p. 341. In sum, then, he sees mythos as a philosophical reflection of typical, or archetypal, or ritualistic, human action, that provides a literary work with a structure.

There is a lovely road that runs from Ixopo into the hills. These hills are grass-covered and rolling, and they are lovely beyond any singing of it. The road climbs seven miles into them, to Carisbrooke; and from there, if there is no mist, you look down on one of the fairest valleys of Africa . . . The grass is rich and matted, you cannot see the soil. It holds the rain and the mist, and they seep into the ground, feeding the streams in every kloof. It is well-tended, and not too many cattle feed upon it; not too many fires burn it, laying bare the soil. Stand unshod upon it, for the ground is holy, being even as it came from the Creator. Keep it, guard it, care for it, for it keeps men, guards men, cares for men. Destroy it and man is destroyed.¹

In the following chapter the Reverend Stephen Kumalo receives a letter beckoning him to Johannesburg. Already, though, something has gone wrong in the scheme of things: "But the rich green hills break down. They fall to the valley below, and falling, change their nature".² In a sense, then, his journey is a quest to recover the lost "loveliness" of a tribal paradise, to restore the rich green hills and the soil of Ndotsheni to their original holiness: "Stand unshod upon it, for the ground is holy, being even as it came from the Creator". The mythos of Cry, the Beloved Country parallels the Biblical mythic scheme moving from the Fall to the Apocalypse with the concomitant intermediary motif of Salvation. The opening lines of Chapter One describe a South African Eden and its Fall, then Paton introduces a particular social situation in which this Fall is manifested. Then Kumalo's quest to find Salvation for his family and his community begins, with Paton keeping the complementary visions of Paradise and Apocalypse in view: where is South Africa's New Jerusalem? is his implicit question throughout Cry, the Beloved Country. This element of the archetypal Christian quest, though, is muted, so as not to subvert too noticeably the law of verisimilitude, which is that all things must be plausible. Paton casts his hero as a humble old man, dwarfed and overwhelmed by the bewildering urban conglomerate Johannesburg in order to balance realism and mythos.

¹ Paton, p. 7.

² Paton, p. 7.

Paton, then, needs to invest this archetypal structure or mythos with a vibrant sense of reality or his implicit reliance on romantic mythologising would shatter his picture of contemporary South African society, the presentation of which is one of his main aims as Stephen Watson has pointed out.¹ He does this by casting Kumalo in a deceptively "low mimetic" role, by presenting the search in what may be called the perspective of psychological realism and by rooting it in the concrete social circumstances (Kumalo meets up with the bus boycott, the crime wave and the overcrowding, unemployment and destitution associated with detribalisation, in his search for Absalom). Paton's conception of the dimension of a collective Mind as part of the truth of the situation is the most important example of his psychological realism in the novel. (That Paton saw fear as one of the great obstacles to the establishment of a liberal common society in South Africa, in his article "Some Thoughts on the Common Society", in 1971,² shows how he understands society in terms of both politics and corporate psychology--the ideal of a common society can only be brought about in a climate of trust and hope. This is why he constantly personifies South Africa as a Great Person.)

The predominant collective emotion of fear is linked to the symbolic fear in Kumalo's mythic journey of the soul. Fear is also woven into the thread of the story--Kumalo experiences constant fear in Johannesburg, Absalom pulls the trigger in fear, Msimangu has a great fear that one day when the whites turn to loving blacks will be turned to hating.

Despite the trouble Paton takes to underplay the archetypal by stressing the commonplace, the basic structure of the novel remains that of the Christian mythos of a symbolic cycle of paradise, Fall and restoration. The central motif is that of the spiritual journey, both Kumalo's and South Africa's. Kumalo, like Christian in The Pilgrim's Progress, encounters demons that are really within himself, like fear, sin and despair. The myth of a quest that is both literal and symbolic (of a universal process of self-discovery) also informs

¹ See p.9.

² Alan Paton, "Some Thoughts on the Common Society", in Directions of Change in South African Politics (Christian Institute of Southern Africa, 1971), p. 44.

novels like Conrad's Heart of Darkness, Melville's Moby Dick and Twain's Huckleberry Finn.

Paton endows Kumalo's personal journey with an emotional significance and a spiritual coherence that keeps this archetype from lapsing into a dull stereotype. The journey is not simply a linear sequence of events, but has a rhythm of its own, the rhythm of an inner struggle between good and evil, between despair and hope, the rhythm of experience that is never definitively understood or finally complete, but which develops in a way that sometimes in retrospect yields its design:

He turned aside from such fruitless remembering, and set himself to the order of his vigil. He confessed his sins, remembering them as well as he could . . . There were some he remembered easily, the lie in the train, the lie to his brother . . . his loss of faith in Johannesburg, and his desire to hurt the girl . . .

Then he turned to thanksgiving, and remembered, with profound awareness, that he had great cause for thanksgiving . . . There was above all the beloved Msimangu and his generous gift. There was the young man from the reformatory saying with angry brows, I am sorry, umfundisi, that I spoke such angry words. There was Mrs Lithebe . . . And Father Vincent . . . And the lawyer that took the case for God . . . Then there was the return to Ndotsheni, with his wife and his friend to meet him. And the woman who threw her apron over her head. And the women waiting at the church. And the great joy of the return, so that the pain was forgotten.¹

The pattern of the journey is now clear to the umfundisi on the mountain tops of Umzimkulu. He has vacillated between fear and faith, despair and hope on the one hand, and cruelty and kindness, sin and obedience, on the other. At the base of his experience has been the transformation of suffering into comfort: "Why was it given to one man to have his pain transmuted into gladness? Why was it given to one man to have such an awareness of God?"² This transformational process is seen by Paton to be the work of God through faith:

¹ Paton, Cry, the Beloved Country, pp. 233-4.

² Paton, p. 234.

"And might not another, having no such awareness, live with pain that never ended?" This is the hero's anagnorisis in Frye's model of the quest archetype:

[the quest] has three main stages: the stage of the perilous journey . . . the crucial struggle, usually some kind of battle in which either hero or his foe, or both, must die; and the exaltation of the hero. We may call these three stages respectively, . . . the agon or conflict, the pathos or death-struggle, and the anagnorisis or discovery, the recognition of the hero, who has clearly proved himself to be a hero . . .¹

Paton's use of the quest motif is, as has been seen, a Christian one, and so the melodramatic action of the romance gives way to more sensitive spiritual yearnings, the struggle being between faith and non-faith, not hero and foe. Yet Frye's threefold sequence remains appropriate here.

Kumalo's confession and vigil prayer represent the climax of this journey to the heart of faith, as well as the narrative dénouement. Frye has pointed out the importance of a cyclical structure in the concept of ritual and hence to an archetype of this sort.² Here Kumalo reveals the depth of his simple character, how his days are bound "each to each by natural piety", how his faith binds his character and his experiences into a spiritual wholeness--each action has been placed by Paton within a context of Kumalo's whole spiritual journey. One becomes aware here of the effortless coherence with which Paton has characterised Kumalo. The umfundisi is a profound and serious enough character to provide an adequate filter in the novel (written in the third person point of view centring on the hero's activities) for the complex and serious issues of South African society. The search comes across as a lived one. It draws out Kumalo's full spiritual potential:

Why was there a compulsion upon him to pray for the restoration of Ndotsheni, and why was there a white man there on the tops, to do in this valley what no other could have done? And why of all men, the father of the man who had been murdered by his son? . . .
But his mind would contain it no longer. It was not for man's knowing. He put it from his mind, for it was a secret.³

¹ Frye, p. 187.

² Frye links archetypes with social rituals and these rituals with various natural cycles (see p. 105).

³ Paton, p. 234.

One feels Paton has successfully harmonised mythos and psychological realism in a character who must rate as one of the most coherent and effective in English South African fiction (despite the antipathy towards this character of some critics like Ezekiel Mphahlele and Lewis Nkosi).¹

The choric sections voicing the fears of the country are linked to Kumalo's symbolic fear and fit in with the whole tone, scope and themes of the novel. Edward Callan calls the two chapters having a choric function respectively: Chapter Nine, "a chorus of African voices" and Chapter Twelve, "a chorus of white voices".² Callan points out that the difference between Paton's use of a "lyric chorus", which is characterised by a single voice "outside the immediate action" and a "dramatic medley" of voices as in the two chapters above. Examples of the lyric chorus are manifold, as in the description of the work down at Ezenzeleni and the commentary on the discovery of gold at Odendaalsrust in Chapter Six of Book Two. Perhaps it is feasible, given Paton's conception of South Africa as one suffering land, to see the papers of Arthur Jarvis in Book Two as just another voice: that of the White English liberal. Paton gives voice to the whole spectrum of South African society. A characteristic of these choric passages is their care-worn urgency and intense pleading:

The child coughs badly, her brow is hotter than fire.
 Quietly my child, your mother is by you. Outside there
 is laughter and jesting, digging and hammering, and
 calling in languages that I do not know. Quietly my
 child, there is a lovely valley where you were born. The
 water sings over the stones, and the wind cools you. The
 cattle come down to the river, they stand there under the
 trees. Quietly, my child, oh God make her quiet. God
 have mercy upon us. Christ have mercy upon us. White
 man, have mercy upon us. ("Chorus of African Voices")₃

¹ It seems Mphahlele's criticisms of Kumalo, for example, are basically political and ideological rather than objectively critical: Kumalo is a servile old African, a concession to white baaskap, and therefore a bad character! (The African Image, p. 131.) This is surely a non sequitur.

² Callan, p. 59.

³ Paton, p. 53.

Who knows how we shall fashion such a land? For we fear not only the loss of our possessions, but the loss of our superiority and the loss of our whiteness. Some say it is true that crime is bad, but would this not be worse? Is it not better to hold what we have, and to pay the price of it with fear? And others say, can such fear be endured? ("Chorus of White Voices")¹

Therefore I shall devote myself, my time, my energy, my talents, to the service of South Africa. I shall no longer ask myself if this or that is expedient, but only if it is right . . . I do this not because I am courageous and honest, but because it is the only way to end the conflict of my deepest soul. (Arthur Jarvis, "Private Essay on the Evolution of a South African")²

Gold, gold, gold. The country is going to be rich again. Shares are up from twenty shillings to a hundred shillings, think of it, thank God for it . . . Well, some of these people are saying it would be nice if these shares could have stayed at twenty shillings, and the other eighty shillings have been used, for example, to erect great anti-erosion works to save the soil of the country. It would have been nice to have subsidized boys' clubs and girls' clubs, and social centres, and to have had more hospitals. It would have been nice to have paid more to the miners . . . anyone can see that this thinking is muddled, because the price of shares has really nothing to do with the question of wages at all, for this is a matter determined solely by mining costs and the price of gold.³

The "Chorus of African Voices" expresses the fears and grievances of black people in Alexandria, Sophiatown, Orlando and Shanty Town who have flocked to Johannesburg for work--lack of accommodation and overcrowding, poverty, the twin threats of crime and immorality and the general breakdown of the community bond are evident:

I am afraid of the place where we are. There is too much coming and going, when all decent people are asleep . . . There will be trouble one day, and my husband and I have never been in trouble. A house we must have.⁴

¹ Paton, p. 71.

² Paton, p. 151.

³ Paton, pp. 146-7.

⁴ Paton, p. 51.

Fears are mingled with nostalgia for a lost tribal past: "Oh my husband, why did we leave the land of our people? There is not much there, but it is better than here. There is not much food there, but it is shared by all."¹ This echoes the theme of the Fall evoked in the opening chapter.

The "Chorus of White Voices" deals with the white fears of engulfment² and the wave of "native" crime: "Have no doubt it is fear in the land. For what can men do when so many have grown lawless?"³ These are the fears of the governing racial minority. In an article "Who is Really to Blame for the Crime Wave in South Africa?", written in 1945 while he was still head of Diepkloof Reformatory, Paton linked black crime to "the disintegration of native society beyond safety point"⁴ and called for social restoration of black society in a new spirit in which "the fears and doubts that so poison the springs of action [have disappeared]".⁵ The essay foreshadows the main themes of Cry, the Beloved Country and many phrases prefigure

¹ Paton, p. 52.

² Paton wrote in an essay "Why I Write" in 1949:

In the meantime the position of the black people was changing beyond recognition. The cities of Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban were rapidly growing, and inevitably began to attract from their Reserves an never-ending stream of black people seeking work and city lights. Problems of housing, crime and deterioration began to increase in intensity. This is indeed the central theme of my novel Cry, the Beloved Country. The white people of South Africa became more and more afraid of engulfment.

(Knocking on the Door, p. 71.)

³ Paton, Cry, the Beloved Country, p. 67.

⁴ Alan Paton, "Who is Really to Blame for the Crime Wave in South Africa?" in The Forum 8(37), 15 December 1945, p. 7.

⁵ Paton, The Forum, p. 8.

the lyrical "pleading" quality of the prose in the novel.¹ The effect of Paton's dramatic juxtaposition of Voices is to add an epic dimension to the themes of fear and faith worked out in the story of Kumalo and James Jarvis, two bereaved fathers, of different races, who find common humanity through their mutual suffering. There is also a deepening of tone through a greater insistence, seriousness and concern lent to the narrative by these choric sections. They seem justified as an integral part of the novel in terms of Paton's constant personification of South Africa as one suffering land, his all-embracing compassion, and the coherent thematic links between the narrative and the Voices.

"Yes, there are a hundred, and a thousand voices crying. But what does one do, when one cries this thing, and one cries another?"²

¹ Examples of this similarity of phraseology include:

- (i) "For a long time the full dangers were not seen, but fathers and sons and daughters went to work and sometimes never came back." (The Forum, p. 7.)

"They are the valleys of old men and old women, of mothers and children. The men are away, the young men and the girls are away." (Cry, the Beloved Country, p. 8.)

"When people go to Johannesburg, they do not come back." (Cry, the Beloved Country, p. 11.)

- (ii) "We were blind to the fact that we were destroying the tribal culture. We were blind to the fact that one way of life cannot absorb another easily unless there are great similarities between them . . . We were blind to the fact that we had started in the native mind itself a great cultural conflict. Our blindness was largely selfish; it suited us to change some behaviour patterns, and to leave others unchanged." (The Forum, p. 7.)

"It was permissible to allow the destruction of a tribal system that impeded the growth of the country. It was permissible to believe that its destruction was inevitable. But it is not permissible to watch its destruction, and to replace it by nothing, or by so little, that a whole people deteriorates, physically and morally . . . We are caught in the evils of our own selfishness." (Cry, the Beloved Country, p. 127.)

² Paton, Cry, the Beloved Country, p. 71.

Paton is here alluding to the near-impossibility of finding a solution to South Africa's problems when there is such an inherent conflict of interests. Certainly, his novel evokes a sense of an entire, suffering land, on the brink of eternal hopelessness, as has been argued. The despair of this land is its fear: "Cry, the beloved country, for the unborn child that is the inheritor of our fear. Let him not love the earth too deeply . . . for fear will rob him of all if he gives too much".¹ Yet the novel's subtitle, *A Story of Comfort in Desolation*, suggests that Paton sees a way out of fear for South Africa. Does the novel itself bear this out?

The subtitle is paradoxical, since desolation, by definition, excludes comfort. Yet Paton speaks of comfort in desolation. What is meant by this contradiction? Firstly, what is this comfort? Clearly, Paton is referring to hope, the antithesis of fear. The novel, in fact, is pivoted on this antithesis.

Hope is a theme that has interested Paton considerably (as has fear, particularly as a collective emotion inhibiting social development). In "The Nature and Ground of Christian Hope" Paton concludes that hope is "inseparable from life".² He has often illustrated this theme, in his essays and in *Towards the Mountain*, with Isaiah's vision of the Holy Mountain (Isaiah, 65:8), which, he explains, represents "the triumph of righteousness". Yet the vision is "unattainable". Then why affirm it?

The fact is that although we shall never reach the holy mountain, the whole of the Christian life is directed towards it. It is the vision of the unattainable that determines what we shall attain.³

For Paton, hope is a moral absolute and ought to be affirmed whether or not there is a ground: "It is possible to cherish hope without a ground".⁴ For man to cease to hope would be an "apostasy".⁵

¹ Paton, *Cry, the Beloved Country*, p. 72.

² Paton, *Knocking on the Door*, p. 286.

³ Paton, p. 238.

⁴ Paton, p. 288.

⁵ Paton, p. 200.

It is important to note that hope, for Paton, is derived from a transcendent source:

The might and power of hope must come . . . from a faith that there is a Might and a Power that is above all . . . It is a faith in the Holy Spirit, that He moves abroad in the world . . . Yet this might and power are not to be confused with any might or power of this earth, they are totally of another order.¹

This explains the paradox of "comfort in desolation"--the desolation is redeemed through faith in "another order".

CONCLUSION

Georg Lukács has made the point, in Studies in European Realism, that a true realist writer suspends "his most cherished prejudices or . . . most sacred convictions" to describe what he "really sees, not what he would prefer to see".² He pictures the world, that is, as transparently as possible. This is not what Paton does in Cry, the Beloved Country. On the contrary, he embodies a definite world-picture in the fictional life-situation, subordinating characters and events to a Christian mythos involving the themes of the Fall, the Apocalypse and Salvation, in muted narrative form (the "low mimetic" mode, in Frye's phrase). It was shown in Chapter Two that Schreiner likewise structures her multifarious material according to a philosophical and allegorical scheme. Paton's mythos centring in the spiritual quests of Kumalo and Jarvis³ is the principle of unity in Cry, the Beloved Country, which must therefore be seen as a mix of romantic archetype, religious mythology and a psychological realism that "fleshes out" the symbolism. What saves the novel from any disunity which may have ensued from this (perhaps) precarious dialectic is Paton's notion of South Africa as a suffering land or Being. This enables him to

¹ Paton, Knocking on the Door, p. 290.

² Georg Lukács, Studies in European Realism (London: Hillway Publishing Co., 1950), p. 11.

³ In Book Two Jarvis goes to Johannesburg for his son's funeral but discovers a new meaning to his life. He is "converted" by his son's papers from a secluded life of unquestioning baasskap (a way of life criticised in Arthur Jarvis's "Private Essay on the Evolution of a South African"), to a more committed, benevolent stance.

relate the archetypal emotions in the journey of the soul to prevailing national emotions impeding progress in South Africa towards peace and justice.

The themes of the novel, that is, work on complementary levels. Redemption, for example, occurs in both individual lives (Kumalo, Jarvis and the girl) and in the community as a whole:

Yes, it is the dawn that has come. The titihoya wakes from sleep, and goes about its work of forlorn crying. The sun tips with light the mountains of Angeli and East Griqualand. The great valley of the Umzimkulu is still in darkness, but the light will come there. Ndotsheni is still in darkness, but the light will come there also.¹

Paradoxically, this is the dawn signifying that Absalom has been executed. Yet the novel closes with a vision of hope in which the fallen state of the country described in the opening chapter has been transcended. Yet the fear that has gripped the mind of South Africa still persists: "But when that dawn will come, of our emancipation, from the fear of bondage and the bondage of fear, why, that is a secret".² Paton earlier posits the only solution: "Yet men were afraid, with a fear that was deep, deep in the heart . . . And such fear could not be cast out, but by love."³ This refers to the Biblical text "Perfect love drives out fear" (1 John 4:18). Paton's is a spiritual "change of heart" solution. Love between the different peoples of the country is advocated. This again indicates Paton's spiritual view of his country's problems. An example of this in the novel is the way Jarvis accepts his son's tragic death in a spirit of reconciliation that leads to his efforts to restore the destitute neighbouring black community of Ndotsheni. This accords with Paton's concept of creative suffering.⁴ Characters who live by

¹ Paton, Cry, the Beloved Country, p. 236.

² Paton, p. 236.

³ Paton, p. 235.

⁴ In an article entitled "The Problem of Suffering" Paton wrote that the only thing to do with suffering was to accept it and use it as a goad to positive action: "If suffering is an inescapable part of life, what does one do with it? . . . accept it, use it, and, where possible . . . prevent it, alleviate it, bring it to an end." (Knocking on the Door, p. 212.) He called this creative suffering.

this ideal are the ministers and priests at the Mission House, Mrs Lithebe, Arthur Jarvis and Jarvis and Kumalo.

Paton combines spirituality and social action in his Christian ethic:

Kumalo began to pray regularly in his church for the restoration of Ndotsheni. But he knew that was not enough. Somewhere down here upon earth men must come together, think something, do something.¹

This combination of faith and practicality is Paton's solution to the despair of fear. If despair in The Beadle is caused by unredeemed sin, it is relative in Cry, the Beloved Country to a social and spiritual "desolation". Paton, through the mythos of the spiritual journey, advocates a change of heart in the individuals of both the ruling and the ruled races, which should lead, as he illustrates in the case of Jarvis, who uses his wealth for social causes after his "conversion", to greater social equity, and to a more wholesome psychic harmony in the Mind of South Africa, something of which all its peoples are a part.

The world-picture implicit in the novel is thus one of constructive optimism based on an understanding of the negative factors at work in the society the book analyses, rather than on a facile idealism. Paton, like Pauline Smith, believes that human suffering can be purgatorial. This does not, of course, lessen the tragedy of the Fall. Paton and Smith's message of comfort emerges in both cases from a desperate situation in which good and evil struggle for supremacy. The cost of the Fall is high--in The Beadle Klaartje and Jacoba lose their lives, in Cry, the Beloved Country, Absalom and Arthur Jarvis, in the former Andrina is saved from near-tragedy while the beadle and Johanna almost crush each other to spiritual death, in the latter, the forces of evil cause the breakdown of whole communities and the alarming escalation of crime and social disorder in the cities. In both novels a Christ-like sacrifice, in The Beadle, Jacoba's death, in Cry, the Beloved Country, Arthur Jarvis's death, leads to some measure of redemption. In both works, then, hope seems wrought from deep suffering.

After The Beadle and Cry, the Beloved Country, though, the vision of hope becomes scarce and increasingly remote in this literature.

¹ Paton, Cry, the Beloved Country, p. 195.

CHAPTER SIX : THE DESPAIR OF ABSURDITY IN
THE GRASS IS SINGING

OVERVIEW

It is ironic that it is The Grass is Singing, and not South Africa's Penguin Modern Classic Cry, the Beloved Country, that has most influenced the major novelists of the latter period of the English South African literary tradition: Dan Jacobson, Nadine Gordimer and J.M. Coetzee. The perplexing blend of social realism and Existentialist Absurdity in Lessing's major South African novel¹ is discernible in much of the work of Jacobson and Gordimer and its

¹ It now seems somewhat anomalous to refer to South African fiction as "Southern African" in order to claim the indispensable The Grass is Singing (Lessing, after all, grew up in Southern Rhodesia, not South Africa). The novel is too good to leave out, but there are reasons for seeing it as part of South African fiction rather than to categorise South African fiction as Southern African, the alternative, which puts the cart before the horse. The reasons are as follows: (i) Lessing identifies her setting with South Africa several times in the novel seeing the situation as part of the same historical predicament ("Thus the district handled the Turners, in accordance with that esprit de corps which is the first rule of South African society . . ." p.11; "If one was looking for a symbol to express South Africa, the South Africa that was created by financiers and mine magnates, the South Africa which the old missionaries and explorers who charted the Dark Continent would be horrified to see, one would find it in the store", p. 36; "For Mary, the word 'Home' . . . meant England, although both her parents were South Africans and had never been to England", p. 37, Doris Lessing, The Grass is Singing 4th ed. [1950; London: Heinemann, 1978]); (ii) there is no alternative literary tradition to which this novel could belong; (iii) the novel invokes themes, motifs and archetypes that are fundamental in English South African fiction; (iv) Zimbabwe is an independent black state and so is no longer part of the white-dominated colonial situation Lessing describes in the novel. In sum, the novel fits into the South African literary tradition, Lessing clearly intended that it should, and therefore it is quite valid, as Christie, Hutchings and MacLennan have done in Perspectives on South African Fiction, to consider it a South African novel without further ado. Michael Thorpe writes, "Though it is well-known that she comes from Southern Rhodesia and knows that country best, she has not wished her African writing to be read in such narrow terms." Doris Lessing's Africa (London: Evan Brothers Limited, 1978), p. 2.

nascent Expressionist style has been developed into a fully coherent aesthetic in a novel like Coetzee's In the Heart of the Country. It is thus unfortunate that critics have concentrated on the realist element in The Grass is Singing to the extent of excluding a more fundamental aspect of the novel: its Existentialist and Expressionist leanings.

Stephen Gray, for example, once more subordinates a novel more complex in style and theme than he implies to the category of liberal-realist fiction.¹ Christie, Hutchings and MacLennan, despite some reservations, still classify the novel as an example of social realism:

The Grass is Singing is certainly "about" a political situation: aspects of the private individual lives of its characters are determined by social forces which they are powerless to control. But the novel is neither a deterministic analysis, nor is it a political treatise: its meaning is ultimately metaphorical . . .²

Unfortunately, they do not make full use of their own criteria--that a novel's "mode of fictional presentation" and its implicit "conception of reality" are the means of determining its genre³--in categorising the novel. They do not analyse the style and fictional techniques of the novel (surely crucial facets of its "mode of fictional presentation") and so miss clear indexes of Lessing's Expressionism. Clive Millar in an unpublished M.A. thesis also underestimates this element of her vision when he refers to Lessing's sensitivity to the "local atmosphere" of Africa.⁴ His idea of an evocation of "spiritual atmosphere"⁵ in The Grass is Singing is closer to the truth, for Lessing invariably opts for the subjective dimension in any given situation. Michele Wender Zak subjects the novel to a

¹ "What begins with Schreiner's novel as the liberal tradition in Southern African English fiction does continue in Turbott Wolfe, is endemic to Cry, the Beloved Country, is reviewed in Lessing's The Grass is Singing, and meets its culmination in later novels", Gray, Southern African Literature: An Introduction, p. 136.

² Christie, Hutchings and MacLennan, Perspectives on South African Fiction, pp. 110-111.

³ See Christie, Hutchings and MacLennan, Introduction, "An Approach to the Study of South African Fiction", p. 9.

⁴ Clive Millar, "The Contemporary South African Short Story in English", M.A. thesis, University of Cape Town, 1962, p. 82.

⁵ Miller, p. 105.

Marxist analysis in "The Grass is Singing: A Little Novel about the Emotions" (a most un-Marxist title, however), arguing that Mary's breakdown "serves as a focus for a keen-edged analysis of the state and the quality of women's lives in a colonial society". The novel, she asserts, is "one of these rare works of fiction which acknowledge the basic truth of Marxian analysis".¹ Wender Zak's argument is less wrong than it is one-sided, and overlooks altogether factors in the novel that simply do not comply with Marxist critical principles. Michael Thorpe in Doris Lessing's Africa refers to Lessing's objective narrative method, implying that her writing, though poetically intense, remains in the realist vein: "Lessing's method is to present relationships and an episode and allow readers the liberty of their own interpretation".² The technique in The Grass is Singing is nowhere near this idea of a neutral "present(ing)" mechanism.

Roberta Rubenstein in The Novelist Vision of Doris Lessing takes a more psychological approach and hits on a basic theme of Lessing's work: the urge of individual human consciousness to become whole: "the impulse of her central characters is to overcome the separations that their own preceptions generate".³ Mary Ann Singleton, though, waxes overly psychoanalytic, seeing Mary Turner's problem as simply one of "repressed sexuality",⁴ which can hardly be true given that Mary is sexually frigid, her relationship with Moses being primarily one of a destitute, passive dependence, on her part, and dominance, on Moses's part.

A study of the theme of despair in The Grass is Singing will bring these critical issues concerning Lessing's technique and philosophy into sharp focus, since her "total view of the world" in the novel is characterised by a grim sense both of the irrationality and absurdity of human existence and the inherent violence and corruption of the white colonial society she depicts. A novelist's world-picture, it was argued in Chapter One, is evident in the fictional

¹ Michele Wender Zak, "The Grass is Singing: A Little Novel about the Emotions" in Doris Lessing: Critical Studies (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1974), ed. A. Pratt and L.S. Dembo.

² Michael Thorpe, p. 11.

³ Roberta Rubenstein, The Novelist Vision of Doris Lessing (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1979), p. 8.

⁴ Mary Singleton, The City and the Veld: The Fiction of Doris Lessing (London: Associated University Presses, 1977), p. 80.

life-situation of a novel and affects the basic elements of characterisation, plot, setting, metaphor, symbolism and thematic development, especially when a novel's form or structure is deeply connected with its content or subject-matter, as in finely formed novels like The Grass is Singing.

THE DESPAIR OF ABSURDITY IN THE GRASS IS SINGING

At the end, with Mary Turner murdered, Dick mad, Moses in custody after his bloodthirsty act of revenge, a shocked Marston about to leave the place for good, Slatter as rapacious and racist as ever and the Turners' farm at Ngesi in a state of dilapidation, the reader is left with the bleakest of impressions of life in the white-ruled Southern African colonial farming society of the 1940s. The negative forces of life are seen to be absolutely victorious. Nothing positive emerges from the endeavours of characters, only depression, frustration, violence, hatred, vengeance and death.

The first chapter signifies the main narrative, stylistic and thematic concerns of the novel. It describes the scene in which the murder is discovered, revealing much about the colonial farming society at Ngesi. There are also many indexes of Lessing's overall fictional aims, and the methods she uses to achieve these aims.

Tony Marston reflects that, "Anger, violence, death, seemed natural to this vast, harsh country . . ." ¹ and these qualities of life seem to be reflected not only in the content of this chapter--the murder, the madness of Dick, the brutal attitude of Charlie Slatter and the underlying prejudice, intolerance and vindictiveness of the white community--but also in the narrative technique itself.

It is significant, for instance, that Mary, central character of the novel, is first introduced to the reader as a corpse, the victim of a savage murder: "Mary Turner, wife of Richard Turner,

¹ Lessing, p. 22.

a farmer at Ngesi, was found murdered on the front verandah of their homestead yesterday morning."¹ The incident is described in an impersonal newspaper fashion, yet the report improperly prejudges a case which is still sub judice (even if a confession has been made). The effect of this opening sentence is twofold--firstly, it invests the novel's exposition with a tone of cold detachment, distancing the author from the subject matter by using a newspaper report to convey the central event; and secondly, it highlights the way the white colonists manipulate the law in order to preserve the status quo. As it turns out, Slatter is the special correspondent who filed the story in the first place, which reinforces the idea that the society is run by the farmers themselves:

For instance, they must have wondered who that "Special Correspondent" was . . . There remained Charlie Slatter, who knew more about the Turners than anyone else, and was there on the day of the murder. One could say that he practically controlled the handling of the case, even taking precedence over the Sergeant himself. And the people felt that to be right and proper. Who should it concern, if not the white farmers, that a silly woman got herself murdered by a native for reasons people might think about, but never, never mentioned? It was their livelihood, their wives and families, their way of living at stake.²

Here Lessing's premise that the economics of a society determine "consciousness" is evident: "It was their livelihood, their wives and families, their way of living at stake". The economic position of the community is thus at the root of its attitudes and response to the incident--". . . a silly woman got herself murdered by a native for reasons people might think about, but never, never mentioned . . ." The attitude of the community to the Turners is founded on an economic threat:

Living the way they did! That little box of a house - it was forgivable as a temporary dwelling, but not to live in permanently. Why, some natives (though not many, thank heavens) had houses as good; and it would give them a bad impression to see white people living in such a way.³

¹ Lessing, p. 9.

² Lessing, p. 12.

³ Lessing, p. 11.

The corporate psychology of the community is complex--their attitude to the Turners is a combination of snobbish disgust ("Living the way they did!") and socio-economic self-interest ("It was their livelihood, their wives and families, their way of living, at stake"). The corporate psychology is itself a necessary element in the preservation of their identity and social order:

Thus the district handled the Turners, in accordance with that esprit de corps which is the first rule of South African society, but which the Turners themselves ignored. They apparently did not recognise the need for esprit de corps; that, really, was why they were hated.¹

There was, it seemed, a tacit agreement that the Turner case should not be given undue publicity by gossip The most interesting thing about the whole affair was this silent, unconscious agreement. Everyone behaved like a flock of birds who communicate - or so it seems - by means of a kind of telepathy.²

This latter simile suggests that the white-ruled community is bound by a primitive, telepathic instinct for self-preservation and unity. Class and ethnic loyalty are deep-seated and permit no exceptions. The Turners are thus cultural as well as economic misfits ("poor whites").

For Marx, the economics of a society constituted its base while the social and political institutions were the superstructure. Hence the law, for example, is an institution strictly subservient to the "esprit de corps" and its self-centred interests. The charge Charlie Slatter (not Sergeant Denham) is investigating is really the Attempted Murder of White Supremacy. Sergeant Denham, the "law", takes second place. Slatter is described as a "judge"³ and Moses is "as good as hanged already".⁴ The trial is a "mere

¹ Lessing, p. 12.

² Lessing, p. 10.

³ Lessing, p. 23.

⁴ Lessing, p. 18.

formality"¹ and "the murder, in itself [is] nothing".² ^{The case} ~~It~~ is really "white civilisation fighting to defend itself".³

Lessing certainly makes much use of Marxist premises in the first (and second) chapter. Yet already there is another narrative strand apparent, which will later dominate the novel to the exclusion of this element of "social realism"--Lessing's Expressionistic bent and related Existential notions:

[Slatter] turned and went into the bedroom. Mary Turner was a stiff shape under a soiled white sheet. At one end of the sheet protruded a mass of pale strawish hair, and at the other a crinkled yellow foot. Now a curious thing happened. The hate and contempt that one would have expected to show on his face when he looked at the murderer, twisted his features now, as he stared at Mary. His brows knotted, and for a few seconds his lips curled back over his teeth in a vicious grimace.⁴

Lessing earlier refers to Moses as a murderer⁵ and seems to side here with Slatter, sharing his "hate and contempt" for Mary. This is a curiously fierce posture for a "realist" to adopt! It has already been seen that Lessing has distanced her sympathies from Mary by introducing her as a corpse and by using the medium of a report to convey the news of her death. This first description of Mary, though, is deliberately negative in emphasis, revealing an almost voyeuristic disdain for the central character, dwelling on the ugliness and unnaturalness of the corpse. The circumstances of Mary's death are degrading and ignominious. She is a figure of contempt in the community. Lessing presents Mary as less than a corpse, without the status of a human cadaver. The body is like a grotesque doll, a "stiff shape" without form or human feature--her hair is "strawish",

¹ Lessing, p. 35.

² Lessing, p. 30.

³ Lessing, p. 30.

⁴ Lessing, p. 19.

⁵ "Charlie stood directly in front of the murderer and looked into his face", Lessing, p. 18.

like a scarecrow's, and her protruding foot is "yellow" and "crinkled". These two synecdoches rob her of human attributes. The soiled white sheet is symbolic of her debased "poor white" status. Lessing, then, negates the human qualities of her protagonist. Her style is highly metaphoric rather than metonymic, expressive rather than realist,¹ and her stance lacks the neutrality expected of the realist writer.² Further, Lessing gives Slatter, villain of the piece, the ascendancy, showing him to be dominant, aggressive, bullying, while the main character is "annulled", less than corpse. The fictional world of The Grass is Singing, one senses, is one in which death and negativity prosper, an anti-heroic universe that is designed to repel, rather than attract, the reader.

Lessing uses retrospective narration to create an effect of an alien world. She begins with the brutal climax of the novel and ends with its foretold tragedy, producing a cyclical pattern, which is appropriate to the existential themes of meaninglessness, alienation and futility pervading the novel. This negative cycle of events also casts an atmosphere of fate and doom in the plot: the reader, while following the fortunes of the Turners, knows their actions will end in catastrophe. This constitutes an alienating device, when seen in the context of Lessing's narrative disdain for her central characters. The tone of disdain reinforces Lessing's impatient dismissal of the Turners as human protagonists, casting them in anti-heroic roles. Michael Thorpe has seen this: Mary Turner, a "non-heroine", is "commonplace, almost characterless, a weak-willed, insecure person".³ What Thorpe does not mention, though, is that Lessing evidently hates her character. A more appropriate term is anti-heroine.

¹ See p. 127.

² Lukács, it was seen in the previous chapter (see p.114), regards the suspension of subjective vision as a necessary element in realist writing.

³ Thorpe, p. 12.

The harshness that Marston saw as inherent in the country seems to be reflected in the fictional form itself. The novel's narrative style is aggressive, hostile, voyeuristic, in short: Expressionistic. Lessing is thus neither for nor against the brutal society of Slatter and his cronies--simply infected by it. This makes for a powerful union of form and content in the novel, and deepens its psychological implications.

The term Expressionism, according to Walter Sokel in The Writer in Extremis,¹ refers to a genre of modern art whose central trait is the intensity of feeling evident in a more abstract, rather than mimetic, form of representation. Sokel explains that Expressionist art breaks with Aristotle's assumption of mimesis, and stresses the manifestation of subjective states of mind in art. The world is not described by the Expressionist in empirical fashion. Olive Schreiner and William Plomer used their novels, The Story of an African Farm and Turbott Wolfe, respectively, as mediums of direct self-expression, the former representing a philosophical crisis personally experienced, the latter being a "phantasmagoria" of impressions of South Africa, often violent, always perturbed. The Grass is Singing is more in line with these "subjective", highly expressive novels, than with the polished realist style of The Beadle and the social documentation in Cry, the Beloved Country. Lessing's novel is saturated with turbulent metaphors and vivid, angry impressions of colonial Southern Africa, and is shot through with a disillusioned nihilism that is too strongly evoked to be considered suspended in the interests of objective realism (even the psychological sort). Sokel calls Expressionist art aesthetic "subjectivism".² M.H. Abrams has suggested that Expressionism represents "a radical revolt against realism"³ and sanctions "distorted perceptions, dreams, and fantasies of distressed, disturbed or psychotic characters".⁴

¹ Walter Sokel, The Writer in Extremis (California: Stanford University Press, 1959).

² Sokel, p.4.

³ M.H. Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms Third Edition (1957; New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1971), p. 57.

⁴ Abrams, p. 58.

Instead of crystallising a likeness to external objects, the Expressionist style draws attention to the emotive nature of perception:

As time passed, the heat became an obsession. She could not bear the sapping, undermining waves that beat down from the iron roof. Even the usually active dogs used to lie all day on the verandah . . . when they came to put their heads on her knee, pleading for sympathy because of the heat, she would shoo them off crossly: the enormous, rank-smelling animals were an irritation to her . . .¹

When she thought of [Dick] down there in the heat mirage close to the heavy steaming red soil, beside the reeking bodies of the working natives, it was as if she thought of a man in a submarine, someone who voluntarily descended into a strange and alien world.²

The descriptions are strongly adjectival and exaggerated (the dogs are "enormous" and "rank-smelling" and the bodies of the natives "reek" of sweat and odours), reflecting the extremity of Mary's perceptions.

This reminds one of Van Gogh's words, quoted by Sokel: ". . . Instead of trying to render exactly what I have before my eyes, I . . . use colour more arbitrarily in order to express myself powerfully . . ." ³ An example of an "arbitrary" Expressionist image is the simile of the "man in a submarine" which conveys Mary's sense of alienation from the whole farm world as much as it describes Dick working amongst the natives in the heat of day. Two entirely different contexts, the farm lands and the ocean depths, are yoked together. The style, then, is geared towards expression of a state of consciousness rather than to delineation of an objective actuality. The farm setting is transformed into an Expressionist stage upon which psychic forces and surrounding objects coalesce in swirling tableaux--Dick, the neat mirage, the soil, the sweat of the working natives and Mary's sense of the strangeness of the scene and her separation from it merge into one consuming impression. The picture, that is, is primarily

¹ Lessing, p. 84.

² Lessing, p. 83.

³ Sokel, p.49.

a representation of a distorted human perception. Lessing's third person (limited) narrative point of view,¹ focusing throughout on a rather unbalanced and obsessive Mary, reinforces this stylistic tendency. Sokel writes that the Expressionist character is not a fixed entity but "a crystallisation of psychic forces, modifying the scene around him."²

The passage describing Mary's arrival on the farm illustrates Lessing's Expressionist stress:

The car stopped at last and she roused herself. The moon had gone behind a great luminous white cloud, and it was suddenly very dark - miles of darkness under a dimly starlit sky. All around were trees, the squat, flattened trees of the highveld, which seem as if pressure of sun has distorted them, looking now like vague dark presences standing about the small clearing where the car had stopped. There was a small square building whose corrugated roof had begun to gleam whitely as the moon slowly slid out from behind the cloud and drenched the clearing with brilliance. Mary got out of the car and watched it drive away round the house to the back. She looked round her, shivering a little, for a cold breath blew out of the trees and down in the vlei beyond them hung a cold white vapour. Listening in the complete silence, innumerable little noises rose from the bush, as if colonies of strange creatures had become still and watchful at their coming and were now going about their own business. She glanced round at the house; it looked shut and dark and stuffy, under that wide streaming moonlight. A border of stones glinted whitely in front of her, and she walked along them, away from the house and towards the trees, seeing them grow large and soft as she approached. Then a strange bird called, a wild nocturnal sound, and she turned and ran back, suddenly terrified, as if a hostile breath had blown upon her, from another world, from the trees. And as she stumbled in her high heels over the uneven ground and regained balance, there was a stir and a cackle of fowls that had been waked by the lights of the car, and the homely sound comforted her.³

Mary's arrival at the farm is heralded by the disappearance of the moon behind a cloud and the sudden darkening of the veld. The "great white cloud" that blots out the moon is perhaps symbolic of the white society that brings about moral darkness in this environment. The trees are "squat and flattened", suggesting the

¹ By this is meant the narrative method that constantly focuses attention on a single character but still tells the story, as it were, from the outside.

² Sokel, p. 39.

³ Lessing, pp. 62-3.

cruel distorting power of the sun, which will later wear Mary down, pouring out the merciless heat of the highveld. The motif of whiteness recurs in the passage--the white cloud, the moonlight, the gleaming white of the corrugated roof, the cold white vapour, the glint of the stones on the ground--and is contrasted with the darkness and shadows of the night. This symbolism possibly suggests the confrontation of white and black in the novel. The predominance of the darkness--the white moonlight glints and gleams and illuminates the clearing in front of the farm, but the rest of the bush is in darkness--foreshadows the final triumph of Moses, the archetypal black man, over his white masters. Moses, in fact, emerges from these same dark, shadowy trees to murder his white ruler in the end.

The noises from the bush suggest to Mary "colonies of strange creatures" indicating her feeling of unfamiliarity with her surroundings. Her state of mind, apprehensive, isolated, unsure, influences the way the farm is presented to the reader through the lens of her consciousness. She then ventures towards the trees but is frightened away by the calling of a strange bird. This feeling of the strangeness and hostility of the bush never leaves Mary:-

She had never become used to the bush, never felt at home in it. Still, after all this time, she felt a stirring of alarm when she realised the strangeness of the encircling veld where little animals moved, and unfamiliar birds talked. Often in the night she woke and thought of the small brick house, like a frail shell that might crush inwards under the presence of the hostile bush.¹

In the end, the bush, from the beginning her adversary, avenges itself and the white intruder is defeated. In the afternoon before her death, she runs into the trees after her apocalyptic nightmare of the destruction of the farmhouse by the bush and realises that she has never during her stay on the farm "penetrated into the trees . . . never gone off the path".² This reveals her isolation and fear of the

¹ Lessing, p. 198.

² Lessing, p. 244.

bush, the seeds of which are sown in this early incident. Mary's identity as a town-dweller is symbolised in this passage by her incongruent high heels on the bush track, that cause her to stumble. Then she is comforted. On the farm, though, her various comforts, sewing, reading, decorating, managing the farm while Dick is sick with malaria, are soon dissipated--even the comfort of self-abdication in her relation to Moses. An ontological panic always reasserts itself, as it does when she realises Moses is going to kill her.¹

The absurdity of Mary's predicament--her divorce from her setting, to paraphrase Camus--is glimpsed here in the passage. Later Mary will realise that she never became one with the platteland surroundings:

She felt, rather, as if she had been lifted from the part fitted to her, in a play she understood, and made suddenly to act in one unfamiliar to her. It was a feeling of being out of character that chilled her, not the knowledge that she had changed. The soil, the black labourers, always so close to their lives but also so cut off, Dick in his farm clothes with his hands stained with oil - these things did not belong to her, they were not real. It was monstrous that they should have been imposed upon her.²

This seems to be the existential predicament exactly: the uncoupling of character and setting.

There is a close relation between the Expressionism and the Existentialism in the novel, since Lessing uses Mary, cast in the role of an alienated schizoid, as her focus or "centre of consciousness". If the picture of the world in the novel, the fictional life-situation, is refracted through the prism of Mary's alienated consciousness, as it is in the above passages, it follows that the effect will be one of exaggerated and magnified perception as in the Expressionist style.

¹ Lessing, p. 251.

² Lessing, p. 119.

The most overt Expressionist images in the novel are Mary's apocalyptic visions of the bush overrunning the farm in the form of rats, beetles, rains and overgrown vegetation¹ and later of a grotesque spider, a metaphoric projection of Moses, crawling over the roof to blot out the light.²

R.D. Laing has formulated in his Self and Others and The Divided Self his notion of the schizoid character which fits Mary's case closely and is useful here.³ The schizoid suffers from "ontological insecurity", by which Laing means a chronic lack of self-identity or sense of unity of self,⁴ resulting in an awareness of the self as discontinuous, incoherent and fragmented.⁵ The schizoid constantly tries to affirm himself in a world full of "dangers to his being that are the consequences of his failure to achieve a secure sense of his own identity".⁶ When Mary overhears scornful gossip about her status as a spinster, she is plunged into paranoia, and her picture of herself is destroyed.⁷ The fundamental emptiness at the core of the schizoid's personality results in a perpetual struggle to be: "the need to gain a conviction of his own aliveness and the realness of things is, therefore, the basic issue in his existence", writes Laing.⁸ The schizoid tries to overcome his crippling "state of depersonalization" through affirmative action. His spiritual condition is one of desperate desolation. Tillich has also noted the grave dangers that may confront being when life is without a spiritual centre.⁹

¹ Lessing, pp. 242-3.

² Lessing, p. 252.

³ See Chapter One, pp. 15-16.

⁴ R.D. Laing, The Divided Self 12th ed. (1960; London: Penguin, 1975), p. 108.

⁵ Laing, p. 42.

⁶ Laing, p. 108.

⁷ Lessing, p. 52.

⁸ Laing, p. 108.

⁹ See Chapter One, pp. 17-19.

Mary's basic lack of belonging is a fundamental aspect of her schizoid alienation. She tries to keep her being creatively alive by busying herself on the farm, which is also an alien world to her, by sewing, decorating, reading, taking over as manager when Dick is ill, but she is perpetually restless and dissatisfied. Lacking the sort of personal autonomy and creative sense of self Laing saw as necessary to psychic stability, Mary never establishes a rapport with her husband, her environment or herself. In the place of a creative self is an inward void. In Tillich's terms, the power of non-being predominates over being in her life. Mary's relations with Dick and Moses, for example, are characterised by sterility and are lacking in the mutual self-affirmations of a rich, growing relationship. It is Mary's alienated identity that leads to her magnified and exaggerated perception and this, in turn, is reflected in an Expressionist focus.

Her lack of autonomy and identity, then, are at the basis of her alienation. Before she is murdered by Moses she reflects that her marriage has been a form on ontological escape:

Yes: long, long ago, she had turned towards another young man from a farm, when she was in trouble and had not known what to do. It had seemed to her that she would be saved from herself by marrying him. And then, she had felt this emptiness when, at last, she had known there was to be no release and that she would live on the farm till she died.¹

This is her first "betrayal", her second is her dependence on Moses. She lacks altogether the Sartrean self-responsibility. Certainly, her central attribute, her "impersonality"² is an Existential flaw, an inability to be free, in the Sartrean sense of determining one's own meaning and identity. She shies away from the private, personal life as a secretary in the town:

¹ Lessing, p. 248.

² Lessing, p. 43.

She was by now the personal secretary of her employer, and was earning good money . . . There was nothing to prevent her living by herself, even running her own car . . . She could have become a person on her own count. But this was against her instinct.

In the Club she was a person of some importance . . . She seemed impersonal above the little worries . . . She seemed immune. This was her strength, but also her weakness that she would not have considered a weakness: she felt disinclined, almost repelled, by the thought of intimacies and scenes and contacts.¹

Further, she has a "profound distaste for sex"² and a "genuine, rock-bottom aversion towards the personal things like love and passion".³ Mary eschews the existential responsibility of being human, it is against her instinct to become "a person on her own count". Her essence is her "social being",⁴ although society for her is not an abstract politico-economic entity but simply belonging gregariously to a girls' club. This is hardly the mature Marxism Michele Wender Zak attributes to the novelist.

Lessing ultimately shows, rather, the disintegration of the human personality under the pressure of the sheer meaninglessness and hopelessness of life. This is despite the strong awareness Lessing shows, too, of the determining effect of material conditions that many critics seem to see as the major factor in the novel.

Mary constantly looks for projects by which to sublimate herself; for example, she immerses herself in the tobacco drive, and when the enterprise collapses, she experiences her intolerable existential emptiness: "It seemed that something had finally snapped inside her, and she would gradually fade and sink into darkness".⁵ Then she conceives of the idea of having a child "to save her from herself".⁶ Dick refuses. What is there left to hope for? The approach of summer is a grim prospect:

¹ Lessing, p. 43.

² Lessing, p. 46.

³ Lessing, p. 51.

⁴ Lessing, p. 49.

⁵ Lessing, p. 164.

⁶ Lessing, p. 166.

She thought of the heat ahead with dread, but was not able to summon up enough energy to fight it. She felt as if a touch would send her off balance into nothingness; she thought of a full complete darkness with longing.¹

She is now in absolute despair, to the point of the Kierkegaardian death-wish.² This is when Moses comes. He is her last "ontological" project. Moses, whose name suggests that he is a black liberator, dominates this weak, hollow person. His powerful personal autonomy serves to break through the pernicious white code of stereotyping the black man as a servant without real human identity:³

But although he was never disrespectful, he forced her, now, to treat him as a human being, it was impossible for her to thrust him out of her mind like something unclean, as she had done with all the others in the past. She was being forced into contact, and she never ceased to be aware of him.⁴

A sexual fascination accompanies this breakdown of the code of racism: "She realised, daily, that there was something in it that was dangerous, but what it was she was unable to define."⁵ Mary's emotional weakness leads to her dependence upon Moses; after she sobs before him when he tells her he is leaving, he assumes ascendancy over her: "There was now a new relation between them. For she felt helplessly in his power."⁶ The forbidden is committed:

It was like a nightmare where one is powerless against horror: the touch of this black man's hand on her shoulder filled her with nausea; she had never, not once in her whole life, touched the flesh of a native.⁷

¹ Lessing, p. 173.

² The desire to be rid of the self and its intolerable misery. See Chapter One, pp. 16-17.

³ "But, in the interval, there would be a few brief moments when Marston would see . . . that 'white civilisation' . . . will never, never admit that a white person, and most particularly, a white woman, can have a human relationship, whether for good or for evil, with a black person. For once it admits that, it crashes, and nothing can save it. So, above all, it cannot afford failures, such as the Turners' failure." (p. 30).

⁴ Lessing, p. 192.

⁵ Lessing, p. 192.

⁶ Lessing, p. 190.

⁷ Lessing, p. 186.

Turbott Wolfe experienced a similar Freudian turmoil when he fell in love with Nhliziyombi.¹ Wolfe's fear of cultural dissolution inhibits his impulse to commit miscegenation. Likewise, Mary's "dark attraction"² involves the fear of some apocalypse it might bring: "For a moment she could not remember what had happened; but when she did the fear engulfed her again, a terrible dark fear".³ Laing sees fear of "engulfment" as part of the schizoid syndrome.⁴ Mary's fear develops into her apocalyptic dream of the vanquishing of the farmhouse by the bush, a symbolic vision of the final defeat of the white men by the black. This is similar to Wolfe's fear of "being sacrificed, a white lamb to black Africa".⁵ Shortly after Mary had abdicated white power by weeping uncontrollably before Moses, Dick contracts malaria and the doctor warns the Turners they are losing control: "'Why have you not cut down the bush round the house where the mosquitoes can breed?' . . . These people were hopeless . . . Everywhere there was evidence of breakdown of will."⁶

Mary has nightmares in which the relentless bush, Moses and memories of her sordid father blend into one horrific phantasmorgia. The texture of this unreal, nightmarish spell is vividly evoked by Lessing's Expressionist style in this section.⁷ Her alienation reaches its fiercest as she loses contact with reality:

In the daytime, when she had finished preparing Dick's cool drinks, which were all that he took, she sat idly by the bed and sank into her usual apathetic state. Her mind wandered incoherently, dwelling on any scene from her past life . . . And she had lost all sense of time.⁸

¹ See Chapter Three, pp.57-8.

² Lessing, p. 190.

³ Lessing, p. 187.

⁴ Laing, pp. 43-5.

⁵ See Chapter Three, p.65.

⁶ Lessing, p. 194.

⁷ Lessing, pp. 192-254.

⁸ Lessing, p. 195.

Seeing the native, with the terror of the dream still in her, she shrank back . . . watching him in a paroxysm of fright. He put the tray down, clumsily, because of his weariness, and she struggled in her mind to separate dream from reality.¹

Dick became to her, as time went by, more and more unreal, while the thought of the African grew obsessive. It was a nightmare . . .²

Tony Marston, who functions in the novel as an objective observer to provide balance in a topsy-turvy world of obsession, prejudice and paranoia, diagnoses her position as one of "complete nervous breakdown".³ Her schizoid alienation is now complete:

She behaves simply as if she lives in a world of her own, where other people's standards don't count. She has forgotten what her own people are like. But then, what is madness, but a refuge, a retreating from the world?⁴

Mary's complete nervous collapse anticipates the solipsistic obsessions and complexes of Magda in In the Heart of the Country. In the day of her destruction, the bush and the black man become one overwhelming antagonist who overpowers and defeats her, a paltry, hollow white woman out of place in the harsh African veld:

Step by step, she had come to this, a woman without will, sitting on an old ruined sofa that smelled of dirt, waiting for the night to come that would finish her.⁵

Two further elements in Mary's despair are her isolation from a vicious colony of white farmers like Slatter who demand conformity to the Master Race ethos,⁶ and who regard the Turners as "poor whites", and her alienation from the geographical setting. These are part of Lessing's partial determinism in the novel. Lessing

¹ Lessing, p. 204.

² Lessing, p. 206.

³ Lessing, p. 228.

⁴ Lessing, p. 232.

⁵ Lessing, p. 241.

⁶ "Yet Tony, too, wanted to be accepted by this new country. He would have to adapt himself, and if he did not conform, would be rejected . . .", Lessing, p. 31.

presents a picture of a system of entrenched racism in Southern Rhodesia at a certain historical time (possibly the 1930s or early 40s) and constructs a metaphor of the bush as representative of a hostile, indifferent universe. Yet this provides no more than the stage for the acting out of essentially Existential dilemmas like metaphysical alienation, isolation and absurdity. It is true that the heat, the shrill cicadas, the hostile vegetation of the bush, all drive Mary to the brink of despair. It is also clear that fate plays malignant tricks on the Turners: there are droughts, bush fires, crop failures, rampant mosquitoes, shrilling insects, an entropic African sun. There is, too, the negative influence of a prevailing dehumanisation in the colony. And the economic base of her life--the farm--collapses, too, owing to Dick's incompetence and fate's maliciousness.

Yet this catalogue of woes is that bit too devastating to qualify as a rationalistic account of the horrors of a perverted society--the logic is less deterministic than it is Absurdist: the world is conceived of, in a fictional life-situation in which evil, madness, death, violence, meaninglessness prevail, as irrational and nihilistic, one in which there is inherent anarchy, malignance, futility and squalor attached to life.

Lessing's whole fictional technique, in fact, is geared to a cohesive presentation of this despair of Absurdity. Her method of anti-heroic characterisation illustrates this. Lessing harbours an ironical, disdainful attitude towards Dick and Mary Turner. They have little of the normal human person about them, and when they do reveal simple, wholesome qualities like Dick's love of the land and his humble affection for Mary, these are either juxtaposed with other qualities which negate any potential worth or are put into a context that renders them impotent or irrelevant. An example of this anti-heroic technique is the marriage itself. Dick hates the town and Mary the veld. Neither of them can tolerate the other's favoured environment. This is the basis of their incompatibility. There seems to be no hope of a betterment in their situation, since these preferences are basic and unalterable.

Lessing ingeniously places her characters in situations that lead to this kind of deadlock. Dick's circumstances, for example, are hopeless. At the time he meets Mary he has been farming for five years without making any headway. He began without capital and ran into debt and is now heavily mortgaged. Through her portrait of Dick Lessing carefully reflects some of the conditions prevailing in Southern Rhodesia in the agricultural slump of the 30s and 40s, when many of the white farmers experienced disillusionment after the initial failure of tobacco, the Depression and a general decline in standard of living for the English colonialists. Some farmers turned to other enterprises like poultry farming and gold prospecting to offset this decline.¹ Dick tries numerous such alternatives, but it is his own incompetence rather than the slump that is responsible for their abortiveness. There is also his ill-fatedness. Lessing's fiction here combines Marxist and Existentialist features.

Dick's poverty and incompetence are set alongside his love for the land. His mystical attachment to it contrasts with Charlie Slatter's capitalistic contempt for the land itself. Mary, too, adopts a materialistic view of farming--that the farm is an instrument for making a profit. For Dick farming is an experience in and for itself. Yet his priorities are misplaced. Dick does not have a solid material base--his farm is simply not working. Further, their material impoverishment has negative practical consequences. It precludes the possibility of their having a family, something Dick has seen as a life-goal, and which Mary at one time turns to as a possible means of salvation from her life of torpor. Here poverty is presented as a determining factor in the general unhappiness of the household. It is a characteristic Marxist view that material conditions have far-reaching effects on "consciousness".

Lessing highlights the sentimentality of Dick's love of the land through his lack of initiative and his failure to meet the economic demands of the situation. He is particularly inept during the period

¹ This has been pointed out by M.C. Steele in his paper "Children of Violence and Rhodesia: A Study of Doris Lessing as Historical Observer" (Salisbury: The Central African Historical Association, Local Series Pamphlet No. 29, 1974).

of his abortive enterprises.¹ Lessing makes him out to be a fool. Here her aim of creating the effect of nihilist absurdity results in hasty characterisation and a lack of credibility. However, Lessing is more interested in negating her characters' human qualities than in their fictional roundedness. Dick's other potentially good features--his love of and admiration for Mary, and his hard-working endurance--are degraded in similar fashion, since his adoration leads to an abasement that Mary despises as she really needs a more powerful man like Moses to coax her out of her apathy. Dick's whole-hearted commitment results in exhaustion and incapacitation.

An important feature of literature of the Absurd is an effect of irrationality, as part of both the themes and format of the work.² Lessing dislocates linear time in the novel by beginning with the climax and then leading up to it again in an atmosphere of inevitable doom. The circular plot represents nihilistic futility. Further, many elements of ordinary human society are inverted in order to produce the impression of an irrational world: the murder is hushed up and yet would normally be discussed in such a close-knit community; contempt, rather than sympathy, is shown for the murder victim; the law and Sergeant Denham's ex officio authority are disregarded by Slatter and the community in the interests of underplaying the disconcerting sexual associations of the murder; the black policemen are forbidden to touch the demented white man Dick who is now in need of assistance; summer is seen as hellish and winter a respite (reversing the European associations) and finally Moses the servant becomes the oppressor and Mary the oppressed becomes his slave. A dislocation occurs, too, when Mary, previously

¹ He tries bee-keeping using a manual written for English conditions. He keeps pigs in inappropriate conditions. He sets up a store that runs at a loss and buys twenty bicycles no-one will buy.

² Abrams defines the literature of the Absurd as all works "which have in common the sense that the human condition is essentially and ineradicably absurd" and which are characterised by irrational situations as in Beckett's Waiting for Godot in which two tramps wait in the middle of nowhere for a vague unidentified figure Godot who never comes and, perhaps, does not even exist. See M.H. Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms, pp. 86-7.

against having a family, pleads with Dick, who has always wanted one, to start a family. Dick refuses. There seems to be no stability in this topsy-turvy world, no "normality", other than the perverse codes of racist domination.

No theory of literature, though, can justify artistic gratuity. There are occasions, as in the case of Dick's ill-advised enterprises, where psychological credibility is forfeited in a relentless drive to create an Absurd fiction. Mary and Dick lack cohesiveness and often seem to be vessels of the voyeuristic contemptuousness that characterises the novel's tone. Sometimes as a result there is a rather loose relation between character and behaviour, motive and action. Mary's change from smarmy spinster to paranoid husband-hunter after a superficial incident in which she overhears gossip is unconvincing.¹ At one point Dick suddenly becomes a chain-smoker and nigger-hater after having led a passive, tolerant life on the farm. Likewise there appears to be no rationale for Mary's change from aggressive negrophobia to passive negrophilism under the spell of Moses. Is this change from tyranny to helplessness feasible? Is there a Freudian sense of repression that accounts for the extraordinary about-face? And how can the vindictiveness of the murder be reconciled with the tenderness of the relationship between Moses and Mary? And why does Moses agree to stay on in Mary's employ out of compassion if his motive all along has been vengeance for the incident in which Mary whipped him in his face?

There is, then, a measure of implausibility in the Moses section of the novel. The ending is conceived in metaphoric terms and its symbolism of an African Nemesis and the demands of the plot do not cohere. The expulsion of Moses from the farm (which he wanted to leave anyway) does not seem an adequate motive for the murder. The climax is thus something of a mystification.

¹ Until this point she has been an average, contented, rather impervious character immune to the effects of others on her life. Even the deaths of her brother, sister, mother and father leave her cold. Lessing does not provide sufficient grounds for her collapse into paranoia.

CONCLUSION

An analysis of the effects of Lessing's Existentialist vision of Absurdity on the novel has revealed its link with her Expressionist style. It has also taken note of some failures of artistic effect in the novel caused, perhaps, by an over-developed sense of the characters as Expressionist vessels whose fictional coherence is of less concern to the novelist than the intensity of their perceptions and the pathetic plight of their lives. There is also a predominance of this vision over the elements of determinism and realism in the novel which are pursued with vigour in the early chapters but neglected in the second half of the novel.

However, sufficient consciousness of both the veld and racist colonialism as destructive is evident in the novel to make of The Grass is Singing a seminal work in English South African fiction, containing themes, motifs and symbolism that have influenced the whole of the latter period of English South African writers, particularly Dan Jacobson, Nadine Gordimer and J.M. Coetzee. Contrary to Gray's standpoint that Olive Schreiner's The Story of an African Farm established the image of the inimical South African landscape as a major precedent in this literature,¹ it is thought here that this image receives its first real, vivid embodiment in The Grass is Singing, since neither Schreiner nor Plomer paid any substantial attention to the immediate natural settings of the Karoo and Zululand, respectively, in their novels, which were passionately orientated in other directions. There is no more than an implicit use of this symbol in the literature until Lessing explores in frank detail the debilitating effects of the bushveld climate on a neurotic town girl and a young English liberal in The Grass is Singing:

[Marston] looked up at the bare crackling tin of the roof, that was warped with the sun . . . It was enough to drive anyone mad, the heat in this place.

¹ See p.96.

What sort of woman had Mary Turner been, before she came to this farm and had been driven slowly off balance by heat and loneliness and poverty?¹

Anger, violence, death, seemed natural to this vast, harsh country . . .²

In a review of The Heart of the Hunter by Laurens van der Post, Lessing criticized the author for symbolising Africa in a sentimental way.³ ". . . where in this book are all the stink and squalor of Africa that go side by side with its splendour?" she asked. "It may turn out that we can't have one without the other; but there is never a mention in this book of flies, prickly-heat, mosquitoes, sand, ticks or the reek of stale sweat and dirt".⁴ Lessing tries to evoke the texture of the African climate and land in her African fiction, in a way that is far from sentimental, sharing, rather, something of Hardy's notion of a malignant Fate. In an early short story "The Anniversary" (1949), for example, Lessing pictures the veld as an insidious enemy of the protagonist, a woman, like Mary Turner, alienated from her surroundings:

The heat came up off the ground and she could feel her skin tightening . . . There it was, the enemy, the arid sullen landscape that gave back no glare of recognition when she searched its too familiar contours.⁵

This Expressionistic description of the bushveld is very reminiscent of passages in Lessing's novel, which portray the hostility of the bush as a whole atmosphere oppressive to the human spirit through the sense of sight and sound:

¹ Lessing, p. 33.

² Lessing, p. 22.

³ Doris Lessing, "African Interiors", New Statesman 62 (1598), 27 October 1961, p. 613.

⁴ Lessing, "African Interiors", p. 614.

⁵ Doris Lessing, "The Anniversary", Common Sense, May 1949, p. 223.

[Marston] realised, as the sound grew loud in his ears, that cicadas were shrilling all about him . . . It was a steady, insistent screaming from every bush and tree. It wore on his nerves.¹

They stood there beside the cars, in the moment of parting, looking at the red-brick house with its shimmering hot roof, and the thick encroaching bush . . .²

The sun is pictured as the principal agent of the bush's hostile power, coarsening, warping, pounding. The sun "bruises" Mary's flesh.³ The farm is plagued by an entropic decomposition:

After that the Turner's farm was run as an overflow for Charlie's cattle. They grazed all over it, even up to the hill where the house stood. It was left empty: it soon fell down.⁴

Plomer may have spoken grandiloquently of "the almighty violence of Africa" in Turbott Wolfe⁵ but nowhere in the novel is the hostility of the landscape given a concrete texture. The pictures of the South African landscape in The Beadle and Cry, the Beloved Country are far more benign and are linked to the themes of redemption in both novels. The hostile heat and emptiness of the desert in Jacobson's A Dance in the Sun and the tormenting insentience of the universe in Coetzee's In the Heart of the Country owe more to Lessing's articulation of a hovering violence in the African subcontinent than to any earlier work by either Schreiner or Plomer. Jacobson, Gordimer and Coetzee are also influenced by Lessing's treatment of destructive, dehumanising colonial racism which The Story of an African Farm skips and which Plomer treats with the distance of the witty, elevated satirist. In this way, too, Lessing's novel has exerted a more powerful influence than has Schreiner's.

¹ Lessing, The Grass is Singing, p. 34.

² Lessing, p. 29.

³ Lessing, p. 182.

⁴ Lessing, p. 34.

⁵ See Chapter Three, p. 66.

A third area of influence is the notion of Existential Absurdity--and the despair it engenders--which is perhaps the most dominant common feature of post-war English South African fiction. This philosophy receives its first serious artistic representation in this literature in The Grass is Singing, although The Story of an African Farm, as was suggested in Chapter Two, precurses some important Existential notions. The account of Mary's family life in Chapter Two, for example, is chillingly nihilistic. Their relations are characterised by a complete lack of feeling and involvement. Her parents' marriage foreshadows her own--there is no real contact between them: her mother "behaved as if he were simply not there for her . . . he brought home the money . . . Apart from that he was a cipher in the house, and knew it".¹ Here the Existential emphasis is strong, the alienation in the household seems less a consequence of not having enough money² than a matter of strangely inhuman personalities. When her father dies, for example, Mary is "very happy"³ and the death of her brother and sister leaves her cold. They are ciphers drifting in and out of each other's lives without meeting.

This reminds one of the Kafkesque quality of human relations in dehumanized societies in the fiction of Jacobson, Gordimer and Coetzee.

¹ Lessing, p. 39.

² Lessing, p. 41.

³ Lessing, p. 42.

CHAPTER SEVEN : DESPAIR, FUTILITY, VIOLENCE AND
 ALIENATION IN THE TRAP AND A DANCE IN THE SUN
 (WITH REFERENCES TO STORIES IN THROUGH THE WILDERNESS
 AND "THE STRANGER" FROM A LONG WAY FROM LONDON)

OVERVIEW

Nadine Gordimer defines African writing in this way:

My own definition is that African writing is writing done in any language by Africans themselves and by others of whatever skin colour who share with Africans the experience of having been shaped, mentally and spiritually, by Africa rather than anywhere else in the world. One must look at the world from Africa, to be an African writer, not look upon Africa from the world. Given this Africa-centred consciousness, the African writer can write about what he pleases, and even about other countries, and still his work will belong to African literature.¹

Gordimer expects of African writing that it be informed by a discernible Afrocentric vision, a consciousness of the world, that is, "shaped" by the experience of living in Africa. Dan Jacobson left South Africa permanently in 1954 and now lives in Britain, but much of his work that has a South African setting and evokes an "African" quality of experience, remains South African. Those works that lack both these elements must be classed as his British component, such as The Rape of Tamar (1970), The Wonder-Worker (1973) and The Confessions of Josef Baisz (1977). This narrows down Gordimer's definition to exclude writing lacking both an African setting and a peculiarly African experience of some sort or another.

This said, it is clear that there has been no serious critical attempt to assess the place of Jacobson's South African writing in

¹ Nadine Gordimer, The Black Interpreters (Johannesburg: SPRO-CAS/Ravan, 1973), p. 5.

the English South African literary tradition, aside from hints by Stephen Gray and Christie, Hutchings and MacLennan that his work is realist, in common with major South African writers like Alan Paton and Nadine Gordimer.¹ This is not to say, of course, that there have been no good reviews of single fictional works by Jacobson,² only that his overall position in the literature is still unclear.

A start can be made by noting his place in the chronology of English South African fiction. The time span of his work straddles the three decades of the 50s (The Trap, 1955, A Dance in the Sun, 1955, The Price of Diamonds, 1957, A Long Way from London, 1958), the 60s (The Evidence of Love, 1960, The Beginners, 1968, Time of Arrival - [and other essays], 1962) and the 70s (The Rape of Tamar, 1970, The Wonder Worker, 1973, Through the Wilderness, 1977, first published as Inklings in 1973, The Confessions of Josef Baisz, 1977).

It was argued in Chapter Six that The Grass is Singing represents a watershed in this literary tradition, dividing off the two Christian-oriented novels The Beadle and Cry, the Beloved Country from the mainstream of pessimistic works about South African society and life, setting in motion a surge of fictional work dealing with Existential absurdity and despair as part of a critique of South African society. This phase of the literature has more in common with the philosophical emphasis adopted by Plomer and Schreiner than with the themes of redemption and comfort in the two most important novels of Smith and Paton. Dan Jacobson bridges the period between the publication of Lessing's seminal novel in 1950 and the more Existentialist works of contemporary novelists of the 70s and 80s, Nadine Gordimer and J.M. Coetzee, providing impetus for the later development of despair

¹ Stephen Gray puts Jacobson into his liberal-realist tradition in Southern African Literature: An Introduction and these three critics do likewise in Perspectives on South African Fiction, classifying Jacobson as a social realist writer. Stephen Watson looks at Jacobson's work in terms of what he sees as the irrelevance and paucity of the liberal ideology in South Africa.

² For example, A. Alvarez's review of The Evidence of Love, "The Difficulty of Being South African", in New Statesman 59 (1525), June 1960, is penetrating and convincing and H.K. Girling's essay "Compassion and Detachment in the Novels of Dan Jacobson" in The Purple Renoster 2, Spring 1957, and G.H. Durant's "Promising Young Men" in Standpunte 11 (63) Dec 1956-Jan 1957, are also insightful and well-argued.

as the archetypal mood in English South African fiction.

DESPAIR, FUTILITY, VIOLENCE AND ALIENATION IN A
SELECTION OF JACOBSON'S FICTION

The Existential emphasis is evident in an early short story by Jacobson, "The Stranger" from A Long Way from London (and Other Stories). The story presents a portrait of a European business magnate who hands over his enormous fortune and position as director of several companies and comes to a South African desert town to spend his last days as a hermit. Oddly, his purpose seems to be simply to die in the desert, to pine away in its vast emptiness, a perverse mystical death-wish that suggests Kierkegaardian despair. He turns to the desert "like a worshipper".¹ The town seems to melt into the vastness, indicating man's--and the world's--insubstantiality and insignificance:

There was no fence, no line, no place where the town ended: there was only the soft surge of the desert and the twinkling of the street lamps, and a more distant scattering of houses.²

The setting is symbolic of the experience of "nothingness" the stranger is seeking: his own spiritual annihilation and desolation. The townsfolk see the "desertion and emptiness" in his eyes as he seeks his "self-abnegation".³ Macrocosm, a town "crumbling in the heat",⁴ echoes microcosm, as it often does in Jacobson's fiction. The "shining empty sand"⁵ with its mirage-like, lifeless texture reflects something of the stranger's spiritual desolation and insubstantiality. His alienation is like Sartre's

¹ Dan Jacobson, A Long Way from London (and other stories) (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1958), p. 71.

² Jacobson, p. 69.

³ Jacobson, p. 72.

⁴ Jacobson, p. 71.

⁵ Jacobson, p. 84.

"exile in the midst of indifference".¹

Later he hires an African woman to do his housework. He treats her as a tool or instrument, ignoring her as a human being. Jacobson's theme of isolation in human relations, prevalent in the stories in Through the Wilderness, is apparent here. In an apocalyptic ending that recalls the climax in The Grass is Singing, the African scullion, incensed by the ageing white man's galling indifference, murders him in vengeance. The ending, as in Lessing's novel, is problematic since the symbolic nemesis is insufficiently justified in terms of the plot.

This story, with its nihilist mysticism, stark imagery, frank impersonal language, cold, neutral tone and inhuman themes makes for chilling Existential reading as its hollow non-hero slowly commits spiritual suicide. (This type of non-heroism--which Jacobson perhaps derived from Lessing--is a prominent feature in other Jacobson works.²)

Jacobson's Existential theme of isolation is apparent in the portrayal of human relations in his fiction. His short stories and novels both concentrate on sets of individual relations, usually across ethnic or racial divisions. Failure of communication through misunderstanding, prejudice or, simply, lack of humanity, across group or race barriers, is the focal theme of "The Box", "A Day in the Country", "The Zulu and the Zeide", "A Way of Life" and "Beggar My Neighbour" in Through the Wilderness. The human relations within these groups are no less fraught with insincerity, dilemma, fear and ambiguity in "The Little Pet", "The Game", "Fresh Fields", "Trial and Error", "Another Day", "Through the Wilderness" and "Led Astray".

¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness trans. Hazel E. Barnes (1943; New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), p. 507. Sartre writes, "Finally our freedom causes these things to manifest themselves as out of reach, independent, separated from me by the very nothingness which I secrete and which I am", p. 509.

² The narrator of The Rape of Tamar, Yonadab, is self-confessedly cynical, corrupt and devious. The first-person narrator of The Confessions of Josef Baisz is an obsessive double-dealing sadist who derives what he calls "quasi-sexual delight" from his acts of betrayal. He is a spy and a murderer. Sithole, the hapless labourer in The Trap is a "good Kaffir" but degraded and servile. Jacob van Schoor, the white farmer, is honest but, like Dick Turner, gullible, and, by the end of the story, violent and embittered. The other characters in the story are cheats, double dealers, liars and crooks.

These stories invariably lead up to some sort of epiphany which is precipitated by a crisis in the relations between the characters in the stories, as in "The Box", in which the white narrator, Master Dandy, "discovers" the humanity of the coloured houseboy, Jan Louw, when the latter weeps before him, and in "A Day in the Country" when the encounter between the Jewish and Afrikaans families forces them to realise the crushing effects of ethnic prejudice on human relations.

The title story of Through the Wilderness is exemplary of Jacobson's typical thematic and stylistic concerns. The narrator of the story is a young Jewish graduate, son of a sheep farm owner, whose life has become stagnant. He has no real plans for the future, nor anything to do in the present:

I met Boaz, the Israelite, at a time when I was doing nothing. I was idle, stagnant, dead still . . . I remained at home, like someone in a thrall, unable to move, without sufficient energy even to want to do so.¹

The narrator is a self-confessed anti-hero. Like Mary in The Grass is Singing he is town-bred and unsuited to life on the veld: "I was town-born and bred. I had just spent three years at university in Johannesburg. I was no farm boy, no cattleman, no shepherd."² The narrator is uninterested in the Karoo setting:

The veld always surprised me, when I came out: the house was cramped and meagre, the veld so very large. Yet in point of life there didn't seem to be all that much to choose between them.³

The whole setting is without life for the narrator. He is also isolated from the Zionist Jewish culture of his upbringing:

¹ Dan Jacobson, Through the Wilderness 2nd edition (1973; Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 154.

² Jacobson, p. 154.

³ Jacobson, p. 157.

I had associated the Hebrew language with being alien, set apart, exposed; implicated in what I was convinced at an early age was a continuing, unendurable history of suffering and impotence; involved with a religion in whose rituals I could find no grace, no power, no meaning, and that had no connection I could discern with the dusty, modern mining town in South Africa in which I was growing up.¹

He is alienated from his surroundings, his culture and the people around him. He is in the Sartrean position of man without a ready-made identity trying desperately to define a role for himself. Like Camus's Existential man, he is divorced from his setting. He is suffering from Kierkegaard's despair of necessity:

When I went slowly I'd drive as slowly as I could in top gear, until the car began to stall, then I'd change down into second and do the same; then the same in first. I'd accelerate to seventy miles an hour, switch off the ignition, and see how far the car would go before coming to a halt. I would turn the car round so that it faced the farm again, put it into reverse, and drive backwards for a couple of miles. Many times I simply stopped the car at the side of the road, walked a little way into the veld, and lay down on the sand and tufts of grass, shielding my eyes from the sun and looking straight up into the blue sky until it swam with a multitude of tiny, squirming shapes that were dark and bright at the same time. Or I stared at a particular thornbush, trying to impress it so firmly on my mind that I would be able to visualize it in every detail an hour later, when I would be back in Lyndhurst. But I found that usually it was something nearby that I hadn't been concentrating on, seeing only out of the corner of my eye, which I would really remember: the knobbly, hard surface of an anthheap, or a particular tuft of grass, or the bland, flat face of a locust, its eyes like tiny beads pasted on, which had jumped on to my trouser leg.

I was seldom disturbed by anything other than insects. A car, or some solitary African on foot or on a bicycle, might pass on the road; I daresay they were curious about the empty car standing on the roadside, but insufficiently so ever to come and look for me. I was on my own, surrounded by a flat, blank vacancy of sky and veld, a world of pale colours and strong light. It was abysmally dull, null, motionless, limitless, meaningless.

¹ Jacobson, p. 160.

Eventually I would drive on to meet the main tarred road, where the view opened out on the town itself: low iron roofs, which always looked black in the strong sunlight; a group of taller buildings in the town centre, also black; some trees, the same; mine-dumps of green sand in a rough circle around the entire scatter of the place. I used to skirt the town, going home along a by-pass road which had pairs of tram-tracks running parallel to it, for some distance, before they branched off into the veld, making for no visible destination at all. Poles, no longer carrying cables, arched over the tracks. God knows when they had been laid down, and with what expectations. The expectations had clearly not been fulfilled, but the tracks and poles still marched bravely and aimlessly across the bare veld, under the wide sky.¹

This picture of his aimless drives between the farm and the town indicates the ennui of his life. The universe is depicted as utterly devoid of life and meaning: "I was on my own, surrounded by a flat, blank vacancy of sky and veld . . . It was abysmally dull, null, motionless, limitless, meaningless". The pointless driving back and forth and reversing is reminiscent of the desperate ploys of the two tramps trying to ward off despair in Waiting for Godot. Jacobson here modifies Lessing's conception of the veld as man's enemy, conceiving of it as utterly alien and indifferent to the presence of man. This veld, which scares the youthful hunters in "The Game" and maddens the unhappy Jew in "Through the Wilderness", is perhaps as destructive of human aspiration as the violent entropy of Lessing's veld. The obsolete tram tracks branching off into the empty veld symbolise both the narrator's directionless life and man's lost cause.

The style of the passage is suited to this theme of the nullity of his life and the world around him:

Eventually I would drive on to meet the main tarred road, where the view opened out on the town itself: low iron roofs, which always looked black in the strong sunlight; a group of taller buildings in the town centre, also black; some trees, the same; mine-dumps of green sand in a rough circle around the entire scatter of the place.

¹ Jacobson, pp. 159-60.

The writer seems uninterested in, and bored by, the scene before him: "... a group of taller buildings in the town centre, also black; some trees, the same . . ."; the scene's monotony evidently fails to excite the writer, its want of grace or richness of texture is mirrored in a style that is correspondingly vague and dull: ". . . a group of taller buildings . . . some trees, the same . . . the entire scatter of the place". The writer's nihilistic indifference to the world around him (and one takes Jacobson's persona in the story to be representative of his own views and perceptions)¹ leads to a sort of fictional impassivity through which the finer, more delicate forms of things cannot penetrate, resulting in a rather generalised and uninteresting delineation: how large is the "group" of buildings? how tall are they? what sort of buildings? what kind of trees are they? how many are there? The descriptions lack particularity and concreteness: what precisely does Jacobson mean, for example, by "the entire scatter of the place"? One senses one has been drawn into a nebulous picture that irks rather than satisfies one's curiosity. Few details are provided, and those that are could hardly be considered suggestive or piquant. No objects are finely realised and the texture of the writing is smooth and shallow.

The image of the veld's disconcerting blankness and emptiness and a style that is loose and general, conceived in a spirit of apparent boredom particularly when Jacobson is describing an external landscape, are features of much of his South African fiction. Another common feature is the theme of deadlocked relations.

¹ Jacobson seems to feel that the country of his birth is characterised by a violent society, a shallow culture and an empty land. This is evident in both his essays and his fiction. In A Dance in the Sun he describes South Africa as a wide, sad land housing "a multi-tongued nation of nomads", A Dance in the Sun (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1955), p. 141. In his essay "South Africa: Explanations and Speculations", written after a visit to the country in the early 60s, Jacobson wrote:

What I chiefly remember of the country are its spaces, simply; all the unused landscapes of a country that still seems to lie bereft of any human past, untouched by its own history. Blue sky, brown earth, and people who live unaccommodated between: that is the abiding image of South Africa. (Time of Arrival and Other Essays, [London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962], p. 79.)

In "The Box", the narrator's relation with Jan Louw is one of friendly impersonality, at best, and of guilty ambiguity, at worst. Jacobson uses dramatic irony to expose the white narrator's unconscious shallowness as he unthinkingly breaks the box Louw has given him. Even the recognition that Jan is "human" does not lead to a deepening of their relation: "'Stop crying, Jan. You can make another box.' But I could not touch him, I could not put my arm around him. He was still black."¹

Yet the real gulf is not so much the racial barrier as a more universal human inadequacy that Jacobson also writes about in stories that do not have a racial theme--the inability to make real contact with others and with the world. Through the technique of dramatic irony it is made clear that it is not simply the colour bar that separates "Master" and servant: "Unthinking and unfeeling the childhood contact may have been, but it was at least free of that self-consciousness which colour can become . . .".² Master Dandy prefers the lack of commitment characterising the childhood relation to one involving real recognition. There is a distinct lack of conviction on the narrator's part, a cynical indifference, that borders on the callous:

. . . we were saved that sad, stock, embarrassing situation, in which the servant comes back . . . and the gap has grown too great to be crossed by anything but uneasy smiles and a talk of memories that embarrass as one is reminded of them . . . we were saved that in Jan's case, because he was killed at El Adhem, near Tobruk, in the fighting against the Germans in the Western Desert.³

"Beggar My Neighbour" deals with the relation between a white schoolboy and two homeless orphans from a nearby location. The story traces the relation from its first emotional link--the white boy's pity for them--to its final dissolution. There is an element of compassion in the pleasure Michael, the boy, feels, when he alleviates

¹ Jacobson, Through the Wilderness, p. 6.

² Jacobson, p. 7.

³ Jacobson, p. 7.

their hunger by giving them a portion of bread: "He wanted to see them eat it; he wanted to share their pleasure in satisfying their strained appetites".¹ This is one of the only moments of genuine emotion between characters in these stories (another example would be the affection between Paulus and old man Grossman in "The Zulu and the Zeide" and the brief love between Fatty and Sonia in "Sonia"). Yet in his fantasies the boy sees himself as their heroic benefactor and there is an element of condescending self-aggrandisement, which later leads to other, less noble, manifestations, in this early stage of the relation.

His attitude degenerates into maliciousness and scorn, significantly, when he notices they have become dependent on him. In his dreams he sees himself as their tyrannical master:

When they appeared in his games and fantasies, Michael no longer rescued them, healed them . . . Now he ordered them about, sent them away on disastrous missions . . . And because something similar to these fantasies was easier to enact in the real world than his earlier fantasies, Michael soon was ordering them about unreasonably in fact . . . So, as the weeks passed, Michael's scorn gave way to impatience and irritation, irritation to anger.²

Michael starts to hate, fear and "dread" them. His feelings of power and dominance mingle with these fears in a perverse complex of racial intolerance. In a feverish sickness he imagines himself committing sadistic acts upon the children. Jacobson here consciously misleads the reader, showing the boy meeting the orphans and being reconciled with them. It turns out to be another fantasy, the boy waking up to disappointment and emptiness, wishing that his dream had been true.

¹ Jacobson, p. 60.

² Jacobson, p. 65.

The story is an attempt to define the race relation, showing the difficulties or making real contact in a situation that puts whites in a position of power, which leads in Jacobson's view to corruption and thwarted sincerity, and blacks in a position of dependence and poverty, leading, in turn, to a sort of inhuman and "stupid" persistence.¹ There is a suggestion of real sadness at the failure of the relation. Jacobson's stories are more convincing when the author's cynicism is suspended sufficiently as it is here to allow a measure of sincerity to prevail in the portrayal of relations.

Jacobson's theme of human relations reaching a deadlock position often takes the form of a dilemma, an intolerable situation in which people cannot act positively, since there are no potential alternatives that could lead to improvement. In "A Way of Life", for example, a dilemma results from a master-servant relation involving a clash between white liberal sentiments and the awkwardness of retaining a servant who is no longer able to do her job properly.

Lena in the story has no real identity beyond her role as servant to the Capons. She has no tribal loyalties, no religion and her identity papers are in a disorder.² She is a portrait of the rootlessness accompanying detribalisation and apartheid. She becomes chronically sick and finds herself dependent upon her employers for her livelihood. They have become her life-bearers as she has nowhere else to go. They are confronted by a dilemma:

What could they do with her? They couldn't pay for her upkeep indefinitely . . . But to send Lena away, to turn her out of doors, and to tell her to go to the dreaded Native Affairs Department to claim her sixty pennies a week, or to send her trudging the streets looking for another job - that was impossible too.³

¹ Jacobson, p. 65.

² Jacobson, p. 48.

³ Jacobson, p. 56.

Their position fits Kierkegaard's criteria for the despair of necessity, when there is no promise of change and life has become dull and hopeless. The dilemma also occurs in "Trial and Error": Bothwell hates his live-in girlfriend for having deserted him but accepts her back because he fears being left alone more strongly than he despises her.

This tripartite set of elements--a vacuist conception of the veld, a stark, impersonal, style and the theme of thwarted human relations--is characteristic of Jacobson's two important novellas, The Trap and A Dance in the Sun. An Existentialist pessimism can be seen to underpin these works.

The Trap opens in a moment of respite and innocence with an early morning scene on the veld at Driehoek, where Jacob van Schoor is a stock farmer: ". . . the land looked as though it were reposing; peaceful, and as yet not savaged by the sun".¹ This latter omniscient comment, suggesting transience of the innocence in a "savaged" world, foreshadows the violence and disorder that is shortly to erupt. An ironic light is cast on the peace of morning. The story ends on a violent note in the darkness of a veld that Jacobson invests with foreboding. If the darkness symbolises this undercurrent of violence and the sun brings devastation and merciless heat, then the respite of dawn is brief indeed. Even the innocence itself is tainted--one of Van Schoor's labourers, Setole, lies like "a heap of old clothing"² on the veld, the blood dry on his mouth from the beating he got from "boss-boy" Willem the previous night:

How quiet everything was, and peaceful - the cool veld,
the indifferent broken line of the river. Only Setole was
a flaw in the morning: a crack in the cup of stillness, a
mark on the veld.³

¹ Dan Jacobson, The Trap (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1955), p. 11.

² Jacobson, p. 11.

³ Jacobson, p. 12.

The effect of opening the novel with this ironically conceived scene of innocence and "repose" is to create a cycle of violence--from the beating up of Setole on the night before the story begins to the beating Van Schoor gives Willem at the end--that frames everything in the story. Setole's "innocence" is as much lent by the effect of the previous night's drunkenness as by his own guileless simplicity:

Even on that hardened veld the morning rested with tenderness, the softness of birth. And Setole, one eye open and blood on his black skin, sat on the ground and looked about him, open to the veld, seeming almost in his patience and simple perceptiveness, a part of it.¹

Jacobson's similes--the "heap of old clothing", the "crack in the cup of stillness" and the "mark on the veld"--suggest degradation and dehumanisation, picturing Setole as an intrusion, a mistake, an accident, rather than "a part of it". The metaphorical language thus undercuts the narrative statements. Setole, who awakes "as though he had just been born and was staring around him with wonder, and no suspicion",² is, in fact, babbalas. In this state, he has probably forgotten that he was beaten up and so the connotations of innocence and birth are ironic.

As the sun rises, the dubious illusion of innocence is stripped away: "Now that he was standing he looked merely wretched, a tattered and broken Zulu".³ Jacobson, like Lessing, who appears to be something of his artistic mentor, uses anti-heroic methods of characterisation, exposing the degradation and weaknesses of his characters as something more fundamental than goodness or "innocence". There is, however, a double irony, in that Setole is "innocent" of the deed that leads to his expulsion from the farm, even if he is a "wretched" man.

¹ Jacobson, p. 14.

² Jacobson, p. 13.

³ Jacobson, p. 20.

Jacobson also adopts the technique in these novellas of a negative development of plot by which the action leads not towards epiphany and dénouement, but towards further degradation and violence.

Van Schoor confronts Willem that evening, to find out why Setole was beaten up. Twilight on the veld is less amenable to man than dawn was:

"You!" Van Schoor exclaimed. He stared through the twilight, trying to make out the expression on Willem's face. But he could see nothing. The veld around them was dark, and the rocks were humped closely in still blacker masses. High in the sky, there hung a thinner darkness, the sky still held some light, as faint as a breath, and as tenuous . . . The rest of the world was hooded in darkness. "You?" van Schoor asked.¹

Van Schoor is perturbed by the darkness, as shown by the timid "You?", in contrast to "You!". The veld is seen as vaguely menacing, even the rocks seem affected, "humped closely" together like frightened animals. The light is only a tenuous "breath". The "hooded" darkness suggests something hidden and conspiratorial.

Van Schoor falls into Willem's trap so readily that the characterisation here seems contrived. Why should he believe the boss-boy so readily without bothering to find out Setole's side of the story? As was the case in The Grass is Singing, weak characterisation, which seems to be a danger in the anti-heroic mode, often results in gratuitous action and shallow plot development.

Van Schoor expels Setole against his intuition, and this disturbs him and spurs him on to his second act of violence (he earlier pushed over Willem's son, perhaps more maliciously than playfully²). He shakes the "humble and wretched kaffir",³ who staggers back and falls over:

¹ Jacobson, p. 23.

² Jacobson, p. 20.

³ Jacobson, p. 36.

Setole said nothing. He did not seem obstinate; it was more as though he were too old and timid to waste his breath in a vain shouting across the desert between them.¹

The veld intimidates Setole and seems to be implicated in his final defeat. As in "A Way of Life" the black servant is rootless when without employment:

Setole moved his arms, holding them away from his body, like someone ready to go but not sure of the direction . . . Van Schoor stood aside: it was like a direction that he was giving. And Setole took the direction.²

Setole is compared to a "bird trying to fly with a broken wing" and a "fractured hand trying to grasp an object",³ similes that draw attention to his fragmented self, his helpless dependence on his white employer. He is without his own "direction" and so cannot take on the existential responsibility of "inventing" himself (Sartre); he is not whole, but "fractured". The imagery associating Setole with dehumanisation is one of the most effective elements in the novella, along with the characterisation of the veld, scorched and hostile under a relentless sky by day, and ominous, conspiring with evil, by night.

Setole's despair is like Lena's in "A Way of Life"--the rootless, hopeless life of the dependent, detribalised "Kaffir". He is like "an untrained dog"⁴ and his eyes are "like mud".⁵ He has no direction, no wholeness of self, no apparent human status. Jacobson cleverly roots this dehumanisation in the eye of the beholder, the white oppressor--it was through Van Schoor's eyes that Setole was seen both as a bundle of old clothing "humble and wretched", and like a "dog". Jacobson attributes some innocence and simplicity to Setole that Van Schoor misses, since the latter accepts without hesitation Willem's view of Setole as a "dog".

¹ Jacobson, p. 38.

² Jacobson, p. 27.

³ Jacobson, p. 27.

⁴ Jacobson, p. 41.

⁵ Jacobson, p. 44.

In like manner, dehumanising metaphors are shown to originate in the mind of the brutal Maclachlan in Part Two:

They (a group of Coloured layabouts) stood in the shade against the wall, or simply squatted in the heat and dust. Maclachlan saw them: they were like flies to him, creatures congregating round the bar like flies around a piece of offal, all to be destroyed.¹

Here Jacobson depicts, his character prejudices. The cat Maclachlan watches catching its prey, a locust, is symbolic of his own violent prejudice that sees the Coloureds as "flies" . . . to be destroyed".

The theme of violence, a common element in Jacobson's fiction about South Africa is prevalent, too, in other English South African fiction, from the cruelty and sadism of Bonaparte Blenkins and Tant' Sannie in The Story of an African Farm, the racist intolerance of Soper, Bloodfield and Flesher in Turbott Wolfe, the hateful racism of Mary Turner and the vengeance of Moses in The Grass is Singing, to the violence of the colonizer in J.M. Coetzee's novels.

Africa's "almighty violence" in Turbott Wolfe, and the African veld's destructiveness in The Grass is Singing are echoed in the terrible dust storm that hits Van Schoor's farm, reflecting symbolically the human violence building up on the level of the plot as the conspiracy against the white farmer develops. The storm is described as the "siege of dust",² connoting aggression, and recalling Lessing's concept of the veld as an "enemy". The heat "strikes" the farm³ and the wind blows up from the desert, covering everything with dust. After the dust storm, the sun plunges a "skewer" into the heat of the earth,⁴ thrusting it deeper "until at last the land was transfixed with drought". This militaristic imagery depicts the drought as an onslaught by the sun: ". . . every morning the sun rose in the east and the crucifixion went on methodically".

¹ Jacobson, p. 45.

² Jacobson, p. 67.

³ Jacobson, p. 42.

⁴ Jacobson, p. 70.

Further, the sun "fades" Van Schoor and, to an extent, hardens away some of his human qualities: "He had the strength of leather, of biltong . . . the strength of anything left long in the . . . sun".¹ The implication of Jacobson's metaphor of the sun is that the prevalent violence of the platteland society is somehow related to the metaphysical hostility of the place. Plomer opts in Turbott Wolfe for a similar explanation for the barbarous antics of the colonists.² The heat drugs the veld, putting the farm in a "trance",³ "shakes" the veld, causes the insects to scream and drops a pall of oppressive silence over Driehoek. The land is "locked" in the heat, "seized" with the sun,⁴ suggesting the sun's antagonistic power. The sunsets are "crazy" with "violent colours". These vivid descriptions of the drought as something grotesquely active rather than as a passive condition of the land are one of the novella's most impressive features. The macrocosm parallels the violent emotions brewing amongst the characters, which surface as the plot to steal Van Schoor's stock at Willem's bidding fails.

Prinsloo, a policeman in cahoots with Maclachlan (as Slatter is with Denham in The Grass is Singing) strikes Willem after the latter has been arrested for stock theft in a set-up job; Maclachlan also strikes him and then Van Schoor sets on him feeling an "orgy" of violence welling up in him.⁵ Willem collapses "like a sack of potatoes". This recalls the ignominious posture Setole was in at the start of the novel.

The final scene in which all feel violent towards one another is rather predictable and contrived, because overdone, an ending that looks preconceived in spite of the metaphoric link with the hostile setting.

¹ Jacobson, The Trap, p. 70.

² See Chapter Three, p. 66.

³ Jacobson, p. 73.

⁴ Jacobson, p. 75.

⁵ Jacobson, p. 93.

Jacobson's South African fiction is, to an extent, formularised: a fundamentally negative life-situation is created by depicting an inimical metaphysical setting, usually a South African dorp in the midst of the relentless veld, in which a set of characters, conceived in the anti-heroic mode, whose wickedness or weaknesses are stressed to the virtual exclusion of positive qualities, are made to play out hapless, self-defeating roles in a plot that leads every time to a futile or violent end.¹

A Dance in the Sun follows this pattern to a tee. First, there is a metaphysical antagonism bedevilling the two student hikers hitching down to Cape Town through the Karoo:

We took up our position on the road outside the village in which we spent the night, and stood there for hours, while the sun climbed higher and grew fiercer, and the sky paled, and dust hung in the air above us . . . As the sun stalked higher, our shade shrank. And the veld was enormous and empty, and the sun seemed to have seized the land, sucking all the strength from the thorn trees, and the earth, and our own bodies, leaving husks behind, husks of earth, husks of koppies, the vast empty husk of a desert.²

Here are Jacobson's typical motifs of dust, heat, emptiness, vastness and insubstantiality. The symbol of the dead horse seems incongruent (one associates sheep, rather than horses, with the Karoo): "It was gone in a moment: when I looked back it might have been a rock, an ant-heap, anything."³ Even death seems dwarfed by the vastness of the Great Karoo. The carcass has lost its recognisable identity and might be "anything". This opening

¹ This is true of the bulk of stories in Through the Wilderness, of the two South African novellas The Trap and A Dance in the Sun, of novels like The Price of Diamonds and The Beginners and, mutatis mutandis, of his British fiction, as in The Rape of Tamar, The Wonder-Worker and The Confessions of Josef Baisz. The preoccupation with the veld is, of course, absent in these latter novels which do not have South African settings. There is a sense in which Jacobson's British fiction is far less "metaphysical".

² Jacobson, A Dance in the Sun, p. 63.

³ Jacobson, p. 64.

creates a certain death-in-life atmosphere, appropriate for the development of the Existential themes of alienation and absurdity. Gray's concept of "Zombiehood" is apposite here as a description of the spiritual condition of the main characters in this novella.¹

The village of Mirredal, where the misadventure of the story takes place, is Jacobson's typical nondescript South African dorp: "It didn't look much of a place either. The usual Karoo village with its two or three wide sandy streets . . .".² As in "The Stranger", the village is as insubstantial as the vast surrounding space:

The whole village (had) . . . too much space for what it was . . . Everything looked impermanent . . . and only the decrepitude of the village showed for how long a time it had been there.³

In the fiction of Lessing and Jacobson the power of entropy is destructive of human life.

Again, Jacobson cohesively integrates setting and characterisation, for this outer disintegration reflects the moral corruption evident at the Fletcher's boarding-house, just as the insubstantiality of the Karoo world embodies something of the hollow, empty characters inhabiting it. This is an Existential world where nothingness looms large. There is a perfect correlation between place and character, for example, in the scene where the student narrator meets the landlady for the first time:

The place was silent, deserted in appearance, like a house that had been abandoned and left to rot and crumble away in the heat, no one caring.⁴

¹ Gray writes, "If Africa may be said to spook its white English inhabitants, the walking dead who stalk the pages of their fiction are the inevitable consequence", Southern African Literature: An Introduction, p. 154.

² Jacobson, p. 67.

³ Jacobson, p. 67.

⁴ Jacobson, p. 70.

She was thin and slight and grey, grey-haired, grey-skinned. Even her lips were colourless. But under the thin lids that she occasionally dropped over her eyes, and let linger, there were, when she opened them, eyes of the palest blue, the lightest colour, as though they too were fading, dissolving into no colour. She looked at me and her eyes seemed transparent, and there was nothing behind them: the translucence seemed more a state of mind than a physical phenomenon.¹

This theme of dissolution is invoked from the beginning of the story, with the carcass of the horse decomposing in the bushes, to the end, with the lone figure of Fletcher dancing in the dust, mad like the blazing sun. It is an omnipresent theme in Jacobson's work and is an oppressively repetitive and laborious element both in this novella and in other of his works.

Jacobson grills the reader with what can be called the nihilist effect. Mrs Fletcher then speaks and her voice is "neutral, South African", as might be expected of an insipid Jacobsonian character. The portrait in the reception foyer, of the father of the hostess, is that of a non-entity: "His face was cream-coloured and looked like nobody special . . .". Once the students have been shown to their room by this zombie-like woman, the windows are opened to let in some air, but instead of being fresh, the air is "heavy, laden with all the weariness of the late afternoon in a desert climate". Jacobson leaves no stone unturned . . .

It is clear that this effect is Jacobson's central concern in this story, his basic theme and principal technique. He degrades characters, paints objects and scenes in a bleak, dismal light and constructs negative plots that promise characters a sticky end.

Fletcher is no less unappealing. His face has the gloss of an animal and he sits at the dinner table "half-crouched over his food".² He holds pessimistic views about the future of the world, positing a nuclear war as inevitable. The elite governors of his post-nuclear war world would be whites. "All the educated kaffirs should be shot," he declares. His opinions seem unsavoury, like their author.

¹ Jacobson, p. 71.

² Jacobson, p. 74.

The food is equally undelectable--the soup is "watery" and the meat "stringy". Nothing in Jacobson's anti-heroic fictional world seems to have any value.

The desolate landscape is, effectively, a vacuum:

Even within my circumscribed sight I could see how forlorn all the growing things were. I could see one taller thorn-tree standing up from the surface of the veld: the light pierced through its rough branches and small spike-like leaves in a thousand places, leaving it black and tangled and weightless, like something that could be blown away in the first strong gust of wind . . . Growth here was a bitter and constricted business. The only thing that was not constricted was the sky and the space of earth. There was an immensity of space above my head, and the night gathering above could not hide the great sweep of earth away from my little summit, a lavish generosity of space given unconditionally to drought and silence.¹

Even the tallest thorn-tree is tangled and "weightless", emblem of a growth that is "bitter and constricted". The meaning of this symbolism is clear.

The real world itself is called into doubt: "But light and sound together throbbing cast the house itself in doubt - a house, it seemed, in a dream, for nothing in the steady earth outside throbbed as this house did, like a dream, a plasm."² Ordinary perception has its hazards, too, for the sceptical nihilist not convinced about the value or reality of anything.

Yet the ethereality and insubstantiality of this world is a strange context for all the violence that is to take place--or is there a connection? Is violence, in fact, a symptom of existential desperation resulting from the intolerable meaninglessness and alienation of life? The heat and emptiness of the desert have been shown to have adverse effects in Jacobson's fiction. Existentialists point out the need for affirmation in the face of life without an essence or purpose (Sartre, Tillich, Camus)--is this the only "affirmation" left in a nihilist world where everything has a negative

¹ Jacobson, pp. 82-3.

² Jacobson, p. 96.

value? Violence in this story, then, may well be symptomatic of sheer despair and the madness of absurdity, as is Fletcher's dance in the dust at the end of the novel:

We turned to look at Fletcher. Fletcher was dancing. Alone in the veld, in the middle of his dusty piece of ground, Fletcher was dancing with humiliation and rage and despair . . . We left him dancing there, solitary in the veld, a grotesque little figure, capering under a blazing sun.¹

This theory of violence, as a desperate grasp at affirmation in an absurd world of negation and insignificance, reappears in sophisticated, intellectualized form in the novels of J.M. Coetzee.²

There is also a sense of repression resulting in bottled up emotions and frustration. Fletcher explains that "In this house everything stays locked", even the bottle of sherry, through fear of theft by servants.³ And behind these fears is the one overwhelming fear of Joseph, waiting for Nasie's return, out in the darkness, dominating the psyche of the Fletchers by mere persistence. The fear of a Black Nemesis was voiced earlier--"All the educated kaffirs should be shot". This fear was seen in the apocalyptic endings of The Grass is Singing and "The Stranger". The notion of repression is a fundamental element in English South African fiction, from the Freudian struggles of Turbott Wolfe to the deep frustration and despair of the lonely, neglected spinster Magda in In the Heart of the Country.

The liberal white student who narrates the story is a lone existential figure, homeless, alien, without identity or purpose, a European-minded white without a European-type society around him:

¹ Jacobson, p. 205.

² See Chapter Nine, p. 206.

³ Jacobson, p. 112.

It was a kind of homesickness I felt then, but it was a sickness for a home I had never had, for a single cultivated scene, for a country less empty and violent . . . a multi-tongued nation of nomads we seemed to be, across a country too big and silent for us, too dry for cultivation . . . We were caught within it, within this wide, sad land we mined but did not cultivate.¹

This type of social alienation was noted as a primary element in Wolfe's final decision to leave Africa.² This longing for a "cultivated" society affected Jacobson personally and was one main reason why he left the country.³

Jacobson's theme of the difficulty of establishing authentic human relations across race lines, which owes much to the Existential position that stresses the isolation of people in a life that is metaphysically meaningless, is a further element in the life-situation of A Dance in the Sun. This is evident when the narrator refuses rather paternalistically to take money from Joseph after giving him information: "(Joseph) had exposed the tenacity

¹ Jacobson, A Dance in the Sun, pp. 140-1.

² See Chapter Three, p.65.

³ Jacobson explained what he saw as the position of the white writer in "Out of Africa", an essay in Time of Arrival (and other essays):

The white writer is a member of a society which has no roots in the past, or no past at all; his present, so far as it is stable, is tawdry, vulgar and thin . . ." (p. 175)

In his introduction to The Story of an African Farm (1883; Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1979), he wrote that a colonial culture like South Africa's is "one with no memory", that is, one with a deep chasm in its being. For Jacobson, who holds a view of culture similar to T.S. Eliot's concept of tradition, the "human reality" of a civilisation "is a reality only if there is some continuity to it" ("Out of Africa", p. 172). In the essay "Time of Arrival", Jacobson pointed out his reason for leaving South Africa:

In England, it became clear to me that, through England, I wanted to escape from the ironies, ambiguities and humiliations of my own position as a Jew, as a white South African, as a "colonial", as a young man who didn't know what to do with his life. (p. 36)

In his fiction Jacobson constantly exposes what he sees as the social tenuousness of South African society and life. A Dance in the Sun can be read, in effect, as his fictional picture of South African society.

and duplicity of my own feelings of white baaskap - my own 'liberal' intolerances, my own assertion of where his place should be, and where mine".¹ Throughout his South African fiction, Jacobson shows how complex race relations are, as in the stories "The Box" and "A Way of Life". The latter highlights the dilemma of the liberal in South African society. As Stephen Watson has pointed out, this dilemma is a recurrent feature of English South African fiction.² Nadine Gordimer also reveals in her novels the complexity of establishing real contact beyond the colour bar³ and J.M. Coetzee dramatises the dehumanisation that accompanies colonial Master/Servant codes of behaviour.⁴

As in The Grass is Singing there are serious weaknesses in the plot of A Dance in the Sun. The subplot involving Joseph and Nasie is very thin, despite its importance as the primum mobile of the action of the story. Questions like the following immediately spring to mind: why did Joseph leave his sister behind at the Fletchers' when he went to work for the railways if he has such a "profound family feeling"?⁵ And why does he go to Johannesburg to save money when he suspects his sister has disappeared after giving birth to a half-caste baby fathered by Louw, to return to Mirredal without any plan of action?⁶ And why does Nasie return knowing Joseph is waiting for him, and then leave again when the going gets rough? Why does Fletcher only threaten to call the police to have Joseph removed from the premises for loitering after the latter has been "loitering" for months, waiting for Nasie to return? And what has Joseph to gain by staying on at the Fletchers' after Louw has left? What has happened

¹ Jacobson, A Dance in the Sun, pp. 155-6.

² Jacobson is one of the novelists Watson discusses in his unpublished M.A. thesis, "The Liberal Ideology and Some South African Novelists", Cape Town, 1980.

³ A World of Strangers, The Late Bourgeois World and The Conservationist are perhaps the most pertinent exemplifications of this particular theme in Gordimer's work.

⁴ See Chapter Nine, pp. 222.

⁵ Jacobson, A Dance in the Sun, p. 169.

⁶ "He did not know what he would do when he returned to Mirredal, but whatever it might be, he wanted to have money to be able to do it", A Dance in the Sun, pp. 171-2.

to the search for his sister and her baby? If this is no longer important to him after the departure of Nasie why did he spend so long stalking his prey, accumulating information to get the full story? How can Fletcher do an about-face and accept Joseph in his employ after earlier ordering him off the premises (he is in any case paranoid about Joseph)?

The plot seems nebulous and contradictory, as does the plot at several points in The Grass is Singing. Is there a connection between those writers' nihilistic philosophy that nothing has value and reality and the shallowness of characterisation and plot in these works? It seems that the nihilist world-view in these cases results in a negative conception of characters and human action as without real potential, which in turn leads directly to the effect of shallowness. If the justification for this is that this world-picture operating in these stories emphasises the absurdity of human action and the value^{less}ness of life, then it can only be concluded that such a philosophy tends to diminish the artistic coherence of the fictional work when it is not allied to the usual concerns of the novelist to create a serious and intense picture of human experience profoundly realised in a novel's form.¹

CONCLUSION

By Jacobson's own criteria, his fiction is found wanting. He argues that fiction centres in the human experience of individuals in specific situations: a novelist, he has said, "knows that any political or moral abstraction has its real life and importance with the individual men who are affected by it".² It is the characters who represent individual experience in the fictional work: "the characters in a novel are the novelist's individual foci of consciousness; they, ultimately, are what the novelist knows . . .".

¹ See Chapter One, p. 8. for an explanation of this principle.

² Jacobson, "Why Read Novels", in Time of Arrival (and other essays), p. 138.

For Jacobson the real subject of a novel is the consciousness of the characters: ". . . the novel is about consciousness, about the degrees, the modes, the states of consciousness which men have experienced". This, however, is related to the broader perspective on experience adopted by the author, the novelist's world-view: "What the novel always strives for is a total consciousness, a total illumination of the experience which it attempts to describe". The reader, or critic, judges a novel "by the extent to which it enlarges or falls short of our own total awareness of the fullness and variety of life as we have experienced it".

Jacobson's own characters, however, are monotonously anti-heroic, more plagued by vices and misfortunes than blessed with virtues and successes--angry, frustrated fools like Fletcher in A Dance in the Sun and the duped Van Schoor in The Trap; violent and malicious malcontents like Fletcher and Nasie in A Dance in the Sun, Van Schoor in the latter part of The Trap as well as Willem and Maclachlan, the two white families in "A Day in the Country" and Harry Grossman in "The Zulu and the Zeide"; lone, alienated figures like the narrator of "Through the Wilderness", the main character in "The Stranger", the narrator of A Dance in the Sun, and Mrs Fletcher; deceivers, crooks, double-dealers or spies like Willem and Maclachlan in The Trap, Yonadab in The Rape of Tamar, Baisz in The Confessions of Josef Baisz, the parents in "The Little Pet", Frederick Traill in "Fresh Fields" and Mawgan in "The Pretenders" in Through the Wilderness. This gallery of anti-heroes is a little too one-sided to convey what Jacobson called "the fullness and variety of life as we have experienced^{it}". The criticism seems justified that Jacobson's typical characters are hardly indicative of the full scope of "the degrees,^{the} modes, the states of consciousness which men have experienced". He exemplifies only those aspects of experience that confirm his nihilist premises and lacks the kind of "negative capability" Lukács, for one, expected of the great realist writer.¹

¹ Georg Lukács, Studies in European Realism (London: Hillway Publishing Co., 1950), p. 11. Lukács states, "This ruthlessness towards their own subjective world-picture is the hall-mark of all great realists."

The nebulosness at certain points in the plots of these two novellas is perhaps due to Jacobson's limited grasp of the intricacies of characterisation. Examples of this shortfall are the incident in which Van Schoor gratuitously falls into Willem's "trap" and the confusion of motive and action in the subplot of A Dance in the Sun.

Jacobson's Existential themes, then, of metaphysical meaninglessness and the absurdity of human action, are given monotonous treatment in the totality of his work. The impression is left of a formularised fiction, which accords very definitely with Northrop Frye's model of colonial literature.¹ Jacobson's literary successors in the field of English South African fiction, for whom his work is something of a stepping-stone, linking their own work to Lessing's fiction, Nadine Gordimer and J.M. Coetzee, though equally indebted to the Existentialist Sartrean tradition and to modernist techniques like anti-heroism, build upon a much sounder artistic foundation in their work.

¹ Frye's notion of a disjunction between form and content in Canadian colonial literature, and its application in a study of English South African fiction, is discussed in Chapter One.

CHAPTER EIGHT : MODERNISM AND THE DESPAIR OF CAPITALISM
IN THE CONSERVATIONIST

OVERVIEW

David Lodge in The Modes of Modern Writing outlines some of the main characteristics of modernist fiction. He conceives of it as the antithesis of realistic fiction, more to do with "consciousness and . . . the subconscious and unconscious workings of the human mind",¹ than with an empirical account of "the action of individuals in time"² that characterises the realist tradition. One consequence of the modernist's aim of reflecting the workings of human consciousness rather than "action" in empirically documented settings is a diminution in the fiction of "narrative structure and unity":

Hence the structure of external objective events essential to traditional narrative art is diminished in scope and scale . . . or is almost completely dissolved, in order to make room for introspection, analysis, reflection and reverie. A modernist novel has no real "beginning" since it plunges us into a flowing stream of experience . . .³

Modernist fiction, that is, is not concerned with a chronology of narrative events and is unified by "alternative methods of aesthetic ordering . . . such as allusion to . . . mythical archetypes, and the repetition-with-variation of motifs, images, symbols".

Georg Lukács has shown that Existentialism and modernism have common philosophical assumptions. For Lukács it is the writer's "weltanschauung" that determines the "formative principles" of a

¹ David Lodge, The Modes of Modern Writing (London: Edward Arnold, 1977), p. 45.

² Lodge, p. 25.

³ Lodge, p. 45.

writing style.¹ Consequently the modernist fictional form presupposes a certain "view of man" as "solitary, asocial, unable to enter into relationships with other human beings".² According to Lukács, an Existential condition humaine is thus evoked in modernist novels:

[The] modernist hero is strictly confined within the limits of his own experience. There is not for him . . . any pre-existent reality beyond his own self, acting upon him or being acted upon by him. Secondly, the hero is himself without personal history. He is "thrown-into-the-world": meaninglessly, unfathomably.³

Lukács distinguishes between "subjective" and "concrete" potentialities: the former being "subjective states not decisive in action" which exist only in the imagination of the character and are thus "inauthentic",⁴ while the latter result in active decisions and constructive action.⁵ For Lukács modernism neglects concrete potentialities in favour of the "bad infinity" of "purely abstract potentialities".⁶ There is a stress on the "disintegration of personality": an "obsession with psychopathology",⁷ which Lukács traces back to the influence of Existential philosophy.⁸ The result is a confusing lack of perspective in modernist fiction.⁹

The Conservationist illustrates both Lodge's idea of the modernist novel as a "flowing stream of experience" which is ordered by an "aesthetic" principle and Lukács's point that modernist characters are conceived in Existential terms. However, the novel is also a fervent critique of Capitalism and its central dynamic, or source of creative tension, is the working out in the novel's form of this apparent contradiction between Existential philosophy and Marxist leanings.

¹ Georg Lukács, The Meaning of Contemporary Realism (London: Merlin Press, 1972), p. 19.

² Lukács, p. 19.

³ Lukács, p. 21.

⁴ Lukács, p. 23.

⁵ Lukács, p. 21.

⁶ Lukács, p. 24.

⁷ Lukács, p. 36.

⁸ Lukács, p. 28.

⁹ Lukács, p. 33.

Stephen Watson has correctly noted that Gordimer's fiction has developed from traditional realism to modernism.¹ An early novel like A World of Strangers (1958) is certainly a story with a strong thematic content, written in a sensuous descriptive style,² and even a novel from Gordimer's mature middle period like A Guest of Honour (1971) follows this pattern whereby narrative events predominate and a lyrical realism is the principal method of description, whereas later novels like The Conservationist (1974) and Burger's Daughter (1979) are less "stories" than modernist works depicting in "a flowing stream of experience" the disintegration of the central protagonist's psyche. Gordimer's short stories, though, which some critics see as her best work,³ are richly descriptive realist vignettes of acknowledged distinction. Gordimer's early writing is predominantly a lyrical "particularising"⁴ and it is only in her latest novels that "alternative methods of aesthetic ordering" are explored.

¹ Stephen Watson, "The Liberal Ideology and Some South African Novelists," Cape Town, 1980, p. 229.

² Robert Green, for example, in "Nadine Gordimer's A World of Strangers: Strains in South African Liberalism" in English Studies in Africa 22 (1), March 1979, writes, "The strength, then, of A World of Strangers is documentary, its creation of the external world - buildings, places, minor characters . . .", p. 48. Lionel Abrahams in "Nadine Gordimer: The Transparent Ego" describes Gordimer's writing as a "recording" art (English Studies in Africa 3 (2), September 1960, p. 148). And H.K. Girling in "Provincial and Continental: Writers in South Africa" in English Studies in Africa 3 (2), September 1960, writes, "Peoples and things in her books are seen in a hard brilliant light that emphasizes weights, volumes and surfaces, the edginess of material objects . . ." p. 116.

³ Such as Lionel Abrahams (see "Nadine Gordimer: The Transparent Ego", p. 149) and Mary M. Webster (see English and South Africa ed. A. Lennox-Short [Cape Town: Nasau Limited], p. 51).

⁴ A phrase used by Alan Lomberg to describe Gordimer's realist style (see "Withering into Truth: The Romantic Realism of Nadine Gordimer" in English in Africa 3 (1) 1976, p. 2).

The Conservationist is not a liberal-realist novel as Stephen Gray has suggested,¹ but an Existentialist-modernist novel which nevertheless contains a subtle infrastructure of Marxist analysis. It belongs to the tradition of South African novels going back to Lessing's The Grass is Singing, (and ultimately to The Story of an African Farm, though for different reasons than for those Gray posits) in which Existential themes of absurdity and meaninglessness prevail. The picture of a "disembodied" Mehring tanning in the moonlight in the twenty-first chapter, sitting alone on the stoep of the outhouse, for example, has rather surrealist overtones.² This existential despair, though, is related in The Conservationist to a Marxist analysis of South African society. Dan Jacobson's fiction, though Existentialist in theme, is not modernist in technique. He thus provides impetus for the development of the philosophy that still dominates English South African fiction today, especially owing to the influence of J.M. Coetzee, while it is Nadine Gordimer, in her later fiction, who first develops the incipient modernism of Lessing's seminal novel into a mature aesthetic. The Conservationist, perhaps Gordimer's best work, which won the Booker Prize jointly in 1974, is her most accomplished and comprehensively modernist piece, which is able yet to embody elements of a Marxist perspective. It is thus of major significance in a study of contemporary English South African fiction.

¹ Gray sees The Conservationist as a central novel in what he calls the liberal-realist tradition in English South African fiction (see Southern African Literature: An Introduction, p. 151).

² Nadine Gordimer, The Conservationist 3rd Edition (1974; Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd, 1978), p. 208.

MODERNISM AND THE DESPAIR OF CAPITALISM IN
THE CONSERVATIONIST

Gordimer employs a basically third person limited point of view with a stream-of-consciousness emphasis in order to construct a modernist narrative which presents a psychological portrait of the white man in Africa. Doris Lessing likewise focused narrative attention on Mary Turner, while retaining the omniscient stance needed to put her case study in a social context. Gordimer focuses more exclusively on Mehring than this but follows Lessing in presenting a social context beyond Mehring's mind and personality, placing his despair into a definite social world. Yet there are very few incidents or descriptions presented from outside Mehring's range of consciousness, whereas the first two chapters of The Grass is Singing, for example, are written from an omniscient perspective with Mary Turner as a passive protagonist (a corpse in Chapter One and an object of a biographical study in Chapter Two). Mehring is cleverly left out of the narrative for a while when he is cut off from the farm after the floods and Jacobus takes full command of the emergency situation, but this is to echo the gradual rise of Jacobus to the position of "baas" of the farm and is thus a deliberate change in narrative focus for a thematic purpose. This method is also used earlier in the fifth chapter when Mehring is away in Japan for a week and Jacobus, once more, dominates life on the farm. The eighth and ninth chapters see Jacobus managing the affairs of the compound, as he looks for a job for Dorcas's husband. Jacobus has all the keys of the farm and this symbolises his independence and influence on it. The cigar butts in the ashtray in the deserted farmhouse (that smells of cats) seen through the chief herdsman's eyes seem a forlorn symbol of the sterility and deadness of the absentee owner's relation to his farm.¹ As key-bearer on the farm Jacobus is more than an overseer, repairing, organising, advising, driving the tractor, phoning Mehring and fighting off the

¹ Gordimer, p. 65.

fire: he is the real conservationist, the true inheritor of the land, even if it is in a "white" area.

Gordimer shifts her narrative focus to highlight Mehring's incongruent position as white baas in other ways: the pieces of paper blown against the location fence in the eleventh chapter, for example, recall the pieces of Terry's letter Mehring tears up in the previous chapter. This casts an ironic light on his fastidiousness about not letting any of the pieces fall and become rubbish. The implication is not so much that the location is like a dump but that Mehring's bourgeois habits and values go hand-in-hand with his position on the rich side of capitalism. Gordimer sees beyond the purely modernist narrative stance to reveal the broader causes of Mehring's hopelessness.

Gordimer also focuses attention on the goings-on at the Indian store (in the fourteenth and twenty-second chapters) without reference to Mehring in order to indicate the prominent, if insecure, social position of the Indian family in the capitalist hierarchy--they and Mehring both have black servants and have direct access to the free market. The same isolation afflicts both and Mehring's estrangement from his son is reflected in a similar gap between Jalal and his father. In both chapters in which the narrative is focused on the store it does so to reveal tensions (such as the worry about being evicted from the "white" area) associated with a class position that operates at the expense of another which it then construes as a social threat and hems out with a high fence and vicious dogs. Gordimer uses her shifting narrative stance, then, to expose the nature of social relations in a highly structured society from its different bird's-eye viewpoints. The splitting up of narrative omniscience in this manner--from Mehring to Jacobus to the location (from the outside, though) to the Indian store--embodies the themes of estrangement in the uneasy social predicament of Group Areas.

Although Mehring's consciousness is the basic medium through which the narrative is presented, then, Gordimer situates her modernist anti-hero in a wider social environment from which he is estranged and about which he knows nothing (it is Gordimer who "knows" about the independent life of Jacobus and the hassles of the Indian

store, although she is curiously and consciously silent about the location from the inside thus reinforcing once more on a very provocative level the notion of "Group Areas" estrangement).

The emphasis throughout, however, remains on perception and consciousness, except when Gordimer is describing in omniscient realist detail the papers blowing against the location fence and the tribulations of the compound and the Indian store. It is as if Gordimer only uses stream-of-consciousness for her "white" protagonist, while black, coloured and Indian characters are described from the outside. She is thus adapting her modernist techniques on an ethnographic--and class--basis with the effect that Existential anguish (as opposed to plain old trouble) is attributed to the dominant class position. (And Gordimer shows up the exploitive nature of the class structure when Dorcas's husband is "ripped off" in the pseudo Christmas Club deal.) Gordimer makes the point that such morbid complexity of consciousness is a product of a privileged position. Mehring is a wealthy business magnate who has bought his leisure time and the place in which to enjoy it. The Conservationist may be an Existentialist-modernist novel but it also challenges Lukács's stereotype of this type of novel as lacking in what he called a social perspective.¹ Gordimer juxtaposes modernistic despair and a more overtly social understanding of the problems of life in a racial and capitalist society through a measured shifting of point of view. An effective dialectic is thus set up which provides insight into the background causes of Mehring's alienation while allowing for a close rendition of the quality of that alienation from a psychological angle.

Although Gordimer's use of narrative point of view is subtle and finely controlled, it is the precision of her symbolic motifs that constitutes the real binding factor in The Conservationist. Their extraordinary coherence is perhaps the novel's main achievement.

¹ See p. 172.

Instead of narrative unity, one has a symbolic structure, an alternative method of "aesthetic ordering", in Lodge's terms. Mehring's consciousness is enmeshed in a web of intricate motifs, symbols, metonyms, synecdoches and icons. There are objects lying around (often lost or mislaid) or part of the farm, such as the guinea-fowl eggs, the corpse in the third pasture, the lost ring, the marble, the lost watch, the cigar butts, the pieces of paper (both the letter and the newspaper and litter blown against the location fence), the empty beds in the house, the farm technology (such as the pump, the tractor and the telephone) and the newly-planted Spanish chestnuts. These objects are either overtly symbolic or suggestive of thematic meaning. The corpse, for example, symbolises the death-in-life presence of the white man on the farm, as Gordimer deliberately links the two when Mehring dozes off face down in the third pasture, recalling the position of the corpse when it is first discovered. John Cooke in an article "African Landscapes: The World of Nadine Gordimer" saw the unearthed body of the murdered African as "an omen of death for a white farmer and a prophecy to his African tenants that their land will someday be reclaimed." The guinea-fowl eggs, which are linked with the farm children in the opening scene, sitting in a ritualistic communal position in a nest of long dead grass,² as if "laying" the eggs in a brooding, organic pose, are symbolic of a natural, healthy bond with the land. The lost ring symbolises Mehring's broken marriage and the lost watch his increasing dissociation from the world of organised "urban" time, the city, business, casual sex and dinner parties. The cigar butts and empty beds suggest a burned-out man and his spiritual desolation respectively. The pieces of the torn-up letter are an index of the fragmentation of Mehring's family life and the frustration of his grim isolation while the chestnuts represent Mehring's Europe-in-Africa identity (a theme reinforced by his frequent trips to Japan). The pump and tractor are synecdoches for the farm technology owned by the white man but operated

¹ John Cooke, "African Landscapes: The World of Nadine Gordimer". in World Literature Today 52 (4), Autumn 1978, p. 534.

² Gordimer, p. 9.

by Jacobus (symbolising, perhaps, the envisaged take-over of the white man's Western technological society by the black underlings, a scenario which Gordimer envisages in July's People¹). The compound children, so insidiously silent and part of an underlying reality Mehring cannot grasp, are a shadowy background motif, too.

Other metonymic, synecdochic and symbolic items abound, such as the metonymic drum-beating at the compound (significantly on an oil drum, symbolising an interaction of European technology and African rhythms), the synecdochic references to shows, boots and feet with Gordimer asking the question, whose feet are closest to the earth? (Jacobus's gumboots, the blood-stained boots of Dorcas's husband who has found a job at the abattoir, Mehring's boots left at the farmhouse and polished by the servants, the grey dust covering his boots as he walks across the blackened veld after the fire, Terry's bare feet, Jacobus's leaking gumboots after the floods, the shoes of the corpse and the stockinged calves of the plain-clothes policeman leading down, no doubt, to a pair of veldskoene . . .), the jet-planes flying overhead on their way to Europe, reinforcing the Europe-in-Africa theme and the motifs of drought, fire and flood suggesting a harshness of nature that Mehring cannot cope with. As a consequence, the real conservationist is the black man who has the time, energy, knowledge of the land and good working relation with his fellow-workers necessary to "tame" a powerful and tempestuous Transvaal landscape. This harshness, that gives Jacobus, the man rooted in the land, eventual ascendancy, by virtue of his perseverance, is evoked most expressively through the motif of the hippos aborting their fetuses in drought conditions, an image that evidently precipitated the writing of The Conservationist.²

¹ Jacobus, in fact, is a precursor of July; the two black servants both possess competence, strength and endurance which sees them through crises that render their white masters helpless.

² In an interview with The Argus, dated 6 February, 1976, Gordimer explained this point, "I read in a newspaper some years ago, during a severe drought that hippos were aborting their young." It was this image that later set the book in motion, she said. Gordimer in a 1965 interview said her stories "often originate in what might be called the tail-tip of a situation as it is whisked out of sight . . . A train of associations begins to play out; the story begins to form about the fragment", "A Writer in South Africa", The London Magazine 5 (2), May 1965, p. 25. The origin and development of The Conservationist bear out this latter point. An aesthetic reading here is appropriate if indeed the novel grew out of "a train of associations" that followed the whisking away of the "tail-tip" of the "hippos" image.

A hostile social situation corresponds with this severity of the natural environment, as evidenced by the violence that erupts periodically: the murder of the African, the assault on Solomon, the insane outbursts of Phineas's wife and the volatility of Mehring's relations with the neighbourhood police, especially in the incident of the Immorality Act "trap". Gordimer binds the two dimensions together in her motif-mosaic, in which facts and metaphors, objects and symbols are interwoven with an astonishing cohesion. The coherent imagery of a pitiless natural cycle fits in neatly with the equally cogent symbolism of social violence. Corresponding with the human corpse, victim of a harsh society, and the couple drowned in the floods in the twenty-fourth chapter are: aborted hippo fetuses, the slaughter of animals at the abattoir (revealed in the synecdoche of bloodied gumboots, which in turn contrasts with the cleaned and polished boots of the white baas who belongs to another economic dimension than this one of a cruel nature and an equally inimical society), the dead rat on the burnt veld, the goat killed at the compound for the communal feast, its blood being used as a charm to keep violence away,¹ the calf that is drowned in the flood and the drowned rats.² Corresponding to the beating Solomon gets is the beating of the dog at the compound.³ That Gordimer intended the death and violence in the animal world to match that in the human, is clear from the careful way in which she juxtaposes them. The incident in which Mehring gets stuck in the marsh mud in the twenty-third chapter, for example, is later recalled when a calf also gets stuck in the mud after the floods and is drowned.⁴ The fact that Dorcas's husband works in the abattoir links the blood and slaughter there with that in the compound where he lives, where animals (and people) are also butchered. The function of this symbolic parallelism is to evoke the theme of brutality.

¹ Gordimer, The Conservationist, p. 171.

² Gordimer, p. 246, "As there were fetuses of hippos there's a lump of dead rat".

³ Gordimer, p. 202.

⁴ Gordimer, p. 244.

There is also the implication that nature and existence are horrifying in their "indifference".¹

Even the technology of the farm seems to be affected by life's inherent brutality. Not only does Jacobus need to fight the fire and counteract the flood, as well as keep the communal peace, he also has to repair the pump and deal with the ice in the water pipes. Life is presented as a constant struggle to survive. Mehring's need to survive on the rich side of capitalism is, of course, of a different ilk.

An important aspect of Mehring's Europe-in-Africa identity, one aspect of his alienation, is his urban, cosmopolitan consciousness, which contrasts with the pastoral identity of Jacobus and the compound children. It has been pointed out that Gordimer metaphorically stresses the oppressive and severe African reality to suggest that a knowledge of, and bond with, the land is a prerequisite for survival, metaphysical if not physical. Gordimer is profoundly interested in the contrasting urban and pastoral consciousness in relation to questions of racial identity in Africa in many of her short stories.

"The Gentle Art" from Friday's Footprint is a satire of the shallow city/mentality represented by the hysterical Vivien McEwen, who is out of place in the dark tropical waters where crocodiles are hunted in Rhodesia, a primordial world "of eternity and darkness", the place "before birth, after death",² which can only be understood by those who have lived long and patiently in it and have learned the "gentle art" of the Bairds: waiting, listening, living, responding. Jimmy Baird, who hunts crocodiles "without the futility of pity and with the mercy of skill",³ and Mrs Baird, who waits with infinite patience for her husband to return, epitomise Gordimer's ideal of the true African. The same urban shallowness and distance from the reality of Africa is much in evidence at the dinner party in "The Night the Favourite Came Home" (from the same collection) in which social worker Freda Grant

¹ Gordimer, p. 200. "Nature accepts everything. Bones, hair, teeth, finger nails and the beaks of birds - the ants carry away the last fragment of flesh, small as a fibre of meat stuck in a back tooth, nothing is wasted." This view of nature as an incinerator of life is a deeply deterministic one and is by no means incompatible with the modernist assumptions of the meaninglessness of life and a general disintegration of the relation between self and world. The fault ultimately is life's.

² Nadine Gordimer, Selected Stories (London: Jonathan Cape, 1975), p. 184.

³ Gordimer, Selected Stories, p. 181.

(who is researching the relation between malnutrition and African tribal life) feels alienated in a company whose main topic of conversation is the eighty-five pounds Vera Ardendyck has just won at the Durban July. The same contrast between African pastoral consciousness and an incongruent and irritating white urban one provides the story with its thematic base. Likewise in "The Catch" from The Soft Voice of the Serpent the Indian fisherman who seems almost a hero of nature, so close is he to its rhythms, catches a giant salmon, which symbolises his natural prowess and his knowledge of the sea,¹ but is let down by the young whites who meet him on holiday when they forget to photograph him with his "catch" as they had promised, in a rush to have fun that evening in Durban.²

In The Conservationist the role of true African, one deeply conscious of, and responsive to, Africa, played by Jimmy Baird, Freda Grant and the Indian fisherman in these three stories, is represented by Jacobus, while Mehring, although he is not petty and shallow like Vivien McEwen, Vera Ardendyck or the young white couple in "The Catch", lacks a deep pastoral bond with the land which alone could have staved off his alienation from Africa: "That's what comes of having two places; you never have what you need, in either."³

One of Gordimer's primary artistic concerns in the novel is to depict, through a combination of the stream-of-consciousness technique reminiscent of the fictional methods of writers of the early Post-First World War period like James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner, and a third person limited point of view, the fragmentation of Mehring's consciousness in his alienated "nowhere" position, belonging to neither the city nor the veld.

¹ Gordimer, Selected Stories, p. 34, "The Indian knew the sea . . . He knew, as magically to them as a diviner feeling the pull of water beneath the ground, where the fish would be when the wind blew from the east . . ."

² Gordimer, Selected Stories, p. 39, "After a few rounds of drinks at the close of the afternoon, the young man and his wife suddenly felt certain that they had had a very dead time indeed up till now, and the unquiet gnaw of the need to 'make the best' - of time, life, holidays, anything - was gleefully hatched to feed on them again. When someone suggested that they all go into Durban for dinner and a cinema, they were excited. 'All in our car!' the girl cried."

³ Gordimer, The Conservationist, p. 228.

The stream-of-consciousness narrative method developed from Henry James's use of third person limited point of view, as in The American, for example, in which James centres attention on Newman and presents his portrait of Paris of the 1860s through his hero's eyes. Stream-of-consciousness, writes M.H. Abrams, (a term first used, interestingly enough, by Henry James's brother, William, the philosopher and psychologist) denotes, in psychology "the unbroken flow of thought and awareness in the waking mind" and in literature "a mode of narration that undertakes to capture the full spectrum and flow of a character's mental process, in which sense perceptions mingle with conscious and half-conscious thoughts, memories, feelings, and random associations".¹

The modernist preoccupation with individual human consciousness, in neurotic or even psychotic states, and the Existential emphasis on alienation, are clearly congruent with this free-flowing method of rendering consciousness in the narrative. It is important to recall, though, before looking closely at Gordimer's prose in sections centring in analysis of Mehring's perceptions and experience, the careful social context she creates for her modernist discourse by juxtaposing different narrative stances. The life-situation in The Conservationist has elements of both a Marxist class analysis as well as Existential absurdity, as is the case in The Grass is Singing.

They are banging away at their drums somewhere over the river. The usual beer-drinks. But his own, up at the kraal, are pretty quiet. The thudding and distant shouts are no more than a smudge on the perfect silence that stretches to his horizon, which is first of all, while he walks, the rise of the next farm beyond the river, and then, when he lies down at the willows, the maze of broken reeds. The willows dangle at him from the sky. A wan yellowed leaf taken between thumb and forefinger is pliable, like thin kid-skin. He rolls onto his belly and, remembering a point he ought to have made clear in Tokyo, making a mental note to make a note of it (there is a tape-recorder in his briefcase but the briefcase is in the car) his presence on the grass becomes momentarily a demonstration, as if those people on the other side of the world were smilingly seeing it for themselves: I have my bit of veld and my cows . . . Perhaps he has dozed; he

¹ M.H. Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms, 3rd ed. (1941; New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1971), pp. 164-5.

suddenly - out of blackness, blankness - is aware of breathing intimately into the earth. Wisps and shreds of grass or leaf stir there. It is the air from his nostrils that moves them. To his half-open eye the hairs that border it and the filaments of dead grass are one.

There is sand on his lip.

For a moment he does not know where he is - or rather who he is; but this situation in which he finds himself, staring into the eye of the earth with earth at his mouth, is strongly familiar to him. It seems to be something already inhabited in imagination.

At this point his whole body gives one of those violent jerks, every muscle gathering together every limb in paroxysm, one of those leaps of terror that land the poor bundle of body, safe, in harmless wakefulness. The abyss is no deeper than a doorstep; the landing, home.

He must have dropped off face-down and his head has sagged off his forearm; a dribble of saliva has made the earth stick to his lip. He's had complaints that he's inclined to sleep open-mouthed and make noises.¹

This passage typically combines stream-of-consciousness--cataloguing a flow of thoughts and perceptions, that is, a sequence of now one act of perception and then another different, if not unrelated, perceptual event--with third person delineation. Gordimer only excludes Mehring, as it were, from her observations, describing something he does not himself experience, but which Gordimer "knows", in the last paragraph: "He must have dropped off face-down and his head has sagged off his forearm; a dribble of saliva has made earth stick to his lip". Mehring does not know in his drowsy, semi-conscious state, that it is saliva that has made sand stick to his lip although he has felt the sand on his lip--Gordimer supplies the information. Before this, Gordimer has avoided the temptation to be omniscient, ". . . I have my bit of veld and my cows . . . Perhaps he has dozed; he suddenly - out of blackness, blankness - is aware of breathing intimately into the earth". Here she narrates only what Mehring himself experiences - the time during which he is actually dozing, and so unconscious of perception, is a blank, too, in the narrative: ". . . out of blackness, blankness . . .".

¹ Gordimer, p. 41.

Gordimer is even reticent about saying whether or not Mehring actually dozes off: ". . . Perhaps he has dozed . . ." (emphasis added). Just before Gordimer lapses into omniscience she uses a metaphor comparing the abyss of sleep and inner consciousness to "a doorstep" and the awakening as a "leap" onto the landing of "home". The metaphor implies a strong authorial presence outside of the character's experience. This breaks the metonymic continuity of the stream-of-consciousness narrative, in which metaphors that Mehring himself is not aware of, are assiduously avoided (the simile comparing the leaf to "thin kid-skin" is a reflection of what Mehring himself feels ^{between} his thumb and forefinger) in order to evoke consistently the quality of the character's and not the author's consciousness. Perhaps this accounts for Gordimer's use of motifs and iconic symbols--in lieu of metaphors which presuppose an omniscient authorial consciousness imaginatively joining together disparate contexts in the active process of analogy. The motifs, as has been seen, are also real objects and incidences and thus have a literal presence too. This is in keeping with the modernist emphasis on consciousness, that is, the experience of assimilating reality by an individual person. In the passage such motifs are: the banging of drums; the reeds by the river; the memories of the visit to Japan; Mehring's thoughts about his white urban friends; the posture of lying face-down on the veld (reminding one of the corpse under the ground where Mehring is); the dead grass; the impressions the veld leaves on the white farmer (the grey ash after the fire, for example), in this case, the sand on his lip; and the allusion to his sex life: "He's had complaints that he's inclined to sleep open-mouthed and make noises".

The overall impression of Mehring in this passage is one of dispossession, despite the ironic references to "intimate" contact with the earth: his union with it is accompanied by humiliation, his face slipping into the sand, making him seem dog-like: ". . . a dribble of saliva has made the earth stick to his lip . . . he's inclined to sleep open-mouthed and made noises". It is typical in modernist fiction for the author to degrade or devalue the protagonist and make him or her anti-heroic, with a voyeuristic relish (Mary Turner in The Grass is Singing and Magda in In the Heart of the Country are good examples). The earth with which Mehring finds himself unexpectedly and rudely united is, in any case, moribund--the reeds are "broken", the grass is

"dead" and shredded, mingling with the fallen leaves: a place of drought, and, later, fire and flood, which are not ultimately redemptive or cleansing as in the Biblical symbolism Gordimer here inverts, but destructive, the fire burning the veld to ash which, like the packed ashtray in the farmhouse, symbolises a burnt-out existence, and the flood disinterring the corpse at the end of the novel. Ironically it is Jacobus, in charge of the white man's technology, the keys, the tractor, the tools, who masters this difficult, unpredictable environment, not sleepy, dreamy, alienated Mehring, tired out by his business ventures, an endless series of dinner parties and affairs, and his broken family life.

Mehring exists nowhere, perhaps in his mind, like the young couple in "The Catch" who quickly forget about their "friend" the Indian fisherman when their own minds are stimulated and excited by the prospect of enjoying themselves in the city, or Vivien McEwan in "The Gentle Art" who cannot appreciate the tropical subtleties of crocodile hunting because she is obsessed with her own sensations, lacking the objectivity and patience of the Bairds. Mehring's perceptions of the surroundings--he hears the drums and dancing, imagines beer-drinking at the location, hears the relative quiet of the compound, looks out at the horizon while walking, takes note of the neighbour's farm, picks up a leaf between his thumb and forefinger after lying down next to the river, notices the willows "dangl(ing) at him"--are mingled with his unconscious sense of himself as a sojourner on the land(which is paradoxical, of course, in terms of the Group Areas predicament that constitutes the powerful framework of the novel): his first thought on lying down is of his recent visit to Japan:

He rolls onto his belly and, remembering a point he ought to have made clear in Tokyo, making a mental note to make a note of it (there is a tape-recorder in his briefcase but the briefcase is in the car) his presence on the grass becomes momentarily a demonstration, as if those people on the other side of the world were smilingly seeing it for themselves . . .

Mehring's world (wherever it is) is multi-layered: a grotesquely complex and fragmented amalgam of a foreign country (Japan), a city to which he does not belong, a Transvaal farm where he rests and sleeps and which he boasts about, and a fantasy and memory world consisting of perverse sex, an unhappy marital past and doubts about the whole enterprise of pig-iron. Mehring's making a note to make a note, a double-layered act of remembering, symbolises a life that is tucked away, like the briefcase, within context upon context. The rich, jet-set life of the capitalist magnate is portrayed as one of helpless disorientation. Gordimer presents the simplicity of the pastoral consciousness and the dignity of ordinary, decent labour on the land, by contrast, as the ideal way of life in the novel. After thinking of both Tokyo (and De Beer's Japanese watch links him, too, Boer that he is, with this theme of dislocation of contexts) and the city, two contexts beyond the farm, Mehring feels the need to assert his presence on the farm as "a demonstration", a cosmopolitan man pretending in his leisure time that he is close to the land, whereupon he promptly falls asleep, entering another context, in his mind, not directly related to farm life. Jacobus, by contrast, is ever wakeful and alert to the practical problems of the farm and does not suffer from the sleepy solipsism of the privileged. Gordimer constantly associates Mehring with contexts outside the immediate farm life. The theme of alienation and the stream-of-consciousness technique, based on the principle of free association of thoughts, memories and perceptions, are perfectly matched in Gordimer's characterisation of Mehring. The presentation of Jacobus from a third person point of view, with only his actions and dialogue documented, is a subtle affirmation of the theme of the pastoral bondedness of the good black man to the land, with the associations of simplicity, practicality, wisdom, naturalness, harmoniousness and wholesomeness. The idea is not that Jacobus does not think, but rather that his psyche is integrated, and a modernist analysis would therefore be inappropriate in his case.

Such an analysis is, of course, necessary in the characterisation of Mehring. In the "nowhere" of his consciousness, the "'bad infinity'

of purely abstract potentialities",¹ Mehring plays out a lost existence. This is apparent in the scene in which he recalls the underhand sexual incident with the Portuguese girl on a plane on its way back to Africa from Europe:

In the cosy dark of other presences, in the intimacy like the loneliness of the crowd, the feel of flesh is experienced anew, as the taste of water is recognised anew in the desert . . . It could have been the last of Europe or was Africa, already, they were unaware of passing over. She need not be afraid of wanting what was happening because it was happening nowhere.²

The analogy between a thirst for sexual experience and thirst for water in a desert is a startling juxtaposition which, like a conceit, has its own hidden logic. The tenor and vehicle seem at first antithetical: sexuality connoting organic warmth, intimacy, and privacy, if not domesticity, and the desert suggesting isolation, aridity and vast open spaces. The context of the analogy renders the comparison even more perturbing: an aeroplane, a form of public transport travelling in a realm one associates with neither the private home nor the vast desert: the sky. On further examination, the analogy is telling. Mehring is fondling a stranger under the cover of a rug in a setting that resembles a desert in that it has no specific identity or definite, demarcated location: the vastness of both sky and desert seems undifferentiated, homogeneous, abstract. The girl remains nameless and so lacks identity beyond that of her body and its mute, dog-like thrills.³ The disconcerting impersonality and detachment of the incident, reflected in an airborne context that is dissociated from the land below, reveals a measure of moral corruption that results from a dislocation of context implied in the jet-set, cosmopolitan, Western lifestyle that Gordimer so often attacks in her work. Sexual corruption is seen as symptomatic of social fragmentation. It is significant that Mehring surmises that the girl whom he sees as a part of an "Immorality

¹ Georg Lukács, The Meaning of Contemporary Realism (London: Merlin Press, 1972), p. 24.

² Gordimer, pp. 128-9.

³ Gordimer, pp. 130-1. "His finger . . . found itself tongued by a grateful dog".

Act" trap is also Portuguese.¹ His sexual indulgence that was once consummated in the "nowhere" of an aeroplane is now given a definite social context: the politics of Apartheid. Gordimer makes it clear that South African society exerts a determining influence on every aspect of the individual's life. Gordimer shows that the private individual cannot survive his rupture from the land and a human community. The Conservationist is a powerful critique of white capitalist society that causes widespread disintegration of both human relations and man's ancient ideal of union with nature. In this sense it is a modernist work with a social perspective.

Its ultimate value, though, is artistic: the degree to which a profound vision of South African society is embodied in coherent literary form that ensures that the vision remains a formidable and challenging presence throughout the novel. And the life-situation in The Conservationist does strike one as a rich human context, full of symbolic importance and dense with human experience of a multifarious sort, as is to be expected of a novel about a segregationist and capitalist society. It is Gordimer's artistry--primarily her manipulation of different narrative stances to make subtle sociological points while retaining an intense, sustained psychology of alienation at work, as well as her cohesive motif-mosaic and interrelated symbolism--that unifies her novel, which deals overtly, as did A World of Strangers, with the severe fragmenting effects of the Group Areas legislation on South African society. A novel which deals with this theme of fragmentation and seems on the surface to be itself fragmentary, succeeding admirably in evoking as does Saul Bellow's Herzog the nature of a disintegrating, alienated psyche, and yet which yields to critical analysis a fine, invisible infrastructure of coherent meaning and vision, surely constitutes a major artistic achievement.

The image of the farm, for example, is kaleidoscopic in its proliferation of symbolic aspects, and yet singular in its indivisibility

¹ Gordimer, p. 262.

and wholeness. The central motif unifying this image is that of death, with its overtones of death-in-life. When Stephen Gray speaks of Africa "spook(ing)" its white English inhabitants (surely in itself an unacceptable generalisation) and argues that The Conservationist is just one more English South African novel in a long line of such novels dealing with this psychosomatic alienation, if it might be called that, he is guilty of a half-truth.¹ The motif of death in Gordimer's novel is not simply indicative of the geographic alienation of the white man, as Gray suggests,² it is, rather, the sign of a moribund capitalist society which encourages a pragmatic approach to the land which leads, in turn, to an absolute lack of belonging in Mehring's case. The stream-of-consciousness technique, used to highlight the psychic fragmentation that results from this alienation, is juxtaposed, it should be recalled, with a telling use of a shifting third-person narrative that provides the modernist despair characterising Mehring with a highly structured social context. Gordimer sets up a dialectic between Mehring and this society which operates the more tellingly because the former is largely unaware of the extent of his bondage to a capitalist system. His motives for buying the farm, for example--as a tax relief scheme, status symbol and love nest--are all aspects of his capitalist individualism,

¹ See Gray, pp. 150-4. "The evidence of these works . . . is that all these authors concur with Schreiner that the land itself (emphasis added) dries the vital juices out of its inhabitants, stunts them and - worst of all - disallows them from achieving man's most sacred desire, the desire to take root in the land and belong" (p. 151). Gray's emphasis on an alienation that is basically geographical explains why he feels that Schreiner's conception of an inherently inimical South African landscape is the central motif in English South African fiction. We have had cause to quarrel several times with this perceptive and must do so again: Gordimer is far more conscious of the determining effects of social conditions on the human psyche than was the more philosophically minded Schreiner, and the hostility of the land in The Conservationist forms part of her argument in the novel that it is the good black man, who understands the land and who "conserves" the farm when it is devastated by nature, who truly belongs to Africa. The black man scarcely enters Schreiner's consciousness in The Story of an African Farm in her obsession with the efficacy of ideas and so an analogy between the two writers in their treatment of landscape is not viable. Michael Wade in Nadine Gordimer (London: Evan Brothers Limited, 1978), p. 201, also makes the mistake of drawing an analogy between Schreiner's Karoo and Gordimer's Transvaal.

² Gray, p. 154. ". . . These are all signs of a felt state of zombiehood which characterises the English South African at the innermost level. If Africa may be said to spook its white English inhabitants, the walking dead who stalk the pages of their fiction are the inevitable concomitant."

whereby leisure (that defies taxation, boosts his ego and livens up his sex life) is seen as a commodity that can be bought when one has "arrived" (as Mehring has), yet cripple his relation to it. He does not allow the farm to become a going concern in case he loses his tax deductions and therefore condemns himself to the role of overlord of a decaying "Colonial" piece of land, an apt symbol of the demise of white capitalism, for the farm becomes a "nowhere" (a place, that is, where Mehring is, but where he is really inhabiting his own multilayered consciousness).

The farm land is often referred to as a graveyard. This is the implication of the motif of the anonymous African corpse that dominates the novel. The Conservationist opens and closes with this symbol just as The Grass is Singing begins and ends with reference to the murder of Mary Turner. Mehring, stomping across the dead grass of the veld after leaving his black Mercedes at the gate of the third pasture, meets Jacobus who tells him about the "dead man" after Mehring has complained about the children stealing guinea-fowl eggs. The children sitting ritualistically in their nest proudly harbouring their deeply significant bounty are connected with organic birth and are thus part of nature and the farm, symbolising their own future that is assured after Jacobus has asserted his authority over and above that of the absentee landlord. Jacobus, with a name that recalls Jacob the inheritor of Israel (just as Gordimer gives a secular Marxist meaning to Old Testament symbolism of the flood), is presented as the father of the people and the future, fighting frost, fire and flood to gain final possession of the land.

The corpse, unnamed, is thus linked with the mass anonymity of the location blacks (and Gordimer deliberately refrains from going beyond the fence). A black has been murdered on Mehring's property. The white police are called. They carelessly bury the corpse in ^{the} third pasture. It is later unearthed by floods which come all the way from the Mozambique channel, (with the obvious connotations of Marxist revolution versus Colonial domination) knocking down the Indians' water-tank and sending Jalal's peace sign (the shape of an egg which, unlike the eggs of the compound children, will never hatch, for the Indians are also on

the toppling wealthy side of Capitalism, having "bought" their place in the white area), face-down into the mud¹ as Mehring, whose baal is Progress, had slipped into the sand while sleeping, biting the dust in an obviously symbolic way. Here geography and politics are metaphorically linked, just as these two dimensions are connected in Gordimer's synthesis of the pastoral ethic and Marxist ideology. The disinterred corpse highlights the crassness and inefficiency of the hasty police burial. In a novel that advocates efficiency as a sign of bondedness to the land, this is a telling repercussion. The demise of white rule is reflected in the seasonal change from autumn in the beginning to devastating winter floods at the end.

In the last chapter Jacobus's men rebury the corpse with proper decorum and ritual.² Ironically, it is Witbooi, "Swart Gevaar", a man without identity papers or legal rights in white territory, who makes the coffin. He is as ^{much a} part of the land and the communal restorative function as Jacobus. This suggests the artificiality of the white colonial system that has debarred him from a place in the area. A drum is sounded. A moment of "absolute silence" indicates the deference of the people attending the funeral of a man they did not know.³ Phineas's wife is no longer raving but "at peace". The black men work together in harmony: all are united under a sky that takes "no note of them", something, ironically, that does not trouble them:

¹ Gordimer, p. 232.

² Gordimer uses a similar contrast, between the callous indifference of the white authorities to the corpse of an anonymous black man, symbolising their bureaucratic and racial indifference, and the deference of the black to his dead in the powerful short story "Six Feet of the Country" from the collection of that name.

³ Gordimer, p. 267.

The one whom the farm received had no name. He had no family but their women wept a little for him. There was no child of his present but their children were there to live after him. They had put him away to rest, at last, he had come back. He took possession of this earth, theirs; one of them.¹

This sense of communal identity contrasts with the breakdown of Mehring's nuclear family. Gordimer routs the capitalist notion of privacy. The blacks are a family, even beyond the fence no white person can penetrate. Mehring, at this time, has gone overseas, leaving Jacobus in charge. The instruction to "look after everything nicely" is an ironic patronising nicety. Mehring owns the land financially, but not really. The contrast between the police burial in the beginning, and the proper funeral at the end thus frames the story and invests the motif of death in the novel with this symbolism of revolutionary overthrow.²

¹ Gordimer, p. 267.

² The references to literal or figurative death, other than this symbolism of the black corpse, are manifold: (i) Animal deaths--the aborted fetuses, the calf in the flood, the drowned rats, the slaughtered sheep and the references to the abattoir. (ii) The associations of the cigar butts in Mehring's ashtray and the metaphor which later compares the burnt-out veld to a huge ashtray ("The whole farm stinks like a dirty ashtray . . . where everything is dead", p. 95), linked with the candles burning out in a restaurant where Mehring is conducting a date in his decaying private life (p. 73) just after his first visit to the farm when he conceives of buying it as a love nest. These motifs are recalled when the ash-heap is washed down over the compound yard (p. 237). (iii) The idea of the land as a tomb, invoked when Mehring is planting, with Jacobus's help, his Spanish chestnut trees: "Broken in upon, the earth gives up the strong musty dampness of a deserted house or a violated tomb . . . They've stopped. Jacobus is making a show of heaving at something: it's a rock they've struck . . . the two trees now stand like branches children have stuch in sand to make a 'garden' that will wither in an hour" (p. 226). The rock symbolises the resistance of the African ground to European transplants, which, Gordimer is saying, will "wither in an hour". This ties in with her theme of the "true" African. The mealies are also compared to embalmed mummies (p. 228). The earth is referred to as a "graveyard" (p. 148) paradoxically when the new reeds sprout after the fire. (iv) The farm after the flood has a "deathly stink" of mud, slime, dead rats, human corpse and rank foliage (p. 246). (v) Many allusions are made to a breakdown of the farm technology: the pump, the water pipes (blocked with ice) and the telephone. This mirrors Mehring's own breakdown, evidenced by his mental blank, appropriately, at the robots in the twenty-sixth chapter.

CONCLUSION

Gordimer in The Conservationist has come a long way from her first novel A World of Strangers, though both novels deal with the same theme of a segregated South African society in which the economic barrier of capitalism coincides with the colour bar. Her artistic development can be measured by the subtlety of her method of preserving artistic unity in the former, through a cohesive poetic symbolism that creates an infrastructure of great finesse beneath a surface fragmentation, as opposed to the relatively conventional technique of a first-person narrator, Toby Hood, whose democratic tabula rasa is an effective medium in the latter novel for looking dispassionately at a world of strangers divided by Group Areas legislation.

An increased technical subtlety is matched by a deepening of insight. Hood's global perspective on South African society of the 50s, from the high-spots of white capitalist culture, represented in the novel by "The High House", home of gold-mining magnate Hamish Alexander, to the world of the "House of Fame", Steve's communal home in Alexandra Township, with its lifestyle of shebeens, black dandyism and cultural rootlessness, is motivated by a fundamental aimlessness and easy-going concupiscence and tainted only by frustration and divided loyalties; his divided loyalties are symbolised at the end of the novel by his vacillation between the glamorous pleasure principle represented by Cecil Rowe and the tough but sincere life of political commitment incarnated by Anna Louw, as he cuts out a newspaper report about the latter's treason trial and a sexually suggestive shot of the former at a cabaret.¹ The insights about the effects of a racially-based capitalist structure of wealthy-white and underprivileged-black, are not this simple-minded in The Conservationist. A complex modernist analysis of a consciousness of despair on the rich side of capitalism is juxtaposed with a simple narrative of a lifestyle that is more pastoral and bonded to the land, an interplay that is further linked to a rich symbolism of an apocalypse that dries out, burns

¹ Nadine Gordimer, A World of Strangers 4th ed. (1958; Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1981), p. 265.

and then washes away the white man's claim to control the land. Gordimer transcends, then, the guilty, and somewhat hypocritical, liberal conscience of her Toby Hood prototype, with a world-view that deepens rather than avoids the angst of the ruling class and yet presents this in a framework that even the author herself, a product of segregation, is reticent to plunge into with the gusto of her innocent Englishman, holding back the camera of the omniscient narrator at the fence of the location, in a kind of determinist awe for the profound effects the structure of South African society has on individual perception.

If this society in The Conservationist is swept away in a metaphoric apocalypse that recalls, in its prophetic use of symbolism, the ending of The Grass is Singing, it is the land itself that continues, like the river that runs along the third pasture, bringing the final flood, to live, rage and destroy, as autumn gives way to winter, frost to flood, and white man to black man. This is Gordimer's mature vision of South African society in a work that rates as her most accomplished piece and a very fine modern novel. Where Lessing confused modernistic use of Existentialism and Marxism, opting for the former in the greater part of her novel, Gordimer balances the same two elements in a consummate effort of artistic skill in which technique embodies, assimilates and finally controls philosophic vision.

The highly structured society of The Conservationist, in which fences are symbolic of a capitalist colour bar, is at once divisive, so that characters, deprived of any glib global vision, play out roles they do not fully understand, showing that segregation engenders rather than dispels ignorance, and yet kept by Gordimer in dialectic balance, so that the reader can see and experience the full effects of this division. Innocence, the possibility of seeing South African society in toto, from both sides, as it were, a rare insight Gordimer gave to a rather undeserving candidate for that privilege in A World of Strangers, is accorded to the reader, a synthesis achieved by an exquisite correlation of form and content that might have startled Lukács out of his preconception that modernist fiction lacks a perspective on society in its fullest extent.

CHAPTER NINE : DEMYTHOLOGISING COLONIALISM AND THE
DESPAIR OF VACUITY IN IN THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

OVERVIEW

If In the Heart of the Country lacks the broad social perspective of The Conservationist it has a searing intensity of a more archetypal critique of the same moribund society, and makes even greater innovative use of modernism than Gordimer in her most technically accomplished novel.

The importance of Coetzee's second novel is not only that it may well be, from a purely artistic point of view, the finest novel in this tradition to date, blending theme and technique, meaning and method, content and form so integrally that to isolate the two in critical discussion would be to misrepresent Coetzee's achievement, but that it brings to a climax with such terminal certainty the pessimism that has dominated English South African fiction from its inception, so that after In the Heart of the Country some new attitude, theme or perspective has to emerge in this fiction if new work is to be more than mere repetition, and probably of an inferior artistic blend, of what has already been consummated.

The Conservationist (1974) and In the Heart of the Country (1977) together bring to completion the struggle of a century in this literature to articulate the grief of a fundamental alienation in a society that does not seem to make full human relations possible. Waldo, Lyndall and The Stranger in The Story of an African Farm, Turbott Wolfe in Plomer's important South African novel of that name, Jacoba in The Beadle, Absalom and Arthur Jarvis in Cry, the Beloved Country, Mary, Dick Turner and Moses in The Grass is Singing, Jacob van Schoor and Setole in The Trap, the Fletchers and the young Jewish narrator in A Dance in the Sun, to take only a sample of characters from a selection of important novels, are all either overt casualties of the violence, inhospitableness or sheer fragmentation of South African society or are deeply frustrated, thwarted and threatened by it, be the setting the Karoo of the late 1800s, the Little Karoo of

the early 1900s, the Zululand of the 1920s, the Johannesburg of the 40s, the Southern Africa of the 40s or the Northern Cape of the 50s. These two mighty novels of the 70s provide a vision of that alienation profoundly realised, as F.R. Leavis and Northrop Frye would have it, in a literary form so densely suggestive and cogent that there can be scarcely more to say about this theme from this perspective.¹

Coetzee's work, however, draws upon an immense literary antecedence that is modern in temper and In the Heart of the Country must also be seen in the context of modernist and avant-garde fiction per se, and not simply as part of a South African tradition, although Coetzee clearly defines his relation to the latter in his work by using Afrikaans characters like Jacobus Coetzee and Magda to debunk Afrikaner colonial myths, creating a fiction that is both indigenous, in theme and setting, and cosmopolitan and avant-garde

¹ It is significant that recent South African fiction published after these two novels does, in fact, look for a new angle on South African society. The staleness of a novel like Burger's Daughter (1979), despite its technical virtuosity, is that it deals with the same old themes in the same old settings, whereas Gordimer's most recent novel July's People (1981) takes an apocalyptic look at South Africa after "The Revolution" and manages to be more interesting than its predecessor, although there is a certain air of contrivance about it that is bothersome. Coetzee's third novel Waiting for the Barbarians (1981) is a successful novel (certainly the most intriguing South African novel, so far, of the 80s) because it employs a new form to embody a new perspective on such conventional concepts of South African fiction as alienation, oppression and injustice. Alan Paton's latest novel, Ah, but Your Land is Beautiful (1981), is not as good as his autobiography Towards the Mountain (1980) (and autobiography is an important genre in itself in this respect, with works like Ezekiel Mphahlele's Down Second Avenue, 1959, and Guy Butler's Karoo Morning, 1977, and Bursting World, 1983, opening up other possible vistas of South African experience for those writing in English) despite Paton's bold attempt to write a new kind of documentary novel. Stephen Gray's Caltrop's Desire (1980) also escapes the monotony of the South African present by going back into pre-Apartheid colonial history. In the realm of drama, Athol Fugard resorts to an autobiographical sketch set in the early 1950s in Master Harold . . . and the Boys (1983).

in technique and "literariness".¹ A further complicating factor in the business of situating Coetzee's unique work in its context is that he sees the South African situation as part of the wider history of the West:

. . . I still tend to see the South African situation as only one manifestation of a wider historical situation to do with colonialism, late colonialism, neo-colonialism.²

I'm suspicious of lines of division between a European context and a South African context, because I think our experience remains largely colonial.³

Coetzee reveals this encompassing historical perspective in Dusklands and Waiting for the Barbarians. In the Speak interview he stated that Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee are "products of the same force in the history of the West".⁴ There is a clear thematic link between the two sections of the novel "The Vietnam Project" and "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee" in that both deal with the question of technocratic power and the exploitation of native peoples under the guise of Western colonialism. The genius of Coetzee's fiction consists in his intense insight into, and evocation of, the devastation that unchecked military and technological power wreaks on human society, both within and without the colonial fortress. In Waiting for the Barbarians Coetzee allegorises the colonial situation and situates it in an archetypal West (that has overtones of Northern America) and so the emphasis is less markedly South African than in In the Heart of the Country, although the authoritarian and oppressive Empire is nearer home than the setting suggests. The novel is predicated upon Coetzee's premise that the

¹ Coetzee is particularly influenced by twentieth century European writers like the Existentialists, Sartre, Camus, Kafka and Beckett, an early modernist writer like James Joyce and later experimental novelists like Nabokov and, more recently, Alain Robbe-Grillet. Coetzee, as an intellectual novelist, is also profoundly influenced by non-fictional sources (see Speak interview), mathematics, linguistics, stylistics, psychology (in particular psychoanalysis and Existential psychiatry), literary criticism (particularly that of Barthes) and, of course, philosophy (phenomenology in particular).

² "Speaking: J.M. Coetzee", in Speak, May/June, 1978, interview by Stephen Watson, p. 23.

³ Watson, p. 24.

⁴ Watson, p. 23.

West as a whole has revealed itself to be both monstrously powerful and unscrupulous.

This being said, Coetzee remains a South African writer writing about South Africa even if its situation is not historically unique in the West and his literary reach is far from parochial and old-fashioned.

If Gordimer in her mature fiction leaves behind the realist assumptions with which she began her early work and which provides her body of short-story writing with its epistemological basis, Coetzee, as a thoroughly modern, "cerebral" writer,¹ was never realist. To describe his writing style as highly intellectual and pyrotechnical, however, as some critics have ventured, is not good enough.² What is also true is that Coetzee's three novels to date vary in their approach, although common themes are pursued in all three works. Dusklands is an uneasy correlation of two separate pieces of historico-psychoanalytic writing that Coetzee's hypothesis of an historical synthesis does not consolidate. In the Heart of the Country is an intense modernist study of mental breakdown told in the form of an Existential monologue. Waiting for the Barbarians is an allegory that is really a powerful social protest. It has been seen that there are common themes in these three novels but the technique in each case differs considerably from that in the other two works. A more likely enterprise for this chapter is to describe the experimental literary style of the intellectually and aesthetically complex In the Heart of the Country and leave the task of classifying Coetzee's fictional work as a whole to some future Ph.D. candidate or critical biographer.

¹ A description used with rather derogatory connotations in a review of Dusklands by Christie, Hutchings and MacLennan in Perspectives on South African Fiction (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1980). Whether or not this intellectual element ought to be seen as something unhappy in Coetzee's type of fiction depends, of course, on one's critical predilections.

² Most notably, Christie, Hutchings and MacLennan.

DEMYTHOLOGISING COLONIALISM AND THE DESPAIR OF VACUITY
 IN IN THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

The elements of modernism in In the Heart of the Country are apparent: the fragmentation of the narrative plot (there are fabrications and hallucinations in Magda's account) which directs attention to the workings of a psychotic and demented consciousness, an assumption, that is, opposite to empirical epistemology that presupposes, in David Lodge's words, "a common phenomenal world"¹; the associated Existential themes of life's inherent meaninglessness and anguish; the adoption of a retrogressive plot that begins at no particular point and leads nowhere; and the use of an aesthetic ordering principle that replaces old-fashioned narrative unity, in this case, Coetzee's subtle dialectical solipsism that contradicts itself and thus reveals its truths through the clash of opposites within the psyche. As in the case of The Conservationist, though, Coetzee manipulates modernist techniques, to make his own furtive, impulsive observations about South African (Western) society. Gordimer used a dialectic of different narrative points of view to provide an objective context for Mehring's psychic disintegration as Lessing had earlier tried, rather amateurishly, to do, for Mary Turner, whereas Coetzee apparently remains closer to the modernist model while providing, with a finesse that only Gordimer at her best in The Conservationist could match, an infrastructure of extraordinary complexity and a validity far beyond the obscene rantings of mad, frustrated Magda. In short, the apparent Cartesian solipsism of the novel is transformed by a dialectic Coetzee, ever alert to contradictions and interested in their origin, into something of a profound social protest, centring in a demythologising of the premises of colonialism in South Africa. It is this dialectic that takes Coetzee's work beyond the Kafkaesque nightmare of total, bewildering subjectivity.

¹ David Lodge, The Modes of Modern Writing (London: Edward Arnold, 1977), p. 45.

Magda's "doubting self" is the medium of a first-person narrative that gives the novel its surface truth. In Dusklands, Coetzee describes the Cartesian epistemology as driving "a wedge between the self in the world and the self who contemplates that self."¹ The fictional life-situation in modernist works is, of course, a radical reflection of subjective perception that lacks the kind of objectivity Lukács called for when he suggested that the focus of the novelist ought to be the "concrete potentialities" of individuals, rather than their "subjective states."² Coetzee, however, is concerned to show that these subjective states are themselves, at least to some substantial degree, socially determined. An analysis of them, therefore, leads to their source in a social basis of human behaviour.

Since the first-person narrator of the story is schizophrenic and has seemingly lost the capacity to distinguish between fantasy, delusion and reality, there is no absolute dividing line in the novel between events that really happen and those that Magda imagines or invents. Yet the life-situation of In the Heart of the Country is by no means simply a fantastic, grotesque, Kafkesque world of schizophrenic torment, even if it is at times surrealistic, as when Magda and Hendrik saw off the bedroom in which the first murder "took place" and send it flying off into the night-sky and when the talking aeroplanes fly overhead delivering prophetic messages in a mock religious experience of revelation. Magda's consciousness is dialectical and this challenges the reader to piece together the infrastructure of reality underpinning the surface fragmentation, just as Gordimer provokes the reader in The Conversationist to interpret the symbolism that unifies the novel and provides Mehring's breakdown with a framework within which it can be thoroughly understood. There is no mediation of Magda's perceptions or any omniscient intrusion to suggest that there is any "fixed" world beyond Magda's mind. Her world, that of epistemological solipsism, constitutes the surface "reality" in the novel. The reader has to do the deciphering. This is in keeping with the later, post-Brechtian

¹ J.M. Coetzee, Dusklands (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1974), p. 21.

² For an explanation of Lukács's distinction, see the previous chapter, p. 112.

modernist view that fiction ought to involve the reader in an active, subjective process rather than leave his being unchallenged. An example of this critical activity would be to infer that the whole exposition of the novel is an invention of Magda's tortured mind.

The first extract¹ begins:

1. TODAY my father brought home his new bride. They came clip-clop across the flats in a dog-cart drawn by a horse with an ostrich-plume waving on its forehead, dusty after the long haul. Or perhaps they were drawn by two plumed donkeys, that is also possible. My father wore his black swallowtail coat and stovepipe hat, his bride a widebrimmed sunhat and a white dress tight at waist and throat. More detail I cannot give unless I begin to embroider, for I was not watching.₁

Extract 38 goes:

38. Six months ago Hendrik brought home his new bride. They came clip-clop across the flats in the donkey-cart, dusty after the long haul from Armoede. Hendrik wore the black suit passed on to him by my father with an old wide-brimmed felt hat and a shirt buttoned to the throat.₂

There is an incantatory repetition of phraseology here and an impression of déjà-vu on the first reading of the novel, but there are also indications that the second wedding really happened and not the first. In the first extract Magda admits ". . . I was not watching." The first odd fact here is that Magda was apparently not invited to her father's second wedding, or simply did not want to go, although this seems unlikely in view of her acute emotional need to be included in family affairs. If Magda was "not watching", where did she get the details of her father's return to the farm with his new wife? "They came clip-clop across the flats . . ." is an audile impression and so can be recorded while Magda is "not watching". The visual details are more hazardous--Magda does not know whether the "clip-clop" is made by a horse or two donkeys, and no doubt supplies the detail of the "ostrich-plume" from memory, as she does the portraits of the bride and bridegroom (later one realises that this incident is fabricated anyway). With

¹ J.M. Coetzee, In the Heart of the Country (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1977), p. 1.

² Coetzee, p. 17.

retrospective insight Magda's implied promise that she has not embroidered is seen as untrustworthy, unless she is totally unaware of the difference between fantasy and reality, which is likely, given her psychotic and schizophrenic behaviour in the rest of the novel. In this case it would be absurd to attribute accountability to her. However, the plea of insanity in Magda's case, while relieving her of responsibility for her terrible actions, does cast some doubts on the viability of a moral protest emerging from the story of her breakdown. (If she was always insane what can one believe of her accusations that her father has mentally "raped"¹ her by mistreating and neglecting her?)

After the first description, Magda outlines the first few days following the return of the couple as she switches indiscriminately from past to present in a mood of vengefulness: "I was not watching my father bear his bride home across the flats because I was in my room in the dark west wing eating my heart out and biding my time."² She cannot separate the new wife from thoughts of her deceased mother: "She is the new wife, therefore the old one is dead." The fact that her mother was "a frail gentle loving woman" who was dominated, like she herself has been, by the father, makes the sexual jealousy of a lonely spinster who hears her father and his new wife "cavort in the bedroom" harder to bear. The contrast between a "frail gentle loving woman" and a mere sexual partner for her lustful father, a "lazy big-boned voluptuous feline woman", who joins with him in excluding her, shutting her out, re-affirming that she is the "absence"³ her father turned her into after the death of her mother, is too much to tolerate. Later this vendetta complex, involving an inability to objectively separate present and past, revealed here to the reader unwittingly, as it were, as Magda spins her grim wish-fulfilment yarn, explains why she conjured up this episode in the first place. It is clear from even this short analysis

¹ Coetzee, p. 3: "Wooded when little by our masterful fathers, we are bitter vestals, spoiled for life. The childhood rape: someone should study the kernel of truth in this fancy."

² Coetzee, p. 2.

³ Coetzee, p. 2.

that Coetzee calls upon the reader to evaluate the text and critically determine its real meaning. This imaginary exposition leads up to the first account of the murder, with Magda using a hatchet as a murder weapon, and afterwards to her efforts to dispose of the bodies.

Just before Magda offers her almost identical account (of the return of Hendrik and Klein-Anna) in extract 38, she admits that the first murder has not really happened, although she has really "lived" it in her imagination:

36. For he does not die so easily after all. Disgruntled, saddle-sore, it is he who rides in out of the sunset, who nods when I greet him, who stalks into the house and slumps in his armchair waiting for me to help him off with his boots. The old days are not gone after all. He has not brought home a new wife, I am still his daughter . . . My heart leaps at this second chance . . .¹

This admission prepares the way for a second, and this time, substantially more real, exposition in which Hendrik brings home his new wife, whom the father stalks, then has an affair with, and Magda in a fit of rage, jealousy, dementia and frustration, imagines that Hendrik's wife cavorting with her father is, in fact, his new wife, projecting this fantasy back six months into the past: "Today my father brought home his new bride." The tenacity with which this fantasy takes hold of her imagination indicates, perhaps, a sort of inverted Calvinistic horror of illicit sex, a horror which initially prevents her from admitting that the affair is happening. After a period of ritually purging the horror from her consciousness by inventing a story that legitimates the affair yet leaves room for a hatred which Magda then herself legitimates by creating in the story a gross "feline" woman, Magda is then able to face the reality and narrate what really happened, from extract 38 onwards. Coetzee creates a fiction within a fiction in order to suggest with Freud that art, and life, in repressive Western society, originate in neurosis. The second attempt at murder can be seen in this context of Freudian psychoanalysis

¹ Coetzee, pp. 16-17.

as something of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Coetzee deceives the reader in order to present a psychoanalytic study of schizophrenia which actively involves the audience in its symptoms: the distortions, contradictions and projections of a demented consciousness. Nor is the author free from the neurosis of the times, if one takes Coetzee's analogy between fiction and psychotherapy seriously.

In extract 38 Magda is no longer eating her heart out in the west wing but observes Hendrik and Klein-Anna with the alertness of a lifelong virgin perversely fascinated by the inscrutable spectacle of marriage. There is now no doubt about the means of travel--a "donkey-cart". Whereas there was no reference to the origin of the journey in the first extract, here it is stated: "Armoede". The fact that Hendrik is wearing a suit passed on to him by the father increases the sense of identification that later is retrospectively imputed to this scene (which is why it is presented in the past tense, while the first extract is written in the historical present), by the horrified Magda unable to tolerate reality. Coetzee, through his narrative technique of dialectical solipsism, embodies in the novel a psychoanalytical complexity of consciousness which gives insight into the nature of madness and, more importantly, of human subjectivity acting inconsistently under the enormous pressure of forming relations with others in a life traumatised, as psychoanalysis would have it, in childhood, and cruelly dominated, too, by relentless sexual drives that conflict with inherited norms and codes.

This double exposition of In the Heart of the Country, a false account, invented for desperate psychological reasons, followed by a true(r) one, is the clearest example in the novel of Coetzee's critical modernism at work. The idea is not to lead the reader along a morally sane path towards the redemption of heroic characters, as in the traditional novel, but to mislead the reader, providing cryptic clues about a hidden reality beyond the anti-heroine's mind, but which she herself cannot ever reach, thus enacting in the text a psychological experience of alienation by dislocating the reader's sense of empirical reality, passing on, as it were, a concept of delusion.

The novel, in fact, is better described as an anti-novel, since it inverts the traditional conception of the novel in a radical, experimental way: instead of moral heroes, like Robinson Crusoe, Lemuel Gulliver, Major Dobbin, Adam Bede, Pip Pirrip, and Gabriel Oak et al. in the pre-modern novel, one has a psychotic, tormented anti-heroine; instead of a didactic message presented to the reader through a plot-structure based on the hero's development in time, one has a dialectic engagement with an enigmatic text that engenders contradictions and inversions, rather than answers and solutions; instead of empirical narration and an objective setting, one has a solipsistic, subjective tale of woe; instead of hope and meaning, in short, one has despair and vacuity.

Coetzee's experimentalism is not pyrotechnical: a radical shift of thought is encapsulated in a complete inversion of form. Coetzee evidently abhors Western-style colonialism which can destroy landscapes with its fiery technology and inflict sufferings on helpless peoples attached to these landscapes, for what appear to be petty Existential reasons. The situation in each of his three novels is basically colonial, with one dominant group of superior military power, presiding over the gradual demise of a subject group with the inevitable consequence that brutalisation of human relations sets in, leading to violence, oppression, rage, dehumanisation and, ultimately, to a vacuous emptiness that may or may not have been there before, a devastating sense of things unfinished. It is perhaps Coetzee's most important contribution to modern literature to have interpreted this historical condition so evocatively in a critical literary form which enables him to strip away false, self-justifying myths from the harsh, inhuman reality that motivates them. He attempts to define in his fiction the brutal errors of Western colonialism and finds himself "brutalising" the novel form in the process. The two aims are thus complementary.

In the Heart of the Country is "set" in a non-setting, a somewhere, or rather nowhere, in South Africa, which is both an emblem of an empty universe and a societal vacuum: Magda sees it as a "barbarous frontier" ¹

¹ Coetzee, p. 138.

that maddens her with its "insentience".¹ Instead of "society" in the realist novel one has an Expressionist stage upon which the protagonist projects her own discrepancies and griefs. Coetzee uses the desert in all his fiction as a metaphor for the sterility and deadness of the Western society he is criticising.² Coetzee explained his understanding of this desert archetype in the Speak interview:

¹ Coetzee, p. 67, "What purgatory to live in this insentient universe where everything but me is merely itself!"

² The setting of "The Vietnam Project" is an urban wilderness within a government building and the jungle (imagined) of Vietnam; the setting in "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee" is the early colonial Southern African wilderness (Jacobus Coetzee describes himself as a "hunter, a domesticator of the wilderness, a hero of enumeration", Dusklands, p. 85); that in In the Heart of the Country, the isolated platteland which Magda defines as a "petrified garden" (In the Heart of the Country, p. 138) and that in Waiting for the Barbarians, an "imperial outpost" (J.M. Coetzee, Waiting for the Barbarians [Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1981]). There is in each case a philosophical interpretation of the meaning of the desert for Western-type technocratic man: in Dusklands, Jacobus Coetzee reasons that life in the desert is "without rules" (Dusklands, p. 105), the mission of the Western explorer being to clear native tribal culture out of the way of the "civilising" Master Race ("If the Hottentots comprise an immense world of delight, it is an impenetrable world, impenetrable to men like me, who must either skirt it, which is to evade our mission, or clear it out of the way", Dusklands, p. 113); in In the Heart of the Country, Magda interprets the desert as a place where man discovers the dizzy Existential emptiness of freedom ("Here in the middle of nowhere I can expand to infinity just as I can shrivel to the size of an ant. Many things I lack, but freedom is not one of them", In the Heart of the Country, p. 50); in Waiting for the Barbarians the desert is simply seen, and less metaphysically than anthropologically, as belonging by rights to the native peoples. Even for those of the Empire who respect them, it remains a kind of "nowhere" where passive epicureanism is comfortably possible: the Magistrate ends his account by admitting that he "lost his way long ago" but is pressing on "along a road that may lead nowhere", (Waiting for the Barbarians, p. 156). The Magistrate explains this position: "We think of the country here as ours, part of our Empire - our outpost, our settlement, our market centre. But these people, these barbarians don't think of it like that at all . . . they still think of us as visitors, transients" (Waiting for the Barbarians, p. 51).

I think the desert archetype is about a lack of society and a lack of shared culture, a feeling of anomie, a feeling of solitariness, a feeling of not having human ties with the people around one . . . for people whose roots have been cut, who have no sense of identity to the extent of not even knowing what their roots were, the image of the desert in which everyone is solitary has a lot of meaning . . .¹

One element in the novel's immense coherence, then, is the relation of setting or "non-setting", themes and retrogressive plot, through the archetype of the desert.

Isabel Hofmeyer in her review of In the Heart of the Country states that Magda is a social paradigm, implying that her position is representative of a whole class struggle.² And Coetzee seems to put Magda into a representative role: "I am the one who stays in her room reading or writing or fighting migraines. The colonies are full of girls like that, but none, I think, so extreme as I."³ Self-identity-- "I am the one . . ."--is given a social context: "The colonies are full of girls like that . . .". The demonstrative pronoun that encapsulates the switch from personal identity to a socio-cultural role. The implication is that colonial structures, in fact, determine identity as much as the self-concept of an individual: "I am the one . . ." (emphasis added), that is, a single, unique person of certain defining personality traits. The demonstrative adjective "the" here is ambiguous, defining both a specific entity and a generalised archetype. This dialectic between identity as a unique human being and as a social being conditioned to play certain roles--as daughter of a chauvinist patriarch, confined to the kitchen and her own room, for example, or as "die Mies" for the servants--is another source of contradictions and ironies in Magda's consciousness. Coetzee is conscious in his portrait of Magda of the tension between Existential freedom and the determining power of both the environment and the society in which she

¹ Watson, p. 22.

² Isabel Hofmeyer, "The Frenzy of Desire" in Africa Perspective 8 July 1978, p. 84.

³ Coetzee, p. 1.

lives. Gordimer's consciousness of the disintegrative effects of capitalism led her to place her modernistic fictional elements into a socio-economic perspective. Likewise, Coetzee infuses his modernist-Existentialist analysis of consciousness with powerful indications of determining social causes linked irrevocably to their disastrous effects. One of the methods of effecting this connection is the use of archetypes. The central irony of the novel may be that Coetzee invites the reader to transform Magda's solipsistic schizophrenia into a profound critique of Western individualism and capitalism and not to affirm, as one might expect, the cogito ergo sum that underpins it.

In creating an archetypal role for Magda, in an archetypal "non-setting", Coetzee follows the lead, perhaps, of Albert Memmi's influential study of colonialism, The Colonizer and the Colonized.¹ Memmi epitomises the colonial situation in the couple, the colonizer and the colonized, and their archetypal relationship: ". . . the couple is not an isolated entity . . . on the contrary, the whole world is within the couple".² Likewise Coetzee incarnates in his fiction an historical situation in terms of couples: Dawn/Coetzee in "The Vietnam Project"; Jacobus Coetzee and "the other" (the Hottentot people) in "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee"; Magda/the father, Magda/Hendrik, the father/Hendrik, the father/Klein-Anna, et cetera in In the Heart of the Country; the Magistrate/Colonel Joll and the Magistrate/the barbarian girl in Waiting for the Barbarians.

Coetzee's conception of the psychology of this epitomal colonial relationship is akin to Memmi's. Memmi's argument begins with a deterministic premise: "The colonial relationship which I had tried to define chained the colonizer and the colonized into an implacable dependence, moulded their respective characters and dictated their conduct."³ This gruesome interdependence can be seen in the relation between Magda and her father:

¹ Albert Memmi, The Colonizer and the Colonized 2nd ed. (1957; London: Souvenir Press, 1974).

² Memmi, p. vii.

³ Memmi, p. ix.

If my father had been a weaker man he would have had a better daughter. But he has never needed anything. Enthralled by my need to be needed, I circle him like a moon. Such is my sole visible venture into the psychology of our débâcle.¹

Magda is clearly the subjugated party, while the father is the "colonizer". Memmi sees "privilege" (economic and social) at the heart of the relationship.² Here the father's privilege is that of the patriarch, free to exert unlimited emotional power in the family household. Magda laconically comments, "We are not a happy family together".³ Hand-in-hand with privilege for the colonizer goes deprivation for the colonized. Again, Magda's deprivation is emotional:

To my father I have been an absence all my life. Therefore instead of being the womanly warmth at the heart of this house I have been a zero, null, a vacuum towards which all collapses inward, a turbulence, muffled, grey, like a chill draft eddying through the corridors, neglected, vengeful.⁴

Memmi talks of the "daily humiliation of (the) colonized".⁵ Magda writes of her oppression at the hands of her father, "Tears roll down my cheeks, my nose is stuffed, it is no good, I wait for the man on the other side of the door to decide for me what form tonight's misery is to take."⁶ Magda is also a dehumanized second-class citizen of an oppressive colony and the colony is her father's home. Coetzee weaves psychoanalytic themes, Afrikaner Calvinist myths of the patriarchal family and the Marxist consideration of power and domination into his epitomal sets of human relations or "couples". (This is an example of his synthesis of the South African and modern traditions.)

¹ Coetzee, p. 5.

² Memmi, p. xii.

³ Coetzee, p. 2.

⁴ Coetzee, p. 2.

⁵ Memmi, p. xii.

⁶ Coetzee, p. 51.

Further, Memmi describes the colonial society as a "pyramid" of power.¹ In In the Heart of the Country the pyramid is: the father, the (deceased) mother, Magda, Hendrik and Klein-Anna. Coetzee adds his own unique twist to this logic when the pyramid collapses after the death of the father and Hendrik gradually assumes the role of head of the farm, raping Magda, parading around the farm in the father's old "finery"² and humiliating the white hag who is now defenceless. Male domination cuts across racial domination, a profound point Coetzee makes in what can be read as a feminist plea for greater equality in sexual relations. He sees male chauvinism as the base of racism and exploitation in the colonial set-up. Hendrik's rape of Magda is only an enactment of the violence innate in the colonial codes. Magda's mother, for example "lived and died under her father's thumb".³ Clearly this is a psycho-cultural standpoint, and not a Marxist one.⁴ Oppression, of both subject race and subject sex, is considered to be primarily psychological. Memmi states that oppression "is the greatest calamity of humanity"⁵ and since Coetzee has written three novels to-date on this theme it seems likely that he agrees with this. Magda described the set-up as "a reign of brutishness".⁶

¹ Memmi, p. xiii.

² Coetzee, p. 98.

³ Coetzee, p. 2. Coetzee attacks with unmitigated virulence the idea of male domination in the novel. Not only is the father presented as a cold-hearted, sexual brute, but Hendrik is seen as rapacious with lust and a kind of mocking male strength. The rape symbolises the brutality of male aggression. Hendrik's physical rape mirrors the father's mental rape of Magda. The females in the novel, Magda, the mother and Klein-Anna are seen, by contrast, as sensitive, vulnerable, if not helpless, passive emotional creatures. Magda's role as kitchen maid is also seen as deeply frustrating and dehumanising.

⁴ Yet Coetzee by no means ignores the dimension of economics. It is made clear that Hendrik, who "arrived from nowhere" (p. 19), has been made rootless through poverty and that his dependence in the colonial relation to Magda's father is economic: "Wat se soort werk soek jy?" "Nee, werk, my baas" (p. 20). The father is "baas" because he has work to offer. Later Hendrik leaves the farm in disgust when Magda neglects to pay him (p. 104; pp. 117-8).

⁵ Memmi, p. xvii.

⁶ Coetzee, p. 47.

The colonizer, argues Memmi, sees himself as an adventurer, a pioneer.¹ The father is often pictured riding into the sunrise, or emerging from the sunset, dismounting, huge, dusty, male, like a sort of African cowboy with male phallic power to swing instead of a six-gun, oppressed by the existential torpor of life, rather than by Indians:

63. In the face of all the allures of sloth, my father has never ceased to be a gentleman. When he goes out riding he wears his riding-boots, which I must help him off with and which Anna must wax . . . In a stud-book he keeps three collar-studs . . . Who would think that out of rituals like these he could string together day after day, week after week, month after month, and, it would seem, year after year, riding in every evening against a flaming sky as though he had spent the whole day waiting for this moment . . .²

67. While Hendrik is out on a godforsaken task in the heat of the afternoon my father visits his wife. He rides up to the door of the cottage and waits, not dismounting, till the girl comes out and stands before him squinting in the sun. He speaks to her. She is bashful . . . He leans down and gives her a brown paper packet. It is full of candies, hearts and diamonds with mottoes on them. She stands holding the packet while he rides away.³

The father treats Klein-Anna as a child who can be beguiled. She, too, is "devalued" by her male oppressor, towards whom she acts with acquiescence and sexual servility:

He tells her to sit. She is going to sit at table with him. He has cut a slice of bread which he pushes toward her with the point of the knife. He tells her to eat. His voice is gruff.⁴

Magda and Klein-Anna, then, embody the effects of depersonalisation and oppression which in an earlier time, blasted defenceless natives ("The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee") and, in a later time, are refined

¹ Memmi, p. 3.

² Coetzee, p. 31.

³ Coetzee, p. 33.

⁴ Coetzee, p. 52.

into a sophisticated technology of military warfare ("The Vietnam Project"). Coetzee roots imperialism and colonialism in an essentially psychological predicament. He offers in his fiction a phenomenological analysis of what he sees to be the central drift of Western colonialism. This marks him off from the later Gordimer who develops a Marxist viewpoint. For Coetzee the problem is not capitalism per se as it is for Gordimer in The Conservationist but an epistemological sickness, an intellectual disease, a psychological neurosis. Coetzee is interested in the consciousness of colonialists, the origins of colonial behaviour, rather than in the outward, social manifestations of it, although these are strongly implied as antecedent causes, as has been suggested.

What results from this colonial relation, in Memmi's argument, is the enslavement of the colonized:

The most serious blow suffered by the colonized is being removed from history and from the community. Colonization usurps any free role in either war or peace, every decision contributing to his destiny . . . and all cultural and social responsibility.¹

Magda writes: "I live, I suffer, I am here . . . I fight against becoming one of the forgotten ones of history."² The experiences are passive--live, suffer, am--those of a person robbed of "cultural and social responsibility". Later Magda calls herself a castaway of history.³ For Memmi, the colonized is no longer a subject of history.⁴ Coetzee uses the fragmentation of Magda's consciousness as a measurement

¹ Memmi, p. 91.

² Coetzee, p. 3.

³ Coetzee, p. 135.

⁴ Memmi, p. 91.

of the disintegrating effects of taking away a person's right to be a subject.¹

Coetzee explores the possibility of freedom as a solution to the colonial oppression that devalues and dehumanises. Memmi argues that the only solution to the explosive situation is revolution:

To live the colonized needs to do away with colonisation . . . The liquidation of colonization is nothing but a prelude to complete liberation, to self-recovery . . . he must cease defining himself through the categories of colonizers.²

Magda fights against being a forgotten one of history: from the beginning she is in revolt: "I was not watching . . . because I was in my room in the dark west wing eating my heart out and biding my time". Although Magda is oppressed by the meaningless desolation of life ("There was a time when I imagined that if I talked long enough it would be revealed to me what it means to be an angry spinster in the heart of nowhere."³), it is not really an existential freedom she seeks, at least at first, but rather a freedom from "colonial" oppression.

Albert Camus in The Myth of Sisyphus, a seminal Existential treatise, defines freedom as revolt:

¹ Immanuel Kant in Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals put forward his great thought that the basis of human ethics is treating others as ends-in-themselves and not as means-to-an-end. "Only rational agents or persons can be ends in themselves. As they alone can have an unconditioned and absolute value, it is wrong to use them simply as means to an end whose value is only relative", H.T. Paton, The Moral Law (1948; London: Hutchinson University Library, 1972), p. 32. Paton is here commenting on Kant's law: "Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end." This formulation has been a fundamental aspect of Western ethics from Socrates to Buber. Coetzee is criticising the violation of this most basic human right.

² Memmi, pp. 151-2.

³ Coetzee, p. 4.

It is a matter of living in that state of the absurd . . .¹

There is thus metaphysical honour in enduring the world's absurdity. Conquest . . . absurd revolt are tributes that man pays to his dignity in a campaign in which he is defeated in advance.²

Magda has endured savage neglect long enough: her "conquest", her "revolt" (Camus) is to liquidate (Memmi) the system of oppression, namely her father, "cause of all my woe"³:

116. The bullet rests snug in its chamber. Wherein does my own corruption lie? For, having paused for my second thoughts, I will certainly proceed as before. Perhaps what I lack is the resolution to confront not the tedium of pots and pans and the same old pillow every night but a history so tedious in the telling that it might as well be a history of silence . . . Am I one of those people so insubstantial that they cannot reach out of themselves save with bullets?

Yet earlier, Magda cried out, "I toss about in the dark whipping myself into distraction. Too much misery, too much solitude make of one an animal. I am losing all human perspective."⁵ This amounts to a dialectic: Magda's existential insubstantiality, her inability to tolerate absurdity and *taedium vitae*, on the one hand, seen in the first passage above, and her sheer demented sense of oppression, at the hands of someone else, on the other hand, in the second passage, lie at the root of her crime of passion. Coetzee does not finally resolve this duality, although one might be forgiven for inferring that he ends up by seeing Magda's plight as one of Existential horror at least as much as it is one of colonial oppression in Memmi's model:

¹ Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus 4th ed. (1955; Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 42.

² Camus, p. 86.

³ Coetzee, p. 11.

⁴ Coetzee, p. 59.

⁵ Coetzee, p. 53.

As for the absence of God from the stone desert, there is nothing I can be told about this subject that I do not know. Everything is permitted here. Nothing is punished. Everything is forgotten in perpetuity. God has forgotten us and we have forgotten God. There is no love from us toward God nor any wish that God should turn his mind to us. The flow has ceased. We are the castaways of God as we are the castaways of history. That is the origin of our feeling of solitude. I for one do not wish to be at the centre of the world, I wish only to be at home in the world as the merest beast is at home. Much, much less than all would satisfy me: to begin with, a life unmediated by words: these stones, these bushes; this sky experienced and known without question; and a quiet return to the dust.¹

This is clearly a metaphysical statement of alienation at the heart of Coetzee's analysis of Magda's madness²: Coetzee's solution is equally a philosophical rather than a socio-political one: a mystic state of oneness with material reality is craved more than anything else: a reification of the human self in an abnegation rather like a religious ecstasy without religion or "God", a material mysticism, if it might be called that. There is also an element of stoicism--the Camus-type "metaphysical honour" of persevering with absurdity--in the wish for "a quiet return to the dust". This cannot in the final analysis be equated with Memmi's concept of revolution.

Yet the murder has been committed, even if it has not solved anything. The memory of the black-booted oppressor with the thunderous voice (portrait of a jackboot fascist) remains indelible, too intensely evoked to be cast aside despite the final emphasis on Existential alienation:

¹ Coetzee, p. 135.

² There are many other examples of the maddening effect of meaninglessness and desolation: "I am cantankerous, but only because there is infinite space around me . . . What is there for me but dreary expansion to the limits of the universe? Is it any wonder that nothing is safe from me . . . or that I should dream with yearning of a bush that resists my metaphysical conquest?" (p. 74). See also extract 248, p. 128.

Now those booted feet come up the passage. I close the door and push against it. I have known that tread all my life, yet I stand with mouth agape and pulse drumming. He is turning me into a child again! The boots, the thud of the boots, the black brow, the black eyeholes, the black hole of the mouth from which roars the great NO, iron, cold, thunderous, that blasts me and buries me and locks me up.¹

And finally, it is absurdity that prevails as Coetzee's technique of dialectic solipsism veers into extreme Expressionism, and even Surrealism, when objective events become severely distorted through the lens of a disfigured human perception--a bedroom soars off into the night sky, a patricide nurses and gabbles to the corpse of her dead father (symbolic of the death-in-life theme evident before the murder), and planes fly overhead philosophising in Spanish to a crazed spinster who writes back messages on stones and rocks. The act of would-be liberation has turned sour even though the power structure has been destroyed; in fact, an even deeper oppression has been engendered, indicating that Magda's malaise, all along, has been an Existential one of the schizoid personality unable to "belong" to other people or to the world.²

Coetzee's final allegiance to absurdity may go some way to explaining his adoption of Expressionist techniques. Walter Sokel argues in The Writer in Extremis, an analysis of literary Expressionism, that Expressionists use time and space as means to subjective expression, not as ends in themselves, accelerating or reversing time (as in The Grass is Singing, written in a retrospective narration and passing rapidly from one part of Mary's life to another, and in Coetzee's use of subjective time determined solely by Magda's patterns of consciousness) and distorting spatial relations (Mary

¹ Coetzee, p. 51.

² For an explanation of Laing's notion of the schizoid character see Chapter One, p.16 and Chapter Six, p.130.

Turner imagines the bush rising up to swallow the farmhouse and Magda fabricates incidents which are presented as objectively real, as in the hallucinations involving the talking planes). This affects the plot (time) and setting (place) of the novel. The setting is "the heart of nowhere",¹ an existential void ("what purgatory to live in this insentient universe where everything but me is merely itself!"²) providing Magda with that freedom that Sartre saw as condemnatory in which man was free to invent his own identity: the farm is "a theatre of stone and sun".³ The whole treatment of setting in the novel is based on Camus's principle of absurdity.⁴ The plot, too, reflects the consequent absurd "revolt" that is "the certainty of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it."⁵ Magda even resorts to subterfuge for this absurd consolation: "From one of the farthest oubliettes of memory I extract . . . the image of a faint grey frail gentle loving mother huddled on the floor, one such as any girl in my position would be likely to make up for herself."⁶

Magda's absurd alienation is evident not only in relation to the heart of nowhere, but to the others on the farm. Here the aspect of social determinism which vies with that of Existential Absurdity for priority in Coetzee's world-view in In the Heart of the Country and loses, makes its strong bid. The Beckett-like monotony, banality and mechanical resonance of the dialogue, for example, stresses the impotence of language as a medium for expressing desire:

¹ Coetzee, p. 4.

² Coetzee, p. 67.

³ Coetzee, p.3.

⁴ Camus, p. 13. "This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity."

⁵ Camus, p. 54.

⁶ Coetzee, p. 2.

Words are coin. Words alienate. Language is no medium for desire. Desire is rapture, not exchange. It is only by alienating the desired that language masters it.¹

Language, a "cool, alienating medium",² a system of signs "numbering the universe steadily",³ and turning their user into a "factor", is an instrument for reducing the world to a neat pattern in which everything is final and ordered (numbered) and therefore existing outside experience itself, like an abstract mathematical number system, whereas experience is essentially characterised by "the frenzy of desire". Thus, "the frenzy of desire in the medium of words yields the mania of the catalogue. I struggle with the proverbs of hell".⁴ Since language, in this understanding, cannot truly represent desire, which is a ceaseless uncontrolled "frenzy" ("... our disease ... is that ... our desires stream out of us chaotically without aim, without response, like our words ..."⁵), it must instead alienate "the desired", the objects in the world, that is, that do not simply exist, for the Existential protagonist in absurd revolt, but are objects of metaphysical yearning ("the farm, the desert, the whole world as far as the horizon is in an ecstasy of communion with itself, exalted by the vain urge of my consciousness to inhabit it."⁶), and thus create a mechanical representation, a "cool, alienating medium", of dead linguistic signs. When Magda yearns at the end of her story for a "life unmediated by words", she is longing for mystic union with material existence in which desire, the essence of subjective time, is perfectly matched with "the desired", the world of matter and chronos⁷, an experience only possible beyond language. Magda's revolt, the impossible effort to attain an unalienated state of being, is a mystic as well as a social one.

¹ Coetzee, p. 26.

² Coetzee, p. 26.

³ Coetzee, p. 27.

⁴ Coetzee, p. 26.

⁵ Coetzee, p. 135.

⁶ Coetzee, p. 49.

⁷ In "Four Notes on Rugby", in Speak, July/August 1978, Coetzee defined chronos as "the time of entropy, of the running down of the universe", p. 19.

Coetzee's method of setting out his narrative in a numerological pattern, a "catalogue", is an artistic reflection of this philosophy of language. Fiction cannot represent experience and so has to invent it (the Sartrean commitment to define the identity of an existence without an essence), and then number it. It is a Western Cartesian rationality, once more, that is insidiously at work.

If words are "coin", lifeless, exchangeable, abstract, but experience is "rapture", then it follows that "dialogue" between people will be a matter, rather, of mutual monologue, as in a Beckett play. Coetzee shifts the "dialogue" of the conventional novel from its position in the narrative to form part of Magda's solipsistic monologue with herself. The "acts" of her consciousness are abruptly cut off from each other in the units of Coetzee's numerological narrative form. Magda's alienation is reinforced rather than moderated by the "exchanges":

58. Hat in hand, Hendrik stands at the kitchen door waiting for me to look up. Across the batter-bowl and the broken eggshells I meet his eyes.

"Môre, mies."

"Môre, Hendrik, gaan dit goed?"

"Nee, mies, dit gaan goed. Ek kom vra: mies het nie miskien werk in die huis nie? Vir my vrou, mies."

"Ja, dalk, Hendrik; maar waar is jou vrou?"

"Sy is hier, mies." He nods back over his shoulder and meets my eyes again.

"Sê vir haar sy moet binnekom."

He turns and says "Hê!", smiling tightly. There is a flash of scarlet and the girl slips behind him. He steps aside, leaving her framed in the doorway, hands clasped, eyes downcast.

"Is jy nou ook h Anna? Nou het ons twee Annas."

She nods, still averting her face.

"Praat met die mies!" whispers Hendrik. His voice is harsh, but that means nothing, we all know, such are the games we play for each other.

"Anna, mies," whispers Anna. She clears her throat softly.¹

The fact that the dialogue is in Afrikaans in a narrative written in English suggests a further disjunction between experience and its interpretation in language. Magda is "thinking" in English, yet talking in Afrikaans (this is rather contradictory, however, as Magda is Afrikaans): her Afrikaans dialogue is at two removes from experience itself, since her thoughts, formulated in English, mediate between reality and her talking voice. Linked with the inherent inadequacy of language and this disjunction between thought and talk is the debasement of relations between parties in a colonial situation that destroys reciprocity and puts in its place a predetermined pattern of behaviour: Hendrik is hat in hand (an absurd posture for Magda's potential rapist), Magda is "mies", setting the tone of the dialogue in a question/answer pattern, Klein-Anna is respectfully coy, Hendrik orders her to talk to "die mies" with a false harshness needed to break down the artifice of servility, part of the "games we play for each other". The theme of the deadening artificiality of colonial relations is repeated several times in the novel:

48. I know nothing of Hendrik. The reason for this is that in all our years together on the farm he has kept his station while I have kept my distance; and the combination of the two, the station and the distance, has ensured that my gaze falling on him, his gaze falling on me, have remained kindly, incurious, remote . . . We have our places, Hendrik and I, in an old, old code . . .

49. I keep the traditional distance. I am a good mistress, fair-minded, even-handed, kindly, in no sense a witch-woman. To the servants my looks do not count, and I am grateful. Therefore what I feel blowing in on the thin dawn-wind is not felt by me alone. All of us feel it, and all of us have grown sombre. I lie awake listening to the cries, muted, stifled, of desire and sorrow and disgust and anguish, even anguish, that swoop and glide and tremble through this house, so that one might think it infested with bats, with anguished, disgusted, sorrowful, longing bats, searching for a lost nesting-place, wailing at a pitch that makes dogs cringe and sears that inner ear of mine which, even in subterranean sleep, tunes itself to my father's signals.²

¹ Coetzee, p. 29.

² Coetzee, p. 25.

The relations between master and servant are depersonalised by an "old, old code"¹ and this creates a remoteness evident in the mechanical, question/answer, command/obedience pattern of dialogue. These codes lead to a degradation of life and atmosphere on the farmstead: the very air is expressionistically infested with "anguished, disgusted, sorrowful, longing bats". Coetzee, like all Expressionists, conceives of human experience as profoundly emotive and subjective, radically individual and personal as well as socially determined. Here the emotional atmosphere of the farm is vile and corrupted by oppression which turns human relations into artificial patterns of domination and subjection.

The dialogue itself echoes with the impersonal emptiness of the "old, old code". Of course, the code is based on "privilege" as in Memmi's analysis. In extract 58 Hendrik is asking for werk for his wife, recalling the time when he asked for werk himself from die baas. Magda's possession of the privilege of being able to offer work puts her into a commandeering position from where she can sport with the shy girl in a game played according to the rules of dominance and inferiority. The code, in other words, is deeply internalised, as evidenced by Magda's automatic attunement to her father's signals, as if she were a dog. There is an automatic quality in all the dialogue in the novel. The skill with which they "move through the paces of (their) dance"² only serves to reinforce the irreparable distance between master and servant (" . . . we might as well be on separate planets, we on ours, they on theirs."³).

Magda later explains to Klein-Anna (the name itself indicating playful condescension) that she has "never known words of true exchange" and that the words she uses are "sonder waarde".⁴ Anna

¹ Memmi talks of the petrification of institutions in the colonial society, see p. 151.

² Coetzee, p. 25.

³ Coetzee, p. 28.

⁴ Coetzee, p. 101.

does not, of course, understand, and this irony stresses the point Magda is making.¹ Coetzee constantly draws attention to the fragmentation of "life on the farm".²

Finally, though, it is Magda's schizoid being that precludes any act of belonging: ". . . But I have quite another sense of myself, glimmering tentatively somewhere in my inner darkness: myself as a sheath, as a matrix, as protectrix of a vacant inner space."³ Magda's inability to be fulfilled is not simply the fault of society or her father: "If I am an O, I am sometimes persuaded, it must be because I am a woman . . . I do not have it in me to believe that the mating of farmboy with farm girl will save me . . ." ⁴. Debunking the Freudian myth of sexuality as the salvation of a material human existence, Coetzee shows up the limitations of the post-Victorian psychoanalytic perspective:

I am pressed but not possessed, I am pierced but my core is not touched. At heart I am still the fierce mantis virgin of yore. Hendrik may take me, but it is still I holding him holding I.⁵

Much of Magda's monologue, in fact, which represents her "metaphysical conquest", is geared to the demythologising of myths of western civilisation in the tortured quest to find meaning. Those myths that do not have experiential meaning are rejected by her

¹ Coetzee portrays Jakob and Anna as shadowy servant-figures to support this notion of depersonalisation. They never emerge as full characters before they are "sent packing" (p. 45) from the farm, presumably by Magda's father who wants to clear the way for his affair with Klein-Anna. Their manner of departure is typical of their presence in the novel--unnoticed, perfunctory, alien. This echoes the idea that there is no true dialogue in the colonial "couple", as does the symbolic episode with Magda nursing her dead father's corpse.

² Coetzee, p. 28.

³ Coetzee, p. 41.

⁴ Coetzee, p. 41.

⁵ Coetzee, p. 116.

"encapsulating consciousness".¹ Examples other than the Freudian concept of sexuality include: (i) the myth of country life as wholesome and natural, (ii) myths of Christian doctrine and patriarchal Afrikaner Calvinism, in particular, and (iii) the Romantic myth of transcendence.²

¹ A phrase used by Coetzee in his article "Samuel Beckett and the Temptations of Style" in Theoria 41 October 1973, p. 47.

² Evidence, briefly, for these points, is as follows:

(i) The English myth of country life as wholesome, with its modern roots in Romanticism and its dichotomy of Nature and Industry, is consciously debunked. The title, In the Heart of the Country, is ironic, since the farm is the "heart of nowhere" and, in fact, has no organic heart. It is a "dead place" (p. 110), a "petrified garden" (p. 138), a "desert of fire and ice" (p. 118), a "vacuum in time" (p. 70), a "vacant . . . desert" (p. 59), an "insentient universe" (p. 67), a "desolate earth" (p. 119), an "immaterial earth" (p. 73) and so on. Magda's lament "How I long for country ways" (p. 80) is ironic in this light--the country destroys, rather than engenders, organic life.

(ii) Christian myths are referred to extensively, especially those of the Calvinist doctrine. This may be seen as part of Coetzee's critique of Afrikaner patriarchal society, since this has been traditionally associated with Calvinism. Coetzee rejects the "God is Love" ethic in extract 260 (p. 135), and the existence of God (p. 134), substituting agnostic Existentialism in its place; the Calvinist concepts of Original Sin, predestination, election, and total depravity are secularised by Magda to become elements in a fatalistic determinism (see extract 44, p. 23, see also extract 88, p. 42 and pp. 129, 134). The revelations from the plane are mock religious "voices" (pp. 125-6) and there are countless references to Christian truths, myths and expressions such as Eden (p. 70, p. 138); the Expulsion (p. 7); lost innocence (p. 18); the Apocalypse and the "new earth" vision (p. 67); the Promised Land (p. 19, p. 118); angels (p. 40, p. 108); salvation (p. 16, p. 46, p. 132); Satan (p. 5, p. 50, p. 10); The Holy Ghost (p. 127); Holy Communion (p. 52); the burning bush (p. 73) and the Transfiguration (p. 113). Coetzee substitutes his agnostic materialism as a world-view he sees as more real and less mystic: it is "iron" scientific laws that rule the universe (p. 46).

(iii) One of the novel's central tensions is the "desire" to be consummated and fulfilled (an agnostic equivalent of Salvation) coupled with the intransigence and "insentience" of the world. There is no final freedom, transcendence or ecstasy for Magda: (see the following extracts: 35, 85, 87, 94, 96, 129, 248, 260, as examples and Magda's central statement: "That is how I spend my days. There has been no transfiguration. What I long for, whatever it is, does not come." [p. 113]). The effect of such demythologising is to suggest the horror of an unredeemed existence that is positively dehumanising (hence the constant references to bats, insects, ants, rats, fish, stones and other non-human beings and things).

After Magda's "encapsulating consciousness" has devoured her environment (her father is dead, the servants--as well as any passers-by--have "crept away" from her,¹ and even the objective reality of a plane flying overhead has been "encapsulated" by her mind), all that is left is the spectatorship of her own disintegration and the crushing despair of vacuity:²

. . . I have chosen at every moment my own destiny, which is to die here in the petrified garden, behind locked gates, near my father's bones, in a space echoing with hymns I could have written but did not because (I thought) it was too easy.³

¹ Coetzee, p. 138.

² By this is meant the notion that human consciousness cannot finally be reconciled with material existence, as Sartre argued in Being and Nothingness (1943; New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), trans. Hazel E. Barnes): "What originally constitutes the being of the For-itself is this relation to a being which is not consciousness, which exists in the total right of identity . . . The For-itself is nothing more than this transcendent Nothing which is the negation of the thing perceived" (p. 140). Sartre here puts forward his notion of human perception as "nihilation" which can be understood only on the basis of a lack of reciprocation between the For-itself (consciousness) and the In-itself (a material object). Coetzee draws heavily on Sartre in In the Heart of the Country: Magda's vacuity is precisely her inability to reify herself, a For-itself, into an It-itself or conversely, to apotheosise an In-itself into a For-itself, like herself, in order to transcend the ontological block of existence separating sentience irrevocably from what Sartre calls "facticity". (Sartre, p. 56). This is the ontological basis of desire which Sartre sees as "lack of being" (p. 87). The despair of Vacuity for Magda, who wants to be like the stones and sand and ants (see In the Heart of the Country, extract 260, p. 135) but cannot, is also a fundamental frustration of this metaphysical desire brought about by the implacable resistance of matter and the endless "chaos" of desire itself.

³ Coetzee, p. 138

CONCLUSION

In the Heart of the Country is more than an Existential horror story, absurdist tragedy or Expressionist poem: it is that rare artistic phenomenon, a masterpiece.

F.R. Leavis reflects the aesthetic viewpoint of writers and critics who have been primarily interested in literature as an artistic transformation of human experience, such as Henry James, D.H. Lawrence, I.A. Richards and Northrop Frye, and, in South Africa, Nadine Gordimer, when he wrote in The Great Tradition that a great novelist combined a preoccupation with form and profound "human value and moral interest".¹ Such a novelist, Leavis argued, subjected a concern with art--manifested in innovativeness of form and method²--to "a profoundly serious interest in life".³ Leavis's criteria, for the great novel, then, are innovativeness and technical ingenuity providing for a completeness and wholeness of realisation (an important word of Leavis's) and embodying profundity of imaginative human vision. Thus, a novel like Madame Bovary, for Leavis as well as for James, is something of a worrying enigma in that "technical ('aesthetic') intensity" is yoked together with an "actual moral and human paucity of . . . subject . . ."4

I think it can be argued that Coetzee's second novel is South Africa's finest contemporary novel (The Beadle has been called a masterpiece, but, as far as I know, no other local novel has been since) although The Conservationist, too, is a major novel of great dimensions. In the Heart of the Country makes brilliant, original use of fictional form--revealing a technical innovativeness of masterful proportions--to evoke a profound phenomenological analysis of human consciousness in the kind of straitened, appalling, conditions that test the human capacity to its fullest. The numerological narrative

¹ F.R. Leavis, The Great Tradition 5th ed. (1948; rpt. Middlesex: Pelican, 1974), p. 41.

² Leavis, p. 28.

³ Leavis, p. 28.

⁴ Leavis, p. 22.

form, for example, is perfectly suited to the linguistic theme of language as a "cool, alienating medium" which is realised, again, in the mechanical ring of a depersonalised dialogue across barriers of the "old, old code". The fact that the narrative is paradoxically fragmented and yet ordered (in units from one to 266) is also thematically significant. The fragmentation of one unit after the other, each separate and isolated from both the previous and the following one, linked only by an abstract system of numbers indicative of a dualistic rationality out of touch with experience's "frenzy of desire", represents Magda's alienated solipsism, expressed in a chaotic Humean epistemology, which is a function of her not belonging to the world.¹ The order of the units is, of course, artificial. The narrative form, then, reflects Sartre's paradox of condemnatory freedom:

We are left alone, without excuse. That is what I mean when I say that man is condemned to be free. Condemned, because he did not create himself, yet is nevertheless at liberty, and from the moment that he is thrown into the world he is responsible for everything he does.²

The novel is resonant with correspondences of this nature, indicating a technical intricacy and wholeness of form. The technique of dialectical solipsism, whereby Magda contradicts herself and provides the reader with the challenge of discerning the truth, thus implicating him in the fragmentation of a consciousness, is further evidence of Coetzee's blend of aesthetic and philosophic awareness which Leavis considered the hallmark of the great novelist. The effect is of an intense phenomenological study of mental breakdown under the pressures of environment, heredity and metaphysical essences.

As for a vision that could be considered serious, challenging and morally concerned, one needs only to consider how cohesively Coetzee has welded the fundamental issues of colonialism--privilege and

¹ R.D. Laing, in The Divided Self 12th ed. (1960; London: Penguin, 1975), p. 17, points out that the schizoid who is unable to experience himself "together with" others or "at home" in the world, experiences himself as a discontinuous personality.

² J.P. Sartre, Existentialism and Humanism 2nd ed. (1948; London: Eyre Methuen Ltd, 1973), trans. Philip Mairet, p. 34.

domination on the one hand, and deprivation and oppression, on the other-- to the universal Existential themes that have plagued numerous modern writers Coetzee has been influenced by, especially Kafka, Sartre, Camus and Beckett, to produce insights, that are both articulate and intense, into the human predicament in these particular historical conditions. The intensity, in fact, adds up to a moral and social protest, voiced by Magda, in a grimly ironically situation, to the corpse of her father (which she sees in her madness as her fatally wounded, dying father):

Do you not see that it is only despair, love and despair, that makes me talk in this way? Speak to me! Do I have to call on you in words of blood to make you speak? What horrors more do you demand of me? Must I carve out my beseechings with a knife on your flesh? Do you think you can die before you have said Yes to me?¹

Magda has been destroyed by her father's "eternal NO"² and her protest and revolt, absurd though they may be, speak on one level, about the violation in a patriarchal, male-dominated society of a fundamental ethical principle from Kant to Buber, that of reciprocity,³ and, on the symbolic level, about the devastating effects of colonial society from a psychological and moral point of view. In both cases the tragedy is a loss of reciprocity in the vacuum of a desert that does not allow human life to grow.

Only a fine novel of this intensity of realisation could end the struggle of almost a century in English South African fiction to define fully the despair of trying to be human in an environment that for reasons of its own does not permit that.

¹ Coetzee, p. 72.

² The 17th century German mystic and philosopher Jacob Boehme made the classic assertion that all things are rooted in a Yes and a No (see Paul Tillich, The Courage of Despair 7th ed. [1952; London: Collins, 1971], p. 42).

³ Coetzee, p. 125, "It is not speech that makes man man but the speech of others."

CONCLUSION TO THESIS

The question whether there is a viable English South African literary tradition was raised in Chapter One and in the course of the thesis it became evident that a fundamental continuity exists in the mainstream of major novels in this literature. It was necessary in the cases of writers like William Plomer, Doris Lessing and Dan Jacobson, for example, who left the subcontinent to live and write in England, to separate their South African fiction from work that could not be seen to reflect South African experience from what Nadine Gordimer termed an "Afrocentric" perspective.¹ This is only one indication among others that this South African literature has evolved its own distinctive character, has established organic connections with the land and country in which it was created and constitutes, in short, a vital indigenous growth. Furthermore, that an artistic soundness and formal coherence characterise the best of the novels in the literature suggests that an imaginative and technical vigour has been at work in the forging of that continuity of consciousness necessary, in the views of T.S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis, for the foundation of any literary tradition.

That the theme and mood of despair as a manifestation of a pessimistic outlook has been highly prevalent in the literature, and has been, more than any other single factor, the focal point of this imaginative continuity, is, in my view, a symbol of the integrity of the search of these artists for a real existence in Southern Africa, a stake in the land, a rootedness that the legacy of colonialism and the implied indebtedness to, and dependence upon, Europe, could not shake. There have been no attempts, that is, to perpetuate pure colonial myths of occupation, domination and civilisation, gazing at Africa from the world, to paraphrase Nadine

¹ See Chapter One, p.5.

Gordimer.¹ Rather, the imaginative stress has been, in these terms, to look at the world from Africa, even if this has meant experiencing the bewilderment of profoundly mixed feelings. The omnipresence of despair in the literature that is part of that effort of a people to belong in a real, rooted way to Africa shows that this commitment was fulfilled, even to that infinitely complex point when the prize remained always elusive. The fact that early writers in this literature of courageous despair² left the country to live in England--Olive Schreiner, William Plomer, Pauline Smith--is a further measure of the arduousness of the process of decolonizing the consciousness, if that is what it can be called, in the interests of moving towards the difficult Africa-centred vision.

Of the novels studied in this thesis, The Story of an African Farm and Turbott Wolfe belong to the early colonial period of the literature, characterised by the need to pioneer both that vision and ways of expressing it. Although Pauline Smith, like Schreiner and Plomer, did not live permanently in South Africa, and wrote in something of a vacuum as far as local literature goes,³ her novel The Beadle depicts the way of life in a pastoral Afrikaans community and the relationship of the Afrikaner to Africa has always been very different from that of the South African English people and so her novel is a special case in some ways, aside from it being a Christian work in which despair is seen as a function of universal sin, not of living in a colonial society. The novel still belongs, though, to a phase of the literature prior to its emergence as an independent tradition fashioned by a growing continuity of consciousness among its writers.

¹ Nadine Gordimer, The Black Interpreters (Johannesburg: SPRO-CAS/Ravan Press, 1973), p. 5.

² Albert Camus, in his The Myth of Sisyphus, propounds his philosophy of courageous pessimism.

³ In a diary entry dated Tuesday, 2nd May, 1905, Smith wrote, "At the opening meeting . . . F. Muller, Esq . . . gave the opening address on South African literature. I did not know there was any . . .". Although Smith wrote The Beadle many years later, there was certainly very little local literature to draw on, even then.

The English South African novel really comes into its own with the phenomenal success of Alan Paton's Penguin Modern Classic Cry, the Beloved Country, still the most popular South African novel ever written. The novel is not only set in South Africa, as are The Story of an African Farm and Turbott Wolfe, it is written from the point of view of South Africa. Schreiner was far more interested in the intellectual implications of the Sceptical Revolution happening at the time in England and Europe than in the details of life in the Karoo: Waldo, unlike Arthur Jarvis in Cry, the Beloved Country, is a mystical dreamer, and while Reverend Stephan Kumalo is highly conscious of the breakdown of the tribal community and the widespread effects of the industrialisation of South African society, Lyndall remains essentially concerned with the Woman's Question. William Plomer described Turbott Wolfe as "an improbable and ineffectual Englishman"¹ and it was found in Chapter Three that much of Wolfe's alienation was cultural: the colonial predicament was too vulgar and coarse for his refined English sensibility. His departure is a symbol in this early period of the literature of the insufficiency of the Eurocentric consciousness in the face of harsh realities in colonial South Africa. This consciousness had to adapt or . . . depart: is this the final implication of Turbott Wolfe?

While The Beadle is rooted in a study of a community belonging to pre-industrial South Africa and which did not see itself as colonial, and Smith pitches her themes at the universal level of a Christian theology of redemption, Alan Paton blends a Christian message of comfort into his study of a desolate South African society of the 1940s, time of industrialisation, urbanisation and detribalisation, producing the first major work in an emerging indigenous English South African literature that can be classified as fully and authentically Africa-centred in its imaginative sense and moral sympathies, written, furthermore, when South Africa was a colony in the British Commonwealth in little more than a nominal way. This phase of the literature, which includes, of the works studied in this thesis, The Grass is Singing and the South African fiction of

¹ William Plomer, Double Lives (London: Jonathan Cape, 1943), p. 160.

Dan Jacobson, can be termed the middle period of the emerging tradition.

It is significant that Alan Paton has remained committed to South Africa until the present time. His autobiography Towards the Mountain testifies to an Africa-centred consciousness (in this case South Africa-centred) that has been "decolonized" all along. For these reasons, then, it seems appropriate to see Cry, the Beloved Country as the turning-point in the literature. By turning her attention to a rustic Afrikaans community Pauline Smith foreshadowed, in effect, this shift from a concern with European issues applied a priori to a South African context, to a full, first-hand examination of the realities of South African society a posteriori, that is, with a strong empirical flourish. Instead of Waldo finding peace in the discovery of Universal Unity, one has Arthur Jarvis offering his moral commitment to South Africa, instead of Turbott Wolfe leaving Africa for reasons that a gentleman is best able to understand, one has a Zulu umfundisi trekking out to the great city of gold and sin on a mission of restoration. And the schizoid condition of characters like Mary Turner, Mehring and Magda is at least caused by their Existential "abandonment" in both degrading social circumstances and the insentient universe.

This shift of consciousness on the part of English South African writers, initiated by Paton, is echoed in an analogous change of heart described in the Frost poem cited in the Preface of this thesis, which begins, "The land was ours before we were the land's". The emphasis in Cry, the Beloved Country is on responding to being part of the "beloved country", working on that irrevocable assumption and, in Paton's case, formulating a principle of creative suffering to cope with the potential of despair that threatens human life in a situation of exhausting complexity and trying conflict of interests.

The responses of writers of the contemporary period of mature English South African fiction--to this condition of "being part of"--have been very different from Paton's notion of Christian hope.

Gordimer's The Conservationist and J.M. Coetzee's In the Heart of the Country have heralded a return to a literature of despair, but not the sort of spontaneous distress of "an improbable and ineffectual Englishman" sojourning in Africa and disgusted by an ungentlemanly, immoral society, but a despair allied to an analytical study of the nature of South African society and the causes of oppression in it. In The Conservationist the central cause of oppression is seen to be a racially based capitalism and in In the Heart of the Country, the structures of colonisation.

It was noted in the previous chapter that a new phase of the literature has been initiated by Coetzee's profound study of South African despair in In the Heart of the Country: later novels like Gordimer's July's People and Coetzee's own Waiting for the Barbarians have taken new, challenging perspectives on the South African situation, Gordimer projecting her focus forward into an envisaged future "after the revolution", Coetzee presenting an ironic utopia in allegorical form. If this represents a movement away from the implications of present despair, it is hoped that English South African novels in the future will encourage that development, given the debilitating existential effects of a despair unallied to some creative philosophical principle.¹ No-one is in a position to speculate on the future of the literature since this is entirely dependent upon the course South African society takes and this is a matter for the clairvoyant and the prophet, rather than for the literary critic.

¹ Despair has been, perhaps, the major element in the Existential philosophies from Kierkegaard to Tillich. Kierkegaard considered despair a fatal and morbid spiritual condition and Tillich in The Courage To Be warned against its effects in the following words: "The pain of despair is that a being is aware of itself as unable to affirm itself because of the power of non-being. Consequently it wants to surrender this awareness and its presupposition, the being which is aware. It wants to get rid of itself - and cannot . . . In view of this character of despair it is understandable that all human life can be interpreted as a continuous attempt to avoid despair." (pp. 61-3).

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