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Fractious Form: the Trans/Mutable
Post-Apartheid Novel

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Abstract

The question which I explore is to what degree, and in what way, the paradigm of anti-apartheid literature gives way to its post-apartheid successor. More particularly, I explore how post-apartheid South African novels perpetuate, displace or transmute the narrative forms and conventions characteristic of anti-apartheid writing. I therefore read the forms and conventions in certain post-apartheid novels through the lens of anti-apartheid discourse, in particular its demand for politically engaged realism, tracing continuity and change. I argue that *The Good Doctor* (2003) by Damon Galgut and *Karoo Boy* by Troy Blacklaws (2004) reiterate anti-apartheid conventions through devices that become anachronistic, in that they reproduce anti-apartheid literary dynamics without adaptation to the post-apartheid conditions represented or implied in these texts. Formal reinvention, however, is evident in the following novels. In *The Restless Supermarket* (2002), Ivan Vladislavić displaces political engagement from narrative form into the speech acts of his narrator. This text thereby stages a lexical meditation that displaces the typical realist sequence of symptomatic events. Despite this innovation, there are continuities between his work and the early writing of J.M. Coetzee, which suggest that Coetzee anticipated characteristic post-apartheid narrative strategies ahead of their time. Further, the innovative magic realist forms of Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying* (1995) and Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001) engage with crises of transition so dire that death becomes their central metaphor. Both writers introduce the device of orature as assertions of African identity. However, Mda counterposes orature against death, injecting through it a humanising principle. In Mpe's novel, by contrast, orature acquires a murderous agency.

I trace variants of what I term 'fractured form', namely form that is duplicitous, or otherwise dualistic, through a further group of novels. My premise is that the social fracture represented as content scripts the formal fracture/fractiousness in their narrative forms. An attendant property is to disrupt nationalist discourse in its dominant post-apartheid manifestation, namely the rainbow nation mythos. The texts in this group are *Disgrace* (1999) by J.M. Coetzee, *David's Story* (2000) by Zöe Wicomb, Achmat Dangor's *Bitter Fruit* (2001), Zakes Mda's *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002), and *What Kind of Child* (Barris 2006).

In conclusion, the central question to which I attend has been raised by

Michael Green (1997: 7), namely how a body of texts generated within the episteme of anti-apartheid can be meaningfully related to the literary paradigm that replaces it. I find that in the collective formal inventions, fractures and displacements demonstrated in this thesis, an emergent post-apartheid episteme becomes discernable.

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Introduction

On the one hand, there is the pressure to be part of a proposed Renaissance, to present positive images that might help to reconstruct our culture. On the other hand, there is an incredible stress at the moment on memory... a sense that writers need to remember, that one of the things writers can do is keep the past alive. Now it's as if writers are being pushed between those two positions, because if you lose sight of apartheid, then people say you've forgotten about the past, and you're part of the trend towards "amnesia"; on the other hand, if you go too deeply into apartheid, they say you're holding onto the past, and it's negative, you should be writing about the future.

(Vladislavić, in Warnes 2000: 279-80)

1

My interest in the topic of this thesis originates in personal as well as academic motives. I began writing fiction during the late apartheid years – my first prose publication, a short story¹, appeared in 1981 – and to a significant degree, I felt shaped as a writer by the conventions and pressures of anti-apartheid writing. The most significant of these pressures, as I experienced it, was a demand for political relevance. I felt no such conviction, however, about the associated demand for realism as a formal mode (both of these demands are discussed in detail in the first chapter). In this latter respect I was similar to other writers of my generation, such as Mike Nicol, Achmat Dangor and Ivan Vladislavić, whose texts at the time were not realist projects.

This choice of topic is no less influenced by the fact that I continued to write

¹ 'Interface' (Barris 1981) appeared in a literary journal entitled *The Bloody Horse*, which survived for a single year.

during the years of transition², approximately from the time of Mandela's release in 1990 until the first election in 1994, and through the first decade and a half of South African democracy. Many authors felt an intoxicating change in the atmosphere, including the expectation that writers would, virtually by default, produce politically committed work. However, this has been qualified during the last ten years by at least three factors: a growing public realisation that apartheid is far from over, in its economic and social aspects; by a realisation that the "rainbow nation" image has been dispelled by postcolonial and post-apartheid disappointments such as corruption, failures of governance, populism, and xenophobic outrages; and by the fact that both political engagement and formal realism have continued to play into many (though certainly not all) the important novels written during this period.

The most immediate aspect of the question with which I was confronted, in engaging with this thesis, is how the discourse of anti-apartheid writing continues to define post-apartheid English fiction in South Africa, and to what extent entirely new directions are being sought. Apart from the generalised situation of being a writer producing work in this context, a more direct stimulus was evident in the fact that during the first two years of my reading towards this thesis, I was also engaged in writing a novel, eventually to be entitled *What Kind of Child* (Barris 2006). The novel became an exercise in divergent formal choices. It traces the lives of two coloured children. One is born into a white family, the other into a marginalised black family. Significantly, as it would turn out, the phase of the narrative dealing with the marginalised child took the form of a classic realist text. The phase of the narrative dealing with the privileged child showed a more postmodern structure. In this way, I perpetuated a literary apartheid of my own, reserving the rigours of realism for the poor, and indulging the middle class of my novel in a surfeit of postmodern choice. I

² See Barris (1988, 1993, 1996a, 1996b, 1998a, 1988b, 1999, 2000, 2002, 2003, 2004a-c, 2005, 2006a, and 2006b).

was aware that this reflected contemporary tensions within the South African literary world. However, the technical choices I made did not stem from what academic understanding I possessed, but from my reading of the internal exigencies of the text as it was being written. Further, as my practice, of itself, demonstrated certain qualities that were to be interrogated by this thesis, the interaction gave to both study and practice a greater personal value and relevance than would otherwise have been the case.

My original hypothesis was that, with some important exceptions, novels which engaged directly with political issues tended to utilise realist form, whereas novels which imagined the social context in a relatively apolitical manner took on more experimental structures. As my work proceeded, I realised that the texts in question were too variegated and nuanced in their interrelationships of form, content and political agenda to support this initial hypothesis. The thesis thus turned into an examination of the politics of form across the period of study, charting continuities, discontinuities and modulations in the narrative forms and topoi of South African English fiction, principally in the medium of the novel. I use 'topos' in the sense articulated by Nathalie Ferrand (2006: 329), namely not the abstract structure of argument associated with Aristotle's or Quintilian's rhetoric, but rather 'a recurrent narrative sequence' that runs through a variety of texts in changing, but still recognisable, form. However, as Ferrand observes, the echo of the classical meaning reminds us that the novel is also an argumentative form. My research shows that in the post-apartheid environment, textual politics tends to generate literary forms that reflect in their construction the principle of fracturing, of division, of various kinds of embedded duality. I have therefore incorporated the term 'fractious form' in the thesis title, with its connotations of both fracture and fractiousness.

The question that my thesis explores is how novels of the transition and of the early post-apartheid years respond at the structural level of form and topos to the

societal changes that they reflect as content. How do these structural elements demonstrate an epistemic shift, or conversely demonstrate continuity, between the anti-apartheid and post-apartheid literary paradigms? In *Novel Histories: Past, Present and Future in South African Fiction* (1997), Michael Green formulates a question that reflects my own concerns, namely how the 'episteme of anti-apartheid' (Green 1997: 7) can be transformed into a post-apartheid paradigm:

How can a body of texts generated within, and in terms of dissemination and reception still held within, the episteme of *anti-apartheid* [...] be meaningfully related to one beyond apartheid? [...] Above all, perhaps, how do we register in the shift towards a more relevant discourse that this shift is all the more painful and difficult for its material conditions not yet being firmly in place?

(Green 1997: 7, original emphasis)

As a supplement to my attention on writers who have produced a measure of canonical change, I further consider how scholarly and critical opinion – taken as a collective process that charts the canonical and epistemic topographies – responds to certain of these changes. This is particularly evident in chapter one, in which the 'episteme of anti-apartheid' is given definition, although this thread is followed through in subsequent chapters too, albeit to a more limited degree.

2

In chapter one ('A Long and Bitter Argument: the Episteme of Anti-Apartheid'), I review the twinned demand for political commitment and realist form as it was expressed within South Africa from the 1970s through to the closing years of apartheid, and various forms of opposition which arose in response. My point of departure is that the documentary burden of formal realism – its mimetic function – bears no epistemologically privileged relationship with the world. I argue that a realist novel does not hold a mirror to the real any more than does a postmodern,

postcolonial or magic realist narrative. It is also an enclosed field of signs that inter-relate according to shifting sets of rules, as Roland Barthes (1974: 204) insists. However, for the review purposes of this chapter, I thereafter suspend my own understanding of realism, and concentrate on the various ways in which the demand for committed realism was propagated and resisted. More particularly, I consider the role played by political, cultural and even labour organisations in making this dual demand explicit, and in some cases, applying a degree of coercive pressure. I also discuss reactions to this demand that arose from the 1980s onwards – part of the epistemic point and counterpoint – attending to the work of commentators as diverse as Lewis Nkosi, Njabulo Ndebele, Stephen Watson, Lionel Abrahams, Patrick Cullinan and J.M. Coetzee. In the closing years of apartheid, and beyond, the debate shifted to more epistemological ground. The view that realism is best suited to representing South African life was opposed by the view that alternative modes of writing such as postmodernism, magic realism, and texts informed by indigenous cultural forms are not only legitimate, but indeed are better equipped to represent the convolutions of experience. In this regard, arguments by Benita Parry, Albie Sachs, André Brink, and Elleke Boehmer, are discussed. Finally, chapter one contextualises various facets of the demand for political realism in the light of similar debates that have occurred in antecedent situations marked by social conflict. Arguments by Lenin, Mao, Gorky, Lunacharsky, Lukács, Brecht and Bloch are related to elements of the South African debate.

In chapter two ('Apartheid Apparitions: the Case of Damon Galgut's *The Good Doctor*'), I assert that Galgut attempts to position his novel as a post-apartheid text, but does so by falling back on the tropes of anti-apartheid writing. The result of this narrative strategy is a distorted structural logic in his narrative. The novel does show political engagement, in its critique of the new South African polity, and in its use of stereotypical anti-apartheid villains, particularly an Afrikaner military figure, and a

former Bantustan military dictator. It also appears, deceptively, to be typically realist in form, in its orchestration of reifying detail, in its structural presentation of time and place, and its use of character to focus on societal conflict. However, this apparent realism is undermined by a systematically enacted code of absence in which principal narrative objects – personalities (and their actions) bearing the possibility of a degree of resolution for the narrator – always elude his grasp. As objects of apprehension, they continually, systematically fail to materialise; yet the narrator sustains, most insistently, his attempts at constructing a world of meanings that is entirely dependent on their presence. This subversive process of wishfully substituting assumed presence for actual absence is extended through key irresolutions and weaknesses in plot construction. I explain this ambivalence of form and meaning in terms of an ambivalent anxiety on the part of the writer: to engage with post-apartheid social conditions, while still trying to position the novel within a literary canon defined by the tradition of anti-apartheid writing. In particular, I relate this anxiety to Michael Green's (1997: 174) concept of 'historicising form', and to Laura Chrisman's view (2000: 3-12) that the British literary market has used the anti-apartheid movement, extending this use later to a pessimistic view of democratisation within Southern Africa, in the construction of postimperial domestic English identity.

Chapter three ('The Afrikaner Grotesque') reviews the representation of white Afrikaner males in two post-apartheid novels, namely *Karoo Boy* (2004) by Troy Blacklaws, and *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002) by Zakes Mda. The former reiterates the racial dynamics of the apartheid past without transformation; the latter subjects these dynamics to a complex and nuanced range of transmutations that respond to societal change. I consider these texts with reference to Afrikaner identity and to the manner/s of Afrikaner power. These observations are related to Gikandi's (1996: 171) argument that 'our relationship to the space of the savage' is marked by the tensions between desire and prohibition implicit (in Freudian terms) within the concept of the

taboo. I further relate these observations to Huggan's (2001: 13) view of the 'exotic' as a sign which combines the familiar and the strange within a complex relationship that displaces its content according to political need and agenda. I then argue that the narratives in question place the figure of the Afrikaner between the coloniser Self and the colonised Other as a unique figure in which coloniser and colonised status, and Self and Other, are fused. Finally, I relate this figure of the Afrikaner, so conceived, to Agata Krzychylkiewicz's (2003) notion of the modern grotesque, arguing that these Afrikaner figures embody what I shall term 'the Afrikaner grotesque'.

Chapter four ('The Politics of Originality: reading Ivan Vladislavić through J.M. Coetzee's Early Fiction') compares Ivan Vladislavić's contemporary fiction with the early work of J.M. Coetzee. I argue that although Vladislavić has been welcomed as an innovative presence because his work is said to introduce magical realism to the South African canon, he actually writes what I term ironic fantasy. His real innovation is twofold. He fuses aesthetics and politics in a satire of commercialised language, and of bourgeois suburban culture, both of which he regards as complicit with epistemic apartheid; and secondly, he has displaced political engagement from allegorising form into the speech acts of his characters. Despite his originality in the above respect, many intertextualities of device can be seen between J.M. Coetzee's first novel *Dusklands* (1974), and *The Restless Supermarket* (Vladislavić 2002). What these intertextualities have in common is a rejection of realist form, and a rejection of *direct* political representation, i.e. of any historical or documentary model of fiction. However, Coetzee attracted hostile reception for this innovation, while Vladislavić was affirmed as an innovator for highly analogous literary inventions. I explain this as a result of the diminution of political urgency towards the end of the 1980s, and of the gradual ascendancy of post-structural literary theory through the same decade. I conclude that in certain respects, Coetzee's early literary praxis would not be exceptional in the post-apartheid milieu. In this sense, he anticipated developments

that would only occur approximately two decades later. Finally, I suggest that through his literary example and its influence on younger writers, he contributed more materially to the formation of the post-apartheid literary paradigm as well.

Chapter five ('Dreaming of a Humane Society: Death and Orature in Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying* and Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*') considers the many parallel structures in these two novels. Both are sited on the cusp of transition, and both are innovative in form, particularly in regard to their integration of African magical realist influences. Both use death as a signifier of traumatic social transition, rather than reflecting it as an accidental consequence of transition. Indeed, the narratives are actively structured around typologies of death, allowing characters to form responses not only to death itself, but through these responses to engage with the texture of their changing societies. The context of social transition, however, differs. Mda's book reflects the vicious and chaotic interregnum between the dying order of apartheid and the unborn democracy. Mpe's is set in a post-apartheid society that continues to transform beyond any conceivable moment of inception, destabilising expectation of a humane society even as it is generated.

In writing out of these disturbed post/colonial conditions, both authors delegate some of the narrative burden to a fictionalised communal voice. In other words, they consciously use the medium of orature. Further, they use orature to position themselves as African speakers, aware of indigenous tradition as they are of cosmopolitan literary practice. I therefore briefly review relevant aspects of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's view of orature, which are then related to its contrasting use in Mda's and Mpe's narratives. Orature in *Ways of Dying* is a humane element that relieves the oppressive universality of death; in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, it is a malicious agency that becomes literally murderous. It is through this crucial difference that both narratives take an innovative, albeit contrasting, stance with respect to the project of *national* struggle. While Mda's text draws on national political/historical events, he has

turned from protest and mobilisation to community development. Mpe, on the other hand, depicts a set of communities in disintegration, and the consequent degradation and crisis of individuals trapped between conflicting urban and rural epistemologies. Redemption and healing in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* is thus shown to be an individual rather than either a community or national possibility. This withdrawal of representation from the exigencies of national political struggle – and the overwhelmingly positive reception the novel has enjoyed – suggests the same changed shape and boundary of the South African literary canon that the reception of Vladislavić's work indicates.

Chapter six ('From Interracial Desire to Interracial Rape: Displacing the Site of Transgression in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*') reads *Disgrace* by J.M. Coetzee (1999a) through the lens of two earlier white-authored novels of interracial sexual encounter, namely *Turbott Wolfe* (1977 [1926]) by William Plomer, and Alan Paton's *Too Late the Phalarope* (1953). These novels reveal in the structuring of their narratives an ambivalent political imagination. It is an imagination that criticises proscription of sexual freedom across the colour line, and yet subliminally endorses the code of transgression against which it protests. I identify a difference between Coetzee's *Disgrace* and the two predecessor novels that is at once obvious and crucial, namely that in the society represented in *Disgrace*, interracial sexual encounters are not illegal. However, I argue that the genre of interracial sexual contact within white South African writing is structured around the signifier "transgression", and that J.M. Coetzee retains this signifier as a point of reference within the genre, by shifting its overt content from interracial desire to interracial rape. Given the amplified transgressive charge that rape presents as narrative strategy, I will argue further that the ambivalent code of racial transgression embedded in earlier instances of the genre re-emerges in *Disgrace* within a different transgression, namely rape. This reproduces, albeit in modified terms, the racialised anxieties embedded in the Paton and Plomer

novels with which *Disgrace* is compared.

This argument is then extended to a consideration of the form of *Disgrace*. Many critics have defended the novel against imputations of racialised discourse on the grounds that both the realist form of the novel and its racialised content are more misleading than substantive. Various kinds of metafictional interrogation, reflexivity and intertextuality have been said to subvert or negate the formal and contextual statement that *Disgrace* appears to make. In this view, what appears to be a racialised depiction of rape in classic realist form therefore cannot be taken at face value. I argue that *Disgrace* in fact demonstrates a duplicitous form in which neither realist nor postmodern readings subsume or negate one another. Despite the complex range of metafictional positionings that the text legitimates, therefore, it knowingly reproduces an historicised discourse of race.

Chapter seven ('From Fractious Politics to Hybrid Form: Zöe Wicomb's *David's Story* and Achmat Dangor's *Bitter Fruit*') explores the use of form as an expression of textual politics. Both novels question issues of coloured identity, siting these explorations in the turmoil of South Africa's transition to democracy. This chapter argues that Wicomb and Dangor respond by producing hybrid narrative forms, as expressions of the crises of transformation and identity they narrate.

Wicomb's response is both to embed and write back to the self-alienations of shame within her narrative. In structural terms, this is done through the rich intertexts the novel effects with the colonial literature of miscegenation, and through Wicomb's questioning of the possibility or validity of representation within such a fraught political context. In consequence, *David's Story* refuses to speak authentically, stuttering into silence at the moment of its production, foregrounding its rejection of the devices of realism, and expressing itself through a variety of decentering postmodern techniques. However, I argue that the narrative also moves through realist sequences, and systematically creates metaphors of embodiment, that create

an alternative type of reality effect. The result is a hybrid form that exerts a tension between its loosely alternating postmodernist and realist modes. I argue further that the realist phase of the novel reflects on its position within the textual history of anti-apartheid writing; in other words, a script of engaged realism remains visible, as in a palimpsest, within the postmodern form.

Achmat Dangor's *Bitter Fruit* generates a different kind of hybrid form by nesting a compounded allegory within an otherwise realist novel. Where the post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) scripted a national allegory of confession and exculpation, Dangor writes a counter-allegory of retribution, again nesting within this a further allegorical layer in the form of an Oedipal fable. A retired security policeman, who raped the wife of an activist during the apartheid years, is later killed by the child of this rape. This Oedipal tale writes back to the discourse of miscegenation, in that the mixed-race son murders his white father, ironically expunging the stain of *white* blood. The discourse of miscegenation is further subverted in that *Bitter Fruit* hyperbolically elaborates the principle of transgression across many boundaries of sexual taboo, including incest, age difference, rape, fidelity, as well as merely colour.

Rape plays a central role in four of the nine post-apartheid narratives explored in this thesis, namely J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999a), *David's Story* by Zöe Wicomb (2000), *Bitter Fruit* by Achmat Dangor (2001), and Zakes Mda's *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002). It is also true of my own novel, *What Kind of Child* (Barris 2006). In chapter eight ('Unitary or Fractured Form? The State of the Rainbow Nation') I argue that all these texts exhibit properties of formal duplicity, splitting, or duality in their representation of rape and its social aftermath. I argue further that this dualism reflects, at the infrastructural or formal level of narrative, fractures in the social body. Writers of the transition, in other words, are driven to inscribe the social disjunctures and transformations symbolised in rape into the language of form itself. My chapter

title therefore includes the term 'fractured form' to imply disjuncture and schism in both form and societal representation. A second consideration is that rape in these narratives plays an intermediary role in bringing the apartheid past into relationship with a political future. I therefore relate the concept of fractured form to an implication raised in chapter one, namely the view that politically committed realism was promoted as the originary narrative mode by which the new republic could be envisioned and perhaps one day realised. I then question what these various fractured forms imply for rainbow nation teleology, and conclude that there is a material relationship between formal dualism and disruption of the rainbow nation trope. Conversely, in the single text in this group that endorses the rainbow nation (*The Madonna of Excelsior*), unitary form is evidenced. I close the chapter with an account of how my own novel *What Kind of Child* constructs its own narrative fractures.

Chapter One

A Long and Bitter Argument: the Episteme of Anti-Apartheid

South African literature is a literature in bondage, as it reveals in even its highest moments, shot through as they are with feelings of homelessness and yearnings for a nameless liberation. It is a less than fully human literature, unnaturally preoccupied with power and the torsions of power, unable to move from elementary relations of contestation, domination, and subjugation to the vast and complex human world that lies beyond them. It is exactly the kind of literature you would expect people to write from a prison.

(Coetzee 1992 [1987]: 98)

This chapter discusses the demand for political realism that marked South African letters during the apartheid years, and contestations that arose in response, in order to contextualise the post-apartheid continuities and discontinuities explored in the thesis as a whole. Attention will be paid to three distinct but interwoven demands of the (literary) anti-apartheid struggle: for realism as the preferred genre; for textual commitment to the political struggle; and for a documentary content which overlapped the recording and interpretative functions of history. I review the role played by political, cultural, and labour organisations in explicating these demands. Further, I consider the intensification of these demands to a more coercive position, namely that writers subordinate their work to the interest of political and cultural organisations.

The demand for political realism did not drown out other voices, and the often bitter struggle arising from the opposition it provoked cannot be excluded from this account. I therefore discuss critique and opposition that arose largely from the 1980s onwards. Commentators such as Lewis Nkosi (as early as 1967) and Njabulo Ndebele criticised the lack of aesthetic realisation in realist fiction by black writers. Stephen Watson and Lionel Abrahams raised similar concerns in the context of poetry, arguing

that the priority given to political engagement should not be allowed to diminish the autonomy of aesthetic value, and that the consequence of such a diminution of aesthetic value was poor writing. Patrick Cullinan objected to the position that only black writers could write against apartheid with authenticity, while J.M. Coetzee contended that fiction could not be subordinated to the procedures, methods and claimed pre-eminence of history. From the late 1980s, the debate shifted to epistemological ground. The monolithic premise that realism is best suited to representing South African life was opposed by the view that alternate modes of writing such as postmodernism, magic realism, and texts informed by indigenous cultural forms are not only legitimate, but indeed are better equipped to represent the convolutions of experience. In this regard, arguments by Benita Parry, Albie Sachs, André Brink and Elleke Boehmer are discussed.

This kind of cultural and ideological conflict was not an exclusively South African phenomenon. The chapter therefore contextualises this sustained controversy with reference to similar debates that have occurred in analogous social and political situations. In particular, positions taken by Lenin, Mao, Gorky, Lunacharsky, Lukács, Brecht and Bloch are related to elements of the anti-apartheid polemic.

Finally, on a point of definition, I have incorporated the term 'episteme of anti-apartheid' (Green 1997: 7) into the title of this chapter. However, I do have certain reservations about the term in this context. Green does not use 'episteme', as Foucault does in *The Order of Things* (1970), to denote a fundamental system of understanding which organises the core method of knowledge underlying an historic period as large, for example, as the Renaissance, or the Classic period. A further aspect of Foucault's concept of episteme is that it organises the structure of the knowing subject – conceived not as an individual, but as a reflection of the community of subjects in a given time – in relation both to itself and to the world. Seen against this scale of conceptual organisation, everything embraced by the concept of anti-

apartheid, or of its negative image in apartheid, is a localised reiteration of a number of histories that have occurred globally through the twentieth century. While the term 'anti-apartheid' clearly draws its complex of referents from the vicissitudes of South African history within a certain period, few of these pressures are peculiar in any exclusive sense to South African politics and history, as I will establish below. Yet despite my reservation of scale and universality, subsequent chapters of this thesis will show how comprehensively the tensions explored so far have structured – and continue to structure – writing in this country. One might add how deeply and widely the apartheid past continues to construct not only formal politics, but identity and subjectivity, the media and all forms of public discourse, social mores and manners, sexuality and gender, health matters, security, sport, and a wide range of economic questions. In this consuming (albeit spatially and temporally local) sense, the term 'episteme of anti-apartheid' does seem to justify itself.

Although many writers have turned (or are turning) from modes of writing so deeply constructed on the premises of the all-consuming struggle, the scars of the apartheid order are still as richly scored on the body of writing as they are on the body politic. What renders these traces legible is the hieroglyphics in which they are depicted: the narrative forms and topoi inscribing the post-apartheid novels that this thesis takes as its subject matter.

1

In this section I will formulate my own understanding of realism, prior to discussing the demand for engaged realism that dominated South African letters during the apartheid years. I consider the views of George Eliot, David Lodge, Georg Lukács and Roland Barthes, and conclude that the genre of realism is in fact a system of signifiatory conventions that relates signifier to signified as arbitrarily as postmodern

praxis would regard itself as doing. In other words, while realism might conceal the disjuncture of signifier and signified that postmodernism proclaims, this disjuncture obtains nonetheless. I articulate this view in order to contextualise my own position with regard to (and existential distance from) the demand for political realism.

While realism has a long and complex history of development, a starting point for definition is George Eliot's proposal, quoted in Morris (2003: 79), that it is a writer's responsibility 'to give a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in [the writer's] mind'. However, Eliot notes that it is not possible entirely to achieve such faithful representation, because the capacity of the mind to function as a mirror 'is doubtless defective; the outlines will sometimes be disturbed, the reflection faint and confused' (in Morris 2003: 79). Realism thus implies a documentary property in its commitment 'to give a faithful account of men and things'.

Lodge (1977: 25) offers a definition of realism in literature that avoids the problem of attempting to achieve faithfulness to nature. Instead of defining the project of realism as a form of representation corresponding in a detailed way with the objective world, Lodge's definition matches the conventions of realist fiction against the conventions of non-fiction and documentary texts produced within the same culture. In this view, realism is '*the representation of experience in a manner which approximates closely to descriptions of similar experience in nonliterary texts of the same culture*' (25, original emphasis).

Lodge (38) fleshes out this definition in his discussion of nineteenth-century realist novels, observing that the characters of such novels are embedded in a larger historical world. Such narratives, he argues, show a range of depicted relationships between individual and society, from the personal through to the social. Further, various positions are available with regard to the positioning of the characters within history – their awareness of it, their ability to change or merely suffer it, their active

or passive role within it (38). Yet again, the configuring of history within this view of realism points to the documentary element as an integral part of the realist form. It follows that for Lodge, the signifying function of realism overlaps with the recording and interpretative functions of history. This latter implication is inscribed into the anti-apartheid tradition of political realism, as I will show below.

What the anti-apartheid struggle demanded of realism, however, was more than a documentary project. A second (and likewise absolute) requirement was political engagement. As Georg Lukács is possibly the most articulate champion of engaged realism – and as his theory of realism, consciously or otherwise, is premised in the 'episteme of anti-apartheid' (Green 1997: 7) – it is important to consider his work. For the same reason, it is necessary to consider his view in formulating my own.

For Lukács (1963: 19), the Aristotelian dictum obtains: 'Man is *zoön politikon*, a social animal.' He takes a stronger view than Lodge, arguing that the characters of realist fiction are *necessarily* enmeshed within their social (read material and historic) environment. Characterisation that is entirely personal is thus incidental to great literature, indeed disqualifies such work from literary greatness. Lukács contends that the highest achievements of realist fiction are protagonists who are at once individual, and yet typical of the social and historical forces surrounding them (57), and that this dual perspective is characteristic of a great writer. The relationship between such typical characters and their social milieu, however, is only a condition of greatness where it is informed by what Lukács regards as a progressive ideology. He insists that 'there is an intimate connection between a writer's ability to create lasting human types (the real criterion of literary achievement) and his allegiance to an ideology which allows belief in social development' (57). For Lukács, realism is thus only significant where it is socially or politically engaged, and where that political engagement reflects alignment with what Lukács regards as a 'progressive' social ideology.

I do not agree with Lukács that political engagement is a necessary condition of

greatness in realism, let alone in literature, although social reflection in diverse forms has been definitive of classic realist novels. Despite my disagreement, in my view the political stance of the writer will inevitably be encoded within the text, whether explicitly or implicitly so. This involuntary subtext, however, must be distinguished from writing that consciously and overtly reflects on social/political circumstances, and makes that reflection its content. In sum, while I regard subtextual inscription of the writer's political stance as an inescapable process of writing, I regard the explicit social content as contingent, as a choice available to the writer.

I do not accept Lukács's criterion of progressive ideology either, for various reasons. The most obvious objection lies the definition of 'progressive'. It is clear that such thinking can play, and has played, dangerously into the hands of culture bureaucrats whose state-sanctioned remit is to define what is progressive, and what is not³. A second objection is that Lukács's criterion defines, *a priori*, nihilistic and other kinds of ideologically subversive writers out of the realist canon. Thirdly, it restricts artistic and technical freedoms on the basis of a system of ideological beliefs to which a great many people do not subscribe – in this case Marxism – as if that system were absolute.

The problem with Lukács's position can be seen in his distinction (1963: 23-24) between abstract and concrete potentiality of characters. Abstract potentiality refers to the subjective properties that come to life within a character in crisis; concrete potentiality refers to these subjective properties in interaction with objective circumstances. Once concrete potentialities are revealed, abstract potentialities are shown to be 'inauthentic' (23). It appears that concrete potentiality is rendered authentic precisely because it emerges through the interaction of subjectivity and 'a palpable, identifiable world' (24). The context out of which Lukács speaks here is his

³ I discuss instances of this below, with regard to cultural practice in the Chinese and Soviet revolutions.

critique of modernism (22-28), in which he would regard the representations of subjectivity in a text such as James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) or *Mrs Dalloway* (1933) by Virginia Woolf to be decadent. However, I cannot agree with his assumption that the subjective mind is not in itself 'a palpable, identifiable world', as worthy of narrative depiction as the world of historical or social facts. Further, figures such as Bertolt Brecht (1967 [1938]), J.M. Coetzee (1987) and André Brink (1988), have pointed out in diverse ways that there is no paradigm of representation which is not constructed⁴. In consequence, realism cannot claim an epistemologically privileged relationship with 'a palpable, identifiable world' that links signifier and signified in any absolute or objective sense.

Despite my criticism of Lukács's insistence on the necessity of ideologically-informed social engagement and representation of a stable external world as textual signs of the real, I accept that political engagement, albeit varying in kind and degree, is a typical property of the realist tradition. For the purposes of this thesis, I will therefore provisionally define realism as a literary discourse which generally presents character in interaction with contesting social interests, an interaction that often can be read as diagnostic of the social condition. However, such presentations of character and social environment within realism are not driven in any definitive way by a 'progressive' ideology, as Lukács would have it, or necessarily by competing class interests.

Two further conventions must be identified to complete my own view of realism. The first is that realism generally attempts to fix the narrative illusion of a tangible, stable external world, relying on the orchestration of concrete details according to unities of place, time and causal sequence to support the illusion of authenticity. The second, perhaps endorsed more in critical practice than in theory, especially the practice of critical reviews, is that background information regarding

⁴ Discussed in greater detail in section 3 of this chapter.

spatial and temporal setting, and historical and cultural context, is expected to be factually accurate. Writers are commonly taken to task by reviewers for perceived failures in this regard, despite the unstated awareness (so obvious that no statement is thought to be necessary) that the principle representations of plot and character may be entirely fictitious. This second convention arises from the expectation that realism operates in a manner analogous to history, and is deployed in support of this expectation.

In Lukács's terminology, socially or politically committed realism exhausts the concept of realism. However, my own provisional definition of realism as a genre allows for a continuum of social reflection, including depictions of individual crisis without great social import, representations of relatively stable and homogenous societies, and of social formations not necessarily locked in a competitive struggle of interests.

To complete my definition of realism, I need to assert that the term is a misnomer. While there certainly is a project which undertakes by various narrative strategies and devices to convince, to coat narrative with a patina of authenticity, which offers a quasi-documentary state of expression as its justification, I would argue that this project relies on a silent contract with readers to agree that such strategies and devices are the markers of authenticity. Nothing could be further from the infinitely detailed, trivial, amorphous, unfocused details of life – nothing could be further from the plenum of chaotic information surrounding and informing each action – than shaped narrative, realist or otherwise. The real is too great a mess to fit the purposes of art. In the most realist of texts, material is selected and arranged, information is disclosed and withheld in artful order, effects are calculated in rigorous and mandatory bad faith with naïve mimetic expectation. George Eliot's mirror is an unfaithful metaphor in itself: no mirror has as much discretion, or wields such powers of exclusion and artifice, as a realist novel.

I would argue further that despite the documentary function expected of realism, a realist text can nonetheless be read as a signifiatory play that is as independent of the signified as its non-realist alternatives. This is demonstrated by Roland Barthes's distinction in *S/Z* (1974: 4) between the 'writerly' and 'readerly' (or classic) text⁵. The former distorts and fractures form and meaning, obliging the reader to become a 'producer of the text' (4), conjuring one or several of an indefinite number of possible readings from its difficulty and fragmentation. The latter consolidates its meaning and organisation according to principles of coherence and closure. The consequence is that the reader of such a classic text becomes a passive consumer, 'left with no more than the poor freedom to accept or reject the text' (4). Yet despite this founding distinction for the argument in *S/Z*, the essay as a whole demonstrates that the readerly text is also, in fact, a densely articulated pattern of signification that troubles the appropriation of the real that is definitive of realism. Barthes argues that five codes of meaning intersect in a readerly text (19-20). Of these, it is the 'proairetic code' that represents actions derived from empiric circumstances, in other words, which provides the armature of realist representation. One might argue that the proairetic code is the very endoskeleton of realist novels, provided that the parts are arranged causally, and not merely sequentially. However, Barthes points out (203-4) that this latter code can be articulated in a number of ways. These include different etymologies of proairetic sequence, i.e. the derivation of certain actions from the store of possible human actions, beginning with the most trivial; or from the archive of previously written descriptions of action sequence, which lend automatic legitimacy to, or habituate the reading of, a given sequence. The proairetic code can further be read in terms of the possible logical development of action sequences, such as catalysis of further sequences, and branching trees of

⁵ Given that *S/Z* is a meditation on a novella by that definitive realist, Balzac, there is little doubt that the 'classic text' in Barthean terms is a realist text.

logical possibility. Moreover, proairetic sequences 'form the favoured raw material for a certain structural analysis of narrative' (204) in that they are more than sequential. They are capable of syntagmatic order (in the syntactic sense, defined by antecedent, and anticipating consequent, effects of meaning, receiving and generating an order of unfolding meaning that is consequential rather than sequential). In other words, the action sequence bears complex logical and grammatical properties even as it enables a framework of reference to the signified. The point of my argument so far is that the action sequence, surely the most elemental property of realist narrative, or as Barthes has it, 'the strongest armature of the readerly' (204), is a deeply systemic element, dense with articulable structure. Indeed, in *S/Z* Barthes reads such intense articulation of structure and system into a classic text that it paradoxically becomes an independent machinery of signification, commanding attention in its own right, exceeding its function as a mirror standing before and reflecting a world of signifieds.

It seems to me therefore ironic that the fractious debate around political realism to be discussed in the following section became a contest of interests between a signifying protocol which declared itself to be realist, and a set of signifying protocols which did not (postmodernism, postcolonialism, magic realism). The irony is that realism is no less a self-contained system of signification than its alternatives, not less isolated from or necessarily more engaged with the world outside text. Moreover, non-realist narratives can certainly engage with the particulars of a political situation, or with the meanings of particular or general political situations; it cannot be said that realist fiction owns the copyright on political engagement, or indeed, documentary effect⁶. Accordingly, I review the debate around political realism below without commitment to any of its axes, but as a necessary context for the argumentation I unfold in subsequent chapters. As I will show below, this debate was constructed on

⁶ *The Ibis Tapestry* (1998) by Mike Nicol exemplifies the point. It is postmodern in form, but moves through a fragmented disclosure and analysis of politically engaged documents, presented as authentic, which displace the conventional realist unities.

several intersecting axes: political engagement/aesthetic freedom; moral coercion/artistic freedom; black authenticity/white inauthenticity; history/fiction; and finally, realism/postmodernism (and associated non-realist modes). These conceptual axes, I suggest, constitute the ideological network underlying the episteme of anti-apartheid.

2

The demand for political realism was frequently expressed in the view that writing produced under apartheid conditions must be instrumental in the struggle against apartheid, and must be accessible to the masses. Karen Press (1988: 27-28) identifies the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) in the 1970s as one of the catalysts of this view. She notes that the BCM saw cultural activity as a vital component of a strategy which would inspire black people to assert 'black identity, black humanity and creativity, in defiance of a dehumanizing social system' (Press 1988: 27). A second catalyst was the Culture and Resistance Festival held in Botswana in 1982. According to Press (28), this was the first gathering of South African artists held with the explicit purpose of affirming the role of artists as members of the anti-apartheid struggle. While the conference was not officially or exclusively under the aegis of any particular political organisation, many prominent African National Congress (ANC) and BCM members played an important role in its proceedings (28).

By the 1980s the call to align writing and other arts with the anti-apartheid struggle had been made explicit by many organisations. According to Benita Parry (1994: 12), calls for 'an expressive and instantly accessible literature, whose message is transparent and where contest and confrontation is manifest in content and delivery' were made by the Congress of South African Writers (COSAW), and by the cultural desks and departments of the ANC, the United Democratic Front (UDF), and the

Congress of South African Trades Unions. Further, the People's Culture Campaign, spearheaded by the UDF during the successive States of Emergency (1985–1986)⁷, articulated the following manifesto. A central objective of the campaign was to build a consensual national culture that would unite various groupings of the oppressed; the arts were to be accessible to disenfranchised audiences; and the campaign was to emphasise 'a type of content that relates very directly to the daily experiences of the oppressed community' (Press 1988: 37). It is therefore clear that a mimetic approach to content was an important component of the demand for political realism.

Despite this evocation of a consensual national culture, in fact the manufacture of consensus was problematic. In its strongest form, the demand for relevance was transformed into an ominous demand for writers to subordinate their creative activity to the interest of political organisations. Parry (1994: 12) wryly observes that proponents of this position had no hesitation in defining the role of 'cultural workers', which was to 'produce art in which the commitment of the writer or artist is literally and overtly registered in the product'. Moreover, Press notes in connection with the UDF People's Culture Campaign an

insistence that the task of progressive artists should be defined in terms of the political analysis and strategies of the ANC and UDF [...] This demand is a logical consequence of the desire on the part of the UDF and the ANC to shape and control the work of artists in both practical and ideological ways – a desire that is consonant with their insistence that they are the only authentic voices of the oppressed people of South Africa.

(Press 1988: 37)

The origin of this demand for political realism is understandably located in the history of resistance to apartheid. Paul Rich traces it to Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948), which 'could be said to entrench the "social problem" novel that sought increasingly to engrain within itself the complexities of South African social and

⁷ These States of Emergency were imposed by the state in 1985 and 1986 in an attempt to suppress the resistance to, and mass protests against, apartheid.

racial cleavages' (Rich 1984a: 120). One might argue that *Turbott Wolfe* by William Plomer (1925) and Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi* (1930) anticipated such complexities and cleavages over two decades before *Cry the Beloved Country*. Admittedly, neither novel generated the degree of international exposure that Paton's work achieved, and the apartheid system, at least in its definitive form, was not yet in place as a tragically comprehensive backdrop of oppression against which South African writers would so universally react.

Despite the various forms of pressure discussed above, it cannot be said that writers only supported the struggle against apartheid because they were under pressure to do so. For a writer as seminal to South African letters as Nadine Gordimer, and no doubt many others, the imperative of political realism was not an external pressure: it was an intensely felt personal commitment. In the Inaugural Andre Deutsch Lecture, of which extracts appeared in *The Guardian Review* (15 June 2002, n.p.), Gordimer identified 'the sacred charge of the writer' to act as a witness, a role which implies both recording and protesting against the operations of injustice and atrocity. This 'sacred charge' of witness is so inescapably part of the act of writing that it became for her both an existential and an enabling condition of being a writer:

I realised, as I believe many writers do, that instead of restricting, inhibiting and coarsely despoiling aesthetic liberty, the existential condition of witness was enlarging, inspiring aesthetic liberty, breaching the previous limitations of my sense of form and use of language through necessity: to create form and use it anew [...].

(Gordimer 2002, n.p.)

Moreover, the role of witness literature is not confined to a particular context such as apartheid. It has more to do with the universal task of writing as a process that confers meaning on experience, under any conditions:

Witness literature finds its place in the depths of revealed meaning, in the tensions of sensibility, the intense awareness and the antennae of receptivity

to the lives among which writers experience their own as a source of their art. [...] This is the nature of witness that writers can and surely must give, and have been giving since ancient times, in the awesome responsibility of their endowment with the seventh sense of the imagination.

(Gordimer 2002)

In protesting against apartheid, therefore, Gordimer would simply be expressing her nature as a writer. Thus she saw no conflict between the principle of aesthetic freedom and that of political realism.

For other writers and commentators, however, the demand for political realism reached extremes that they experienced as restrictive, such as Stephen Watson, Lionel Abrahams, Patrick Cullinan and J.M. Coetzee. This group of writers opposed, in different ways, aesthetic freedom to the demands of commitment articulated above. A second group had no objection to commitment, but still insisted on the preservation of aesthetic standards, namely Lewis Nkosi and Njabulo Ndebele, who criticised the aesthetic quality of political realism that black writers were producing.

To begin with the latter group, Nkosi (1967: 211) criticised black South African writing for renouncing both indigenous and European tradition, and incorporating neither the energy of the former, or the sophistication of the latter. The consequence was excessively journalistic practice, 'journalistic fact parading outrageously as imaginative literature' (Nkosi 1967: 212). This writing exploited

the ready-made plots of racial violence, social apartheid, interracial love affairs which are doomed from the beginning, without any attempt to transcend or transmute these given "social facts" into artistically persuasive works of fiction.'

(Nkosi 1967: 212).

However, what Nkosi criticised was an insecure practice of realism, rather than realism as mandatory form. Indeed, he argued more recently that black South African writers 'need not dispense with realism altogether until, to their own satisfaction, they feel they have exhausted all the resources which realism was supposed to provide in

the first place' (Nkosi 1988: 83). Moreover, in a further (albeit indirect) endorsement of realism, he reiterated the objection to postmodernism that, because of its extreme 'epistemological scepticism' (81), it is politically immobilising and therefore unwise for any marginalised group to adopt .

In his essay 'The Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writings in South Africa' (Ndebele 1984a: 43), Njabulo Ndebele criticised black writing for its reliance on the 'spectacular', which, like Nkosi, he characterised as a simplistic and exteriorised form of realism stripped of imaginative transformation:

Subtlety is avoided: What is intended is spectacular demonstration at all costs. What matters is what is seen. Thinking is secondary to seeing. Subtlety is secondary to obviousness. What is finally left and what is deeply etched in our minds is the spectacular contest between the powerless and the powerful.'

(Ndebele 1984a: 43).

He argued that such work was too formulaic to do justice to the complexity and detail of lived experience under apartheid. In his view, 'the ordinary daily lives of people should be the direct focus of political interest because they constitute the very content of the struggle, for the struggle involves people not abstractions' (55).

Ndebele (1984b:19-35) further criticised the aesthetic quality of political fiction produced by black South African writers, arguing that members of the African resistance were cut off from the country's intellectual centres of information, which led to 'sloganeering, defined as superficial thinking' (25). He described the resultant fiction as 'an art that is grounded in the negation of social debasement, where scenes of social violence and a host of examples of general social oppression become ends in themselves' (27). The consequence is little 'transformation in reader consciousness [...] the only reader faculty engaged is the faculty of recognition' (27), which he charged did not bring about change in the mind of the reader, but merely confirmed the familiar (27). The consequence was paradoxical: while black writers reflected the

victimisations of apartheid, there was inadequate analysis of, and insufficient imaginative or conceptual engagement with, the culture of the victimised (33). He warned that if black writers did not become sufficiently conscious of themselves as creators of culture, 'as philosophers, asking ultimate questions about life, moral values, and social being' (33), the result would be 'a skewed vision of the future' (33).

Ndebele's criticism of black writers for not engaging sufficiently with their own culture was balanced by a prediction that this would soon change. With striking prescience, he predicted (21) 'an era of urban obsession with rural areas as genuine sources of an array of cultural symbols by which to define a future cultural dispensation in South Africa'. According to Ndebele (21), this era had already begun, and that when it reached its peak it would 'come with declarations asserting the need for an awareness of tradition that goes back into a peasant past' (21-22). In predicting that black South African writing would draw on the resources of indigenous culture, which implicitly included the tradition of oral narrative⁸, Ndebele anticipated certain of the devices used by Zakes Mda and Phaswane Mpe⁹.

In a different context, namely South African poetry, analogous tensions between political engagement and aesthetic quality were evident. Stephen Watson (1987: 24) observed one particular consequence of politics becoming the *raison d'être* of poetry: that much black poetry suffered from a 'stupefying intellectual poverty', which he attributed to the substitution of political criteria for 'the great critical commonplaces'. He related this circumstance to an increasing tendency in critical practice to base evaluation on political content. In particular, he objected to

[the] witless idea that if only this poetry stopped using such symbols as 'black' and 'white' (the discourse of race) and somehow incorporated words

⁸ 'Turkish Tales and some Thoughts on South African Fiction' takes as its opening premise the social realism of Yashar Kemal's *Anatolian Tales*. Ndebele (1984b: 15) notes that there is 'an impersonal ring to Kemal's stories, one which approximates the impersonal, communal quality of a traditional tale of unknown origins passed from mouth to mouth'.

⁹ Chapter five presents detailed argument on the use of orature by Mda and Mpe.

like 'bourgeois' and 'proletariat' (the discourse of class), it would become a far more progressive, valuable form of art altogether. Quite apart from there being no logical way of determining why or how this would be so, this line of argument merely reflected a scientific bias that would, when all is said and done, prefer poetry to be class analysis and not poetry.

(Watson 1987: 24)

Lionel Abrahams also argued for poetic freedom from political engagement.

Writing retrospectively about Poetry '74, an influential poetry workshop held in Cape Town in 1974, Abrahams (1988a: 205) ruefully noted that many speakers at the conference had laid greater stress on political freedom than on 'issues of poetic freedom'. In his view, the unacceptable price of this substitution of freedoms was that poets and critics as diverse as Walter Saunders, Mike Kirkwood, James Matthews, Oswald Mtshali and Peter Horn had 'declared or called for conformity with some socio-political stance' (205).

Abrahams (1988b: 212) argued that where the demand for political engagement became prescriptive, its consequences were as ruinous for any aesthetic determination of literature as the effects of state censorship. In a critique similar to Watson's, he objected to canonical values such as 'subtlety, complexity and objectivity' (1988b: 212) being redescribed in class or ideological terms as bourgeois or liberal values, and on that basis being dismissed as self-evidently flawed. In a riposte against the logic of the demand for political realism, he argued (1988c: 321) that the ideological pressure asserted in a *demand* for realist representation must necessarily distort the process of that realist representation. In other words, given the nature of politics as a systematised conflict of interests, ideological distortions would inevitably distort the framework of the resulting realism. A political vision would thus require the remaking of reality in certain aspects. Such a vision would inevitably superimpose 'an interpretive grid of interested theory' over the 'perception of facts' (321), resulting not in realism, but

instead in an ideological map of what shape the real *should* take:

[...] interest predetermines values, theory takes precedence over the perception of facts, and in any case, the programme of political engagement decides which of the multifarious elements of experience are admissible for serious attention.

(Abrahams 1988c: 321)

Apart from the fact that Abrahams's argument blurs the distinction between realist form and an unmediated depiction of reality, it has implications for his own position. In arguing for the autonomy of a value such as 'objectivity', he implies that there is a primal reality that can transparently – objectively – be represented for what it is. A writer possessed of such objectivity could then write without any fear that class, race, cultural or ideological interest might speak into the text. The only ground on which to judge such writing would then be its objectivity and, given that – as long as it were also complex and subtle – one might validate it as a canonical text. While this might be a comfortable stance from which to operate, it does render the premises and assumptions of the writing inscrutable, and its values absolute.

The demand for political realism shifted focus from artifact to author, and took a racialised turn at the same time, in raising the "authentic fallacy": the charge was raised that white writers cannot represent black experience with authenticity. In 1980, for example, Oswald Mtshali interviewed Mike Kirkwood and Mthobi Mutloatse (*The Star*, 4th July 1980): Mutloatse and Kirkwood asserted that white writers were not qualified to write about black experience, lacking real knowledge of black suffering under apartheid.

Patrick Cullinan reacted sharply to this stance in *The Bloody Horse*, a short-lived literary journal of which he was the editor and founder, protesting that it was an assault on creative freedom:

I quite agree that whites cannot live the lives of blacks in this society but I have never read that Gordimer, Paton, Fugard or Brink have claimed to do so, to be in fact 'the spokespersons' of blacks. What they have tried to do is convey, imaginatively, that black experience. Whether they have succeeded or not is a different question.

But to deny them the right to try is to shackle literature; it is to condemn writers to an ideological prison and to deny the creative act itself. That act is essentially one of the imagination and goes much deeper than merely attempting to depict the feelings of another person with a different colour of skin.

(Cullinan 1980: 7)

Ideological pressure to marginalise white writers was extended from content to matters of cultural organisation. In 1981, the Johannesburg branch of PEN, which had for a few short years been a multiracial organisation, took the decision to disband. Abrahams (1988d: 302-3) stated that the leadership of PEN undertook this action, amongst other reasons, because its black members were under duress within their communities for belonging to a multi-racial writers' organisation, as opposed to a black one. A few days later, the African Writers Association (AWA) was established, led by Mutloatse, who had been a key figure in the decision to disband the Johannesburg branch of PEN (Cullinan 1981: 5-8; Abrahams 1988d: 304-5), and the assets of PEN were transferred to the AWA. Abrahams (304-5) recorded that only black Africans were eligible thereafter for membership, citing in evidence the exclusion of Ahmed Essop because he was a 'coloured' African.

The protean nature of this debate around commitment is evident in the fact that it became an epistemological argument. This is evident in the controversy arising from J.M. Coetzee's assertion that fiction could not be seen as supplementary to history, delivered in an address to the 1987 *Weekly Mail* Book Week. Coetzee was no doubt reacting to neo-Marxist criticisms of his work¹⁰, which criticised his abstraction from the material details of history and politics, as did Nadine Gordimer (1984: 3) in

¹⁰ See for example Knox-Shaw (1982:28), Kohler (1987: 3-23), Rich (1984b: 386-7), and Vaughan (1982: 137).

her review of *The Life and Times of Michael K* (Coetzee 1983) in *The New York Literary Review*. She charged that a 'revulsion against all political and revolutionary solutions rises with the insistence of the song of cicadas to the climax of this novel. I don't think the author would deny that it is his own revulsion'. A similar position was taken by Abdul JanMahomed (1985: 73) with regard to *Waiting for the Barbarians* (Coetzee 1980), which in his view 'epitomizes the dehistoricizing, desocializing tendency of colonialist fiction'.

Coetzee (1988 [1987]: 3) argued that in times of 'intense ideological pressure like the present', the novel was obliged to choose between the options of rivalry with, or supplementarity to, history. He defined supplementarity as a position that would provide the reader 'with vicarious first-hand experience of living in a certain historical time, embodying contending forces in contending characters and filling our experience with a certain density of observation' (Coetzee 1988 [1987]: 3). By contrast, a position of rivalry, which Coetzee asserted as his own position, would entail

...a novel that operates in terms of its own procedures and issues in its own conclusions, not one that operates in terms of the procedures of history and eventuates in conclusions that are checkable by history (as a child's schoolwork is checked by a schoolmistress). In particular I mean a novel that evolves its own paradigms and myths [...] perhaps going so far as to show up the mythic status of history – in other words, demythologising history. Can I be more specific? Yes: for example, a novel that is prepared to work itself out outside the terms of class conflict, race conflict, gender conflict or any other of the oppositions out of which history and the historical disciplines erect themselves.

(Coetzee 1988 [1987]: 3)

Coetzee argued further (1988 [1987]: 3) that history cannot claim a higher authenticity based on referentiality, but, like fiction, is a constructed discourse and so cannot be privileged above fiction. It is clear that in rejecting a supplementary role for fiction with regard to history, Coetzee contested the demand for engaged realism. The notion of a 'vicarious first-hand experience of living in a certain historical time' is suggestive of George Eliot's mirror, namely a 'faithful account of men and things' (in

Morris 2003: 79). Further, the notion of 'embodying contending forces in contending characters and filling our experience with a certain density of observation' tilts squarely at Lukács's (1977 [1938]: 46) position that the key achievement of realism is the representation of character as a site of multiple and contradictory social forces, expressed through concrete details drawn from an objective world¹¹.

The epistemological turn of the debate can also be seen in Teresa Dovey's (1987: 16) defence of Coetzee's metafictional strategy in *Dusklands* (1974). To contextualise this defence, the position taken by Coetzee at the 1987 *Weekly Mail* Book Week was a response to neo-Marxist/historicist criticisms of his work (by, amongst others, Kohler, Rich, Vaughan and Gordimer, as noted above). It is this controversy into which Dovey's paper 'Coetzee and His Critics: The Case of *Dusklands*' (1987) enters. As a prelude to her defense of Coetzee, she summarised criticisms of his work (prior to contesting them) in the following terms: (1) Coetzee's writing was said to be preoccupied with problems of consciousness, which reflected an idealist rather than a materialist position, so neglecting the depiction of material conditions; (2) his writing was said to instantiate the forms of consciousness that it criticised; (3) Coetzee was trapped within the colonial paradigm his creative work criticised; and (4) it was said that because Coetzee failed 'to delineate accurately the economic complexities of oppression, [he] has got his history all wrong' (Dovey 1987: 16).

Dovey's arguments against these criticisms were couched in similarly epistemological terms, rather than on the liberal grounds of artistic freedom and aesthetic value used by some of the commentators discussed above. Her defence of Coetzee rested on the argument that Coetzee deconstructed his work by exposing the premises underlying its own construction (see Dovey 1987: 25ff). Further, history (like

¹¹ Coetzee's rejection of the demand for political realism as the preferred/obligatory genre was not confined to theory. His first three novels, *Dusklands* (1976), *In the Heart of the Country* (1977) and *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), written in peak years of the struggle, do not follow the realist tradition.

fiction) is a constructed discourse, as is the literary criticism practiced by Coetzee's critics; it is therefore incumbent on these critics likewise to deconstruct their own productive assumptions. Finally, as they failed to do so, they stood critiqued by contrast with Coetzee's practice. In effect, Dovey's response challenged Coetzee's critics to match his metafictional finesse, again an epistemological challenge, based on postmodernist ideology.

After the formal ending of apartheid with the first democratic election in 1994, the debate around political realism, and its epistemological variants, continued to structure argument. For example, Benita Parry (1998: 149-166) noted that metropolitan reviewers in particular had taken Coetzee's novels as 'realist representations of, and humanist protests against, colonial rapacity at large, and in particular against the intricately institutionalized system of racial oppression that until recently prevailed in South Africa' (Parry 1998: 149). On the other hand, Parry noted that other critics, for whom parody and reflexivity are oppositional linguistic acts, had read the radicalism of Coetzee's praxis and his 'subversive rewritings of the genres traditional to South African fiction' as undermining the authority of colonial narratives (149). In other words, Coetzee's work has been understood to fall on both sides of the faultline between realism and postmodernism. From this observation, Parry (1998: 150) moved to the argument that the subversive rhetoric of Coetzee's fiction is grounded in the social authority of Western cognitive systems and so paradoxically reinforces the colonial authority it is mooted to subvert. She argued too that in writing the silence of the subjugated Other, in opposing to this silence the rhetoric of his narrators, Coetzee's fiction privileges the West as the centre of reference. Again, 'only the European possesses the word' (151). This argument continues, in modified form, the project of mapping ideological criteria onto the ground of aesthetic judgement discussed above. Indeed, Parry's criticism of Coetzee repeats the criticisms recorded in Dovey (1987: 16) eleven years before, namely that Coetzee's writing was said to

instantiate the forms of consciousness that it criticised, and that he was trapped within the colonial paradigm his novels exposed.

A countervailing tendency became evident in the late 1980s, when the African National Congress and the Nationalist regime began to enter into dialogue, and political transformation was anticipated with increasing confidence. It is not surprising that this led to a wave of speculation about the future of South African writing and its relationship with the exigencies of history. In view of the pressure exerted throughout the 1980s by the ANC and other organisations for artists to align their work with the aims of the struggle, it is not insignificant that one of these speculative essays was delivered by an ANC figure as senior as Albie Sachs, to an ANC conference in 1989. Sachs (1990 [1989]: 239) proposed that members of the ANC 'should be banned from saying that culture is a weapon of struggle', conceding that he had 'for many years been arguing precisely that art should be seen as an instrument of struggle' (239). Echoing the criticisms made by Lewis Nkosi some twenty years before (1967), as well as Ndebele (1984) (both cited above), Sachs stated that an instrumental view of culture resulted in writing marked by banality, doctrinaire content and insufficient ambiguity. In particular, he criticised struggle writing for its excessive narrowing of content:

If you look at most of our art and literature you would think we were living in the greyest and most sombre of all worlds, completely shut in by apartheid. It is as though our rulers stalk every page and haunt every picture; everything is obsessed by the oppressors and the trauma they have imposed, nothing is about us and the new consciousness we are developing.

(Sachs 1990 [1989]: 240-241)

Ironically, a reading of Sach's paper shows that his call for a broadening of narrative scope beyond political interests is addressed exclusively (and with numbing repetitiousness) to members of the ANC alone, and not to the broader arts community, while he presents the struggle itself as an event occurring entirely within

the purview and praxis of the ANC. Despite its expansive intention, the paper is a somewhat partisan call for a simultaneous broadening and renewal of the struggle through art, rather for an unqualified separation of art and struggle. Its premise seems to be that while art remains the property of the revolution, the revolution may beneficently allow art to broaden its concerns. This does assume that the ANC had the right to license artistic freedom. As Rustum Kozain (2006) remarked, it further assumed

[...] that the struggle community was one monolithic bloc; or that the struggle community hadn't been debating these things vigorously; or that there was no distinction between Matshoba's art and Mbuli's platitudes; or that workers couldn't think for themselves about these issues.

(Kozain 2006, n.p.)

In short, the liberatory import of Sachs's paper is deeply ambiguous. However, it did receive wide media exposure at the time and was influential in far wider circles than its immediate audience.

Despite the note struck by Sachs, the binary opposition between realism and non-realism remained influential at the time, and continued to structure debate. As recently as 1998, André Brink challenged the view that realism bears a privileged relationship with history, as well as its corollary that postmodernism does not. In his essay 'Interrogating silence: *new possibilities faced by South African literature*' (my emphasis), Brink contested the Lukácsian view that the classic realist novel is the narrative form best able to represent social and political themes. His point of departure was that while realism has been advocated as the exclusive torchbearer of political commitment, postmodernism has been seen as obscurantist and uncommitted. The fact that Brink found it necessary to oppose this view suggests how polarised debate had become, as if there were no such thing as ahistoric realist novels, or politically trenchant postmodern texts. Indeed, Brink opened his essay with

an admonition against regarding fiction and history as mutually exclusive, when they should rather be read 'as markers on a scale' (Brink (1998: 16). Yet, ironically, in taking up the cudgels on behalf of 'textual' as opposed to 'historical' (17) writing, as he characterised postmodern and realist fiction respectively, he reiterated in other terms the distinction between 'fiction' and 'history' made by Coetzee in his 1987 *Weekly Mail* Book Week address just over a decade before.

Brink reviewed and contested the argument that postmodernism is divorced from history because its preoccupation with textuality removes it from the material conditions underlying 'moral choice and historical praxis' (18). Postmodernism is thus seen as a form of neo-conservatism because instead of acting on the world, it withdraws into a reflexive celebration of textuality and relativist experiment (18). To this argument, Brink objected that postmodernism is in fact ineluctably involved with a critique of domination (Wellbery, cited in Brink 1998: 18); further, that it is associated with a broad critical awareness that 'the existence and power of systems of representation... do not *reflect* society so much as *grant* meaning and value within a particular society' (Hutcheon, cited in Brink 1998: 18, original italics). In Brink's words, the belief that reality should be reflected through realist form is 'the real neo-conservatism of a reactionary mentality' (18). It is precisely through perceiving the world as indeterminate and malleable text, 'with an endless capacity for renewal, metamorphosis, and reinvention' (19) that literature is empowered to act on the world. A related validation of postmodern writing for Brink in the South African context lay in its subversion both of the dominant orthodoxy of white historiography, and the nascent threat of its replacement by 'a new dominant discourse of black historiography' (22). By implication, the multivalence of postmodern texts would express more appropriately the cacophonous voices of a democracy than logocentric representation might.

Other commentators in the post-apartheid period have reiterated the call for

multivalent modes and forms of writing. Elleke Boehmer (1998) described the privileged status of realism as limiting, particularly the requirement articulated by the liberation movement that artists should use hard-hitting representational forms as weapons of struggle. However, she qualified this critique with a warning that South African writers might rely too heavily not only on the conventions of realism, but on other modalities that currently marked postcolonial literatures originating in other parts of the world. In other words, she warned against the use of imported modes without 'creative misreading' (52), without imaginative transformation of such modes. What she added to Brink's and Parry's arguments above is the wish that South African writers might generate forms of narrative unconstrained by the conventions of anti-apartheid writing:

[I]t would be encouraging to see in South African fiction the return of endings that allow for new beginnings, for gestative mystery, the moments and movements following apocalypse, as the dramatization of different kinds of generation and continuity. That is to say, one looks forward to an open-endedness that makes room for new and various ways of thinking about the future.

(Boehmer 1998: 51).

Benita Parry (1994: 15) also criticised the practice of realism for emergent postcolonial situations, though on rather different grounds, and in stark contrast to Nkosi (1988: 81-83), discussed above. She argued that presenting new content in received forms perpetuates imperial discourse, and that colonial struggles elsewhere have produced formally rich literatures employing parody, renarrativisation, and hybridising forms to undermine and reinvent received discourse. She further advocated counterdiscursive formal practices such as '[t]he fantastic and the fabulous, the grotesque and the disorderly, the parodic reiteration or inversion of dominant codes, the deformation of master tropes, the estrangement of received usage, the

fracture of authorised syntax' (Parry 1994: 15)¹².

From my perspective as a writer, I read the polarised attitudes reviewed above – the opposition of realism and postmodernism and their contested claims to historicity – without commitment. I would argue (without wishing to go into the Derridean view that there is no reality to be grasped outside the play of *différance*) that no particular mode of narrative is best able to represent the real, or most suitable to express political commitment, or indeed, that political commitment is an obligatory property of serious fiction in the first place. I would be more concerned with how well a work of fiction is constructed from the foundation of its own technical premises, how creatively its choices are followed through, and whose interest is served by the manner of depiction. A neglected implication for writing of postmodernism is that it suggests a world of choice, in addition to proffering a menu of disruptive structural devices. In the timeless condition of signification, a classic realist text cannot be an atavism, and the menu of postmodern literary forms cannot be mandatory.

I would prefer, however, not to base my position on the point I have just made, because I do not wish to rest my case on what appears to be a postmodern understanding. My own view is much simpler than that: the act of writing is potentially a free act of exploration, as free to explore narrative mode as it is to explore content and sense, inside or outside the framework of politics. While I am aware that there are various limiting factors to this position, perhaps the strongest limitation is just how fully a writer is able to grasp and use his or her freedom to explore and break open generic boundaries.

¹² As will be shown in subsequent chapters, the desire expressed by Boehmer and Parry has been strongly realised in transition and post-apartheid writing.

In this section, I discuss antecedents of the local demand for political realism in the writings of Lenin, Mao, Gorky, Lunacharsky and Lukács, and the objections of Brecht and Bloch to Lukács's position, relating certain of these developments to their later echoes within the South African literary discourse in the period reviewed above. Such relationships are relevant to this thesis for various reasons. One is that antecedent moments, such as the control of artists by party bureaucracies in China and the USSR, expose via their excesses the limitations of an instrumental view of art. Another is that the structure of polemic around realism and the avant-garde, originating in the early twentieth century, has not in broad terms been altered or exceeded by the later South African version of the same debate. In other words, the local discourse around the hegemony of political realism is not an isolated phenomenon, but functions as a subgenre of discourse established in related situations. As Watson (1990: 15) observed, 'the old fight between esthetics [sic] and politics' was the South African version of a more widespread and enduring polemic that had played itself out in various countries marked by social conflict. In this section I review certain of these developments in the early years of the United Soviet Socialist Republic, including the tension between critical realism and social realism; the literary practice advocated by Mao Zhedong; and the influential debate around Expressionism between Ernst Bloch, Georg Lukács and Bertolt Brecht. I will further relate these developments to analagous situations in the South African context.

Lenin in 1905 made a radical case for the instrumental function of literature, at the same time blurring the distinction between the interests of the Party and those of the proletariat:

What is this principle of party literature? It is not simply that, for the socialist proletariat, literature cannot be a means of enriching individuals or groups; it

cannot, in fact, be an individual undertaking, independent of the common cause of the proletariat. Down with non-partisan writers! Down with literary supermen! Literature must become *part* of the common cause of the proletariat, "a cog and a screw" of one single great Social-Democratic mechanism set in motion by the entire politically-conscious vanguard of the entire working class. Literature must become a component of organised, planned and integrated Social-Democratic Party work.

(Lenin, 1905: 23-24, original italics)

It has been noted that the United Democratic Front called through its People's Culture Campaign for a literary culture that was submissive to the control of the ANC and the UDF, as a logical consequence of its insistence that these two organisations were 'the only authentic voices of the oppressed people of South Africa' (Press 1988: 37). The analogy here is obvious.

It has also been noted that the People's Culture Campaign called for a culture accessible to, and rooted in the experience of, the oppressed and disenfranchised. In Russia, during the first decade following the 1917 Revolution, the Proletkult ('Proletarian Culture') movement argued in the most far-reaching terms for a genuinely proletarian culture (Swingewood 1975: 80-84). In writing, it sought to replace the typically problematic characters of the traditional realist novel with depictions of positive socialist heroes. In other art forms, the demand to invigorate culture with proletarian impulses took on dimensions that were sometimes as bizarre as they were innovative, as suggested by the dogmatic reinvention of architecture, art and music indicated below.

In architecture it was decided that wood was a bourgeois and 'counter-revolutionary material' fundamentally opposed to proletarian 'revolutionary building materials', the 'future-orientated' metals [sic, presumably 'materials'] of concrete and glass. Left-wing artists demanded the suppression of the Society of Easel Painters and the destruction of traditional forms of painting [...]. In music it was argued that orchestral conductors were merely remnants of bourgeois individualism and in Moscow a 'conductorless orchestra' was formed based on a free discussion of music by the players: thus liberated, however, the orchestra, in the absence of revolutionary proletarian composers, was forced to play 'bourgeois music' [...]. And, like wood, traditional musical instruments were characterised as bourgeois and replaced by a genuine

proletarian instrument – the factory whistle. In 1918 factory whistle symphonies were performed in Petersburg, Baku and Moscow with conductors raised on high towers using flags as batons for the players within the factories: unfortunately the music was barely understood.

(Swingewood 1975: 83)

In 1928, the call for an instrumental focus for culture became a matter of state policy. The Central Committee of the Communist Party in Russia decreed that

[I]terature, the theatre and the cinema should all be brought forward and into contact with the widest circles of the population, and should be utilized in the fight for a new cultural outlook, a new way of life against bourgeois and petty-bourgeois ideology, against vodka, philistinism... against the resurrection of bourgeois ideology under new labels, and against slavish imitation of bourgeois culture.

(in Swingewood 1975: 96)

This call, firstly for culture to be 'brought forward and into contact with the widest circles of the population', and secondly for culture 'to be utilized in the fight for a new cultural outlook', is analogous to the assertion below by Mthobisi Mutloatse in his 1980 introduction to the *Staffrider* anthology, *Forced Landing*. However, Mutloatse's call is framed in terms of race rather than class conflict, and is obviously couched in more spontaneous and explosive language. An interesting further difference is that in his call for the principle of demotic access, Mutloatse does not reproduce the imperative of realism. It does, however, echo the Central Committee's advocacy of new forms purged of the formal influences of the previously dominant class:

We will have to *donder* conventional literature: old-fashioned critic and reader alike. We are going to 'pee, spit and shit on literary convention before we are through; we are going to kick and pull and push and drag literature into the form we prefer. We are going to experiment and probe and not give a damn what the critics have to say. *Because we are in search of our true selves – undergoing self-discovery as a people.*

(Mutloatse 1980: 5, my italics)

Similarly, the Central Committee's rejection of 'slavish imitation of bourgeois culture' finds its analogy in Mutloatse's call to overthrow the received forms of [white] culture, and to invent new ones:

We are not going to be told how to re-live our feelings, pains and aspirations by anybody who speaks from the platform of his own rickety culture. We'll write our poems in a narrative form; we'll write journalistic pieces in poetry form; we'll dramatise our poetic experiences; we'll poeticise our historical dramas.

(Mutloatse 1980: 5)

In 1933, Maxim Gorky posited a tension between writers coming from a privileged class who are nonetheless critical of its political and economic practices, and writers belonging to the oppressed class. This tension lay in his distinction between 'critical realism', which was the work of (sometimes liberal) bourgeois writers, and 'social realism', which was the product of (sometimes proletariat) socialist writers:

If the poisonous, grinding baseness of the past is to be revealed and comprehended fully, it is essential to develop the ability to look upon it from the height of the achievements of the present and the noble goals of the future. Such a view from above must and will evoke a proud and happy enthusiasm that will impart a new tone to our literature, aid it create new forms, and evolve the new school it needs – socialist realism – which can obviously be based only on a socialist experience.

(Gorky 1933: 39)

In a further negation of the contribution by bourgeois writers to the revolution, Gorky was later to criticise critical realism on the grounds that it might be critical of the social and political structures of the past, but could offer no ideological directive to the reader:

The realism of the bourgeois "prodigal sons" was critical realism. In revealing the vices of society and describing the "life and adventures" of the individual caught in the confines of family traditions, religious dogmas and legal norms, critical realism could not show a man a way out of his bondage. The contemporary world was easy to criticise but there was nothing positive to assert except the obvious absurdity of social life and, indeed, of "existence" in

general.

(Gorky 1934a: 41)

Anatoly Lunacharsky agreed with Gorky that critical realism drew its energy from the past, and condemned it as reactionary. By contrast, in his view social realism was progressive because of its role not only in representing the world, but in actively shaping it:

In the USSR today bourgeois realism is considered reactionary. The bourgeois realist, who writes statically, describing things as they are rather than in their process of development, who has no inkling of the mighty process that moves reality forward and does not aim to become an active force in this process, is, of course, a whiner and reactionary in our eyes [...]

From all that has been said it is clear that socialist realism differs sharply from bourgeois realism. The whole point is that socialist realism is itself active. It not only gets to know the world but strives to reshape it. It is for the sake of this reshaping that it gets to know the world, that is why all its pictures bear a peculiar stamp, and this is immediately felt.

(Lunacharsky 1933: 56-57)

This negation of writers from the previously ascendant class who might, nonetheless, be committed to revolution, also found echoes in the South African context. Commentators such as Kirkwood (1974: 102-133) and Mutloatse (1980: 4-6) criticised white liberal writing on the grounds that it perpetuated the interests of white domination while appearing to criticise it. More recently, Zakes Mda expressed a related critique in the following terms, a reiteration which indicates how enduring this theme has been in South African literary discourse:

You will remember that not many years ago the liberal media spoke for us black people, without making us feature as main characters in the narratives that they created. We only appeared as objects in stories that presented as the subjects white liberal protagonists who on our behalf bravely fought the beast of apartheid. We merely became the problem that they discussed and debated among themselves.

(Mda 1994: 143)

The difference, once again, is that class membership as a marker of the writer's putative legitimacy has been replaced by, or at least conflated with, race, in my view another instance of the "authentic fallacy".

A further danger evident in this kind of instrumentalism can be seen in the Russian precedent. According to both Lunacharsky's and Gorky's version of socialist realism, it was permissible to bend the quasi-documentary element of realism to the interests of propaganda, of the party line. Even Soviet writers, Gorky complained,

do not understand that *genuine art possesses the right to exaggerate....* Our actual living hero – the creator of socialist culture – is very much greater and loftier than the heroes of our stories and novels.

In literature he should be portrayed as even greater and more lofty. This is dictated not only by life itself but by socialist realism, which must think hypothetically, and hypothesis, conjecture, is the sister of hyperbole, exaggeration.

(Gorky 1934a: 45, original italics)

This understanding was supported by Lunacharsky, who insisted that

Gorky was right when he repeated several times that literature must be above reality, and that the very knowledge of reality was necessary in order to overcome it... to a certain extent socialist realism is unthinkable without an element of romanticism. In this lies its difference from detached recording. It is realism plus enthusiasm, realism plus a militant mood.

(Lunacharsky 1933: 57)

It is against exactly such a departure from the project of classic realism that Abrahams (1988c: 321, cited above) objected in the South African context, namely to superscribe 'an interpretive grid of interested theory' over 'the perception of facts'.

A further disturbing aspect of critical realism – or more accurately, of the demand for critical realism – was that it soon fell under bureaucratic control. In 1932, for example, the statute of the Union of Soviet Writers demanded that *all* writers give their allegiance to the methods of socialist realism. The language of the statute itself anticipates – and though at the level of theory, exemplifies – the emphasis laid by

Lunacharsky and Gorky on a particular kind of hyperbole, and a specialised form of romanticism, namely the distortions of naked propaganda:

the creation of works of high artistic significance, saturated with the heroic struggle of the world proletariat and with the grandeur of the victory of Socialism, and reflecting the great wisdom and heroism of the Communist Party...

(Union of Soviet Writers, cited in Swingewood 1975: 108-109)

The coercive force of this statute would have been far greater than one might assume. According to Swingewood (1975), the allocation to writers of grants, pensions and other benefits fell under the control of the Union of Soviet Writers.

Similar political directives regarding literature held sway in during and after the communist revolution in China. At the Yenun Conference on Literature and Art in 1942, Mao Zhedong expressed the relationship between literature and art in terms that were to be frequently replicated in the South African struggle context:

The purpose of our meeting today is precisely to ensure that literature and art fit well into the whole revolutionary machine as a component part, that they operate as powerful weapons for uniting and educating the people and for attacking and destroying the enemy, and that they help the people fight the enemy with one heart and one mind.

(Mao 1975: 70)

As was the case with the UDF People's Culture Campaign, Mao exhorted writers and artists to reflect 'the life of the people' by drawing on demotic experience for raw material. Indeed, the life of the people was to 'provide literature and art with an inexhaustible source, *their only source*' (Mao 1975: 81-82, original italics). It is clear too that Mao expected realist representations, based on close observation of 'the different kinds of people, all the classes, all the masses, all the vivid patterns of life and struggle' (82).

Artistic and cultural production was not only to draw its material from the

experience of the masses, but was to be consumed by the masses, a central principle for the People's Culture Campaign launched in South Africa in the 1980s by the United Democratic Front:

To sum up: through the creative labour of revolutionary writers and artists, the raw materials found in the life of the people are shaped into the ideological form of literature and art serving the masses of the people... Whether more advanced or elementary, all our literature and art are for the masses of the people, and in the first place for the workers, peasants and soldiers; they are created for the workers, peasants and soldiers and are for their use.

(Mao 1975: 84)

The discussion above has indicated parallels between the pressure for more direct political engagement in writing, emanating from political formations in the apartheid struggle context, and similar (though more extreme) movements taking place in China and Russia some decades before. With Lukács' critique of Expressionism in the 1930s, and Brecht's response to this, a more analytical dimension entered the debate, anticipating in many respects the tension between postmodernism and realism that marked literary discourse in South Africa from about the 1980s onward.

Lukács (1977 [1938]: 33-36), in keeping with his Marxist perspective, argued that economic and class relations play into consciousness. In his view, the avant-garde (which Lukács saw as an unbroken chain of Naturalists, Symbolists, Impressionists, Expressionists and Surrealists), in depicting the vicissitudes of consciousness according to the mode of the day, invariably failed to notice what particular economic and social forces played into consciousness. He criticised James Joyce, for example, as typical of such modernist superficiality (34). It was insufficient merely to depict the fragmentation in consciousness brought about by the conditions of late capitalism. The result, as Lukács characterised Joyce's *Ulysses*, was inevitably a set of subjective events revealed as a chaos of immediacies. However, it was the task of the realist in this view to transcend the limits of immediacy by relating the

experiences of the characters to the underlying social realities, and thereby to reveal the network of these social relationships. Without rooting its characters in the matrix of social and class forces, the narrative would become a sum of one-dimensional and often inaccessible abstractions (36-7).

It is clear from the above that Lukács took as a premise the existence of a knowable external reality. A related premise was that the traditional realist novel form was the best (if not the only) way to represent this given world. In the case of an epistemology which rejected the concept of a knowable reality, Lukács argued, it would be impossible to construct a novel with 'action, structure, content or composition in the "traditional sense"' (42).

Lukács defended the modernity of classical realism against the claim to modernity proffered by the avant-garde by means of his concept of the prophetic type. A writer in touch with the cornerstone of social forces would create characters which embody these social forces, which Lukács describes as 'prophetic figures' (46). The prophetic quality of such figures would lie in the fact that their qualities anticipate and summarise social developments that might not be evident during the initial period of publication. In short, their representative legibility matures within the text as real social conditions develop towards what such figures have anticipated. For Lukács, realist writers who create such prophetic figures 'form the authentic ideological avant-garde since they depict the vital, but not immediately obvious forces at work in objective reality'. Further, to 'discern and give shape to such underground trends is the great historical mission of the true literary avant-garde' (Lukács 1977 [1938]: 47-48). For Lukács then, realist prophecy in the above sense bore the true and exclusive imprimatur of modernity.

In response to these arguments, Bertolt Brecht (1977 [1967]: 75-6ff)¹³ argued

¹³ The attribution of this source to 1967 is misleading. According to Anderson (1977), the text was first published after Brecht's death, but was written in 1938.

that the surfeit of technique in avant-garde writing, and the inversely corresponding attenuation of human and social values embedded in these texts – which Lukács criticised – reflected contemporary social conditions, and so were justified. For Brecht, the classic realist novel was to be respected as an artefact generated by the struggles of the 'progressive class' of an earlier political dispensation, namely the bourgeoisie. However, the answer for Brecht to the demands of his own time was not to look back to classical models of realism, but firstly to insist on more and greater technical experimentation, and secondly, to draw on the energy and experience of the current ascendant class, namely the proletariat. In a withering critique of Lukács' conservatism, Brecht wrote that '...the aim of such attacks [on the formal excesses of Expressionism and related modes] is to preserve methods of description which suited land-owners even after the land-owners themselves have been swept aside' (74)

Brecht criticised Lukács on the grounds of formalism (70-5), and with regard to his understanding of realism (81-2). He argued that Lukács' critique of avant-garde writing was based on formal criteria, and so was grounded in a literary aesthetic alone. For Brecht, this view failed to take into account changing capacities evident within society, as well as changing means of production: 'Literature cannot be forbidden to employ skills newly acquired by contemporary man, such as the capacity for simultaneous registration, bold abstraction, or swift combination' (75). Where Lukács had argued that avant-garde techniques such as montage were failed attempts at representing reality, Brecht insisted on such techniques because in his view they emulated contemporary modes of technical production, and so were more appropriate modes of representation – in other words, did better justice to the realities of the time – than the techniques that had been used by great writers working under different material and technological conditions.

Brecht also criticised Lukács for deriving his concept of realism from literary antecedents rather than from contemporary social, technical and political conditions

(69). He did echo Lukács' insistence on embedding within narrative the social complexes of the time, and was, like Lukács a committed socialist. However, he disengaged this insistence from questions of literary form, in favour of social and political criteria alone. The crucial difference is that this leaves the arena of form, and its attendant choices, to the artist:

Realistic means: discovering the causal complexes of society / unmasking the prevailing view of things as the view of those who are in power / writing from the standpoint of the class which offers the broadest solutions for the pressing difficulties in which human society is caught up / emphasizing the element of development / making possible the concrete, and making possible abstraction from it.

(Brecht 1977 [1977]: 82)

Again, there are parallels with the South African polemic. In criticising Lukács's insistence that classic realism is the only valid form of literary representation, Brecht foreshadows Brink's (1998) defence of postmodern writing, noted above, against the claim that realism bears a privileged relationship with history, and his argument that postmodernism – in effect, avant-garde literature – is better equipped to represent the complexities of reality than might realism.

Parry's call in the mid-1990s for '[t]he fantastic and the fabulous, the grotesque and the disorderly, the parodic reiteration or inversion of dominant codes, the deformation of master tropes, the estrangement of received usage, the fracture of authorised syntax' (Parry 1994: 15) has been noted above, as has Boehmer's roughly contemporaneous call for 'new beginnings, for gestative mystery, the moments and movements following apocalypse... the dramatization of different kinds of generation and continuity' (Boehmer 1998: 51). In 1938, Ernst Bloch criticised Lukács' insistence on realism as being based on a totalising and yet arbitrary conception of reality. As can be seen in the following quotation, his metaphors closely resemble those of Parry quoted above, even though they emerged from a different conceptual framework:

But what if Lukács's reality – a coherent, infinitely mediated totality – is not so objective after all? What if his conception of reality has failed to liberate itself completely from Classical systems? What if authentic reality is also discontinuity? Since Lukács operates with a closed, objectivist conception of reality, when he comes to examine Expressionism he resolutely rejects any attempt on the part of artists to shatter any image of the world, even that of capitalism. Any art which strives to exploit the *real* fissures in surface interrelations and to discover the new in their crevices, appears in his eyes merely as a wilful act of destruction. He thereby equates experiment in demolition with a condition of decadence.

(Bloch 1977 [1938: 22])

Where Parry has 'the fracture of authorised syntax' and Boehmer has 'the moments and movements following apocalypse', Bloch has 'fissures in surface interrelations' and 'experiment in demolition'. It would seem that the terms of the debate between the proponents of realism, and the defenders of the avant-garde (in Bloch's case German Expressionist writers and artists rather than postmodern writers) show remarkable underlying continuities through the sixty years and continental distances that separate the discursive territories of Bloch and Boehmer.

Chapter Two

Apartheid Apparitions: the Case of Damon Galgut's *The Good Doctor*

I very much doubt that we will see a return to the political realism that characterised the work of writers like Gordimer and Brink during apartheid. Today the demands have shifted and these demands insist on new ways of telling.

(Nicol 1996: 7)

The following publisher's blurb would in most respects be an apt description of Damon Galgut's Booker-nominated novel, *The Good Doctor*, published in 2003:

In the remotest part of South Africa, a disease-ridden homeland subject to violent political events, a small group of doctors struggle to maintain themselves and their craft. In their relationships – positive and destructive – they have to find personal salvation or face a deeper corruption.

It appears, however, on the back of *The Healing Process* by Peter Wilhelm, published in 1988. While there are substantial differences between the two novels, they do show startlingly detailed correspondences. Both are situated in deep rural hospitals, Wilhelm's novel in an apartheid 'homeland' or Bantustan, Galgut's in a former apartheid homeland. Both settings are subject to poverty, neglect and isolation. Both novels are centred around dysfunctional personal interactions amongst a small group of doctors. The central characters in both novels are wounded personalities escaping a troubled past: Galgut's Frank Eloff is withdrawn and pessimistic in consequence of a broken marriage; Wilhelm's Paul Jansen is a recovering drug addict, and likewise an escapee from a broken marriage. Both have been sexually betrayed by their former wives. Both medical communities include a significant member of the support staff who is unqualified in his core functions: Tehogo in *The Good Doctor* as a nurse, and

Jack in *The Healing Process* as a pilot who flies the hospital's air ambulance. Both of these figures neglect their duties and steal from their respective hospitals, and so represent systemic corruption. Both novels establish conscript training in the apartheid-era South African Defence Force as important reference points; both suggest the malign influence of apartheid by means of lawless military figures; and in both cases the hospitals and their settings are tropes of South African society.

The differences between these two texts are likewise instructive. *The Healing Process* was published in the closing years of the apartheid era, and reflects the contemporary political situation. It was written in the mid-eighties (personal communication, Wilhelm 2004), a period marked by the State of Emergency, the South African Defense Force in the townships, and rolling mass action driven largely by the United Democratic Front, in short, a period of violent and debilitating confrontation. The hospital in which the novel is set is overwhelmed by patients in need of healing, most of them ill with multiple infections, and suffering as badly the symptoms of poverty and alcohol abuse. Wilhelm projects his hospital as a metaphor of a sick, tormented society, one that needs healing. In effect, the central images of the novel serve collectively as a diagnosis of the social condition of apartheid.

The Good Doctor, on the other hand, was published nearly a decade after South Africa's first democratic election, and has a more problematic relationship with the history and politics of its subject matter. The hospital in this novel is set in an isolated and depopulated rural town. This hospital is hardly used by the population of the surrounding area. Indeed not many know it is there, and the doctors have virtually nothing to do. It is a sterile and purposeless environment which has a morally debilitating effect on its staff. The premise appears to be that while the illness of apartheid has been overcome, the societal patient is (to borrow Graham Greene's term) a burnt-out case, permanently stripped of vitality and function. If this hospital is a picture of a society, it is a society condemned to mediocrity, one with no future worth

living through. The element of social diagnosis thus obtains in this novel as well.

Frank Eloff, the narrator of *The Good Doctor*, is a spokesperson of pessimism, of downright cynicism; his foil is a young doctor named Laurence Waters who represents hope. More particularly, the pessimism and hope they constantly assert and embody in the text are more than characterological properties. They are societal predictions, as the following typical dialogue demonstrates:

'They're right about you,' [Waters] said slowly. It was a bitter realization. 'I couldn't see it before. But now I see.'
'What do they say about me?'
'That you're not part of... of the new country.'
'The new country,' I said. 'Where is it, this new country?'
'All round you, Frank. Everything you see. We're starting again, building it all up from the ground.'
'Words,' I said. 'Words and symbols.'

(Galgut 2003, 169)

Throughout the novel, Waters' hopefulness is represented as naive and self-seeking at best, delusional at worst. By its end he is removed from the narrative (in fact the spokesman of hope is most probably murdered), and Eloff becomes the head of the hospital. The institution degenerates beyond its previously derelict status, in effect giving Frank Eloff and his cynical view the last word. Indeed, this debate between Eloff and Waters, between hope and despair, runs insistently through the novel, heavily explicating the central metaphor of the hospital as a picture of a society with little to offer its citizens.

In an interview with Lin Sampson in *The Sunday Times* (31 August 2003, n.p.) Galgut endorses what the text makes obvious:

I think optimism is dangerous if it is blind. I have to say a lot of people see the book as pessimistic, as if that in itself is an ethical failure. Frank might be bleak and pessimistic, but at least he is seeing things clearly. In the same light, Laurence's idealism is dishonest.

(Galgut, in Sampson 2003, n.p.)

In short, to see social failure on the horizon is to see things clearly: the pessimistic view is thus granted the imprimatur of truth.

1

The many similarities between *The Healing Process* and *The Good Doctor* suggest the chief value of Wilhelm's novel to my argument. It exemplifies the tradition of politically engaged realist novels with which Galgut's novel might be compared; indeed, it is virtually a template of the form. For example, Wilhelm's apartheid homeland 'Tembuland' is placed in a geographically plausible landscape, one given much descriptive attention. The representational framework is consistently developed and maintained throughout, likewise the omniscient narrative; so too the presentation of character as a stable nexus of initiative and response. The characters are coherent, albeit wounded subjects, acutely aware of their place in social history, and of the political turmoil of their environment. As in classic realism, much attention is paid to grim and even sordid qualities of the human environment, endorsing through such subtextual means the realist writer's conventional obligation to give witness to forces of economic and political distortion. Further, a code of presence underwrites this novel. The theme of distemper, to take a single example, is richly and obsessively worked through many levels: literally in the hospital wards, in images of nature, in overripe images of sexuality, and more structurally in the dense prose.

By contrast, while Galgut's *The Good Doctor* does appear to follow the conventions of a realist novel, I will show that a trope of absence recurs throughout the narrative, problematising this reading. This is particularly manifest in a tension between figures representative of apartheid power, and the setting in a post-apartheid South African order. These figures – a paramilitary colonel and a 'Bantustan' military

dictator – are bearers of a curiously articulated form of power. Its curiosity resides firstly in the ghostly presence of the 'Bantustan' dictator, and his unresolved, uncertain relationship with the paramilitary colonel. Secondly, while this power is utterly real for the narrator, Frank Eloff, evidence for it (presented both to him and to the reader) consistently fails to validate its own reality effect.

Commandant Moller is the militant Afrikaner type personified. His entry into the novel takes the form of a memory picture experienced by the narrator Frank Eloff. As a young conscript doctor during the apartheid years, Eloff is summoned to a room in which Commandant Moller is torturing a Swapo¹⁴ guerrilla. Eloff is asked to give a medical opinion about whether the victim will survive further torture, and for how long. Despite his crisis of conscience, Eloff provides the information, signifying his complicity. Moller, now a colonel, emerges into the narrative present as officer in charge of a military unit tasked with policing the border against smugglers. Despite the post-apartheid setting, he has lost none of his stereotypic menace as an agent of that illegitimate power ("kragdadigheid") associated with the apartheid regime.

The second representative of institutional apartheid is found in the nameless Brigadier, former dictator of the former homeland in which the novel is set. His anachronistic quality is amusingly represented by his Ozymandias-like bust 'half-swallowed in the sand' (Galgut 2003: 37). Despite his derelict status, he works into the narrative as a shadowy figure who, rumour has it, is responsible for the smuggling which Moller is supposed to control. In the single encounter between the Brigadier and the narrator Eloff to occur in the novel, the Brigadier emerges as a figure of sinister charisma. The rest of his presence in the novel is a series of conjectural attributions by Eloff, all of which are never confirmed by the narrative: that he is Eloff's lover's husband, that he is the smuggler whom Moller is supposed to apprehend, that he is responsible for abducting and murdering other characters in the novel. He remains

¹⁴ South West Africa People's Organisation, the dominant Namibian liberation movement.

curiously unrealised, entirely in accord with his role as a ghost of sorts, as a shadowy relic of the past. In short, he is a figure whose power is mostly suggestive. And like a ghost, he has power to frighten (if only Eloff), but never demonstrates any political or operational power within the frame of direct narrative.

The logic of these resurrected figures is neatly expressed in the single encounter between the narrator Frank Eloff and the Brigadier. It takes place late at night, when Eloff takes Waters's girlfriend Zanele to see the Brigadier's abandoned mansion. Although the Brigadier no longer has access to the house itself, he is found supervising a couple of accomplices while they mow the lawn in the dark. He simply will not let go of the past, and neither will Galgut, who seems driven, in his own words (103), to keep 'the old symbols shining'. In sum, the Brigadier introduces a principle of studied anachronism in which the past is invoked, but not narratively embodied.

If time is out of joint in this sense, a related code of absence marks *The Good Doctor*. Most obviously, images of disease are kept at an elegant distance, in sharp contrast with *The Healing Process*. A more subtle form of absence can be found in weak and often missing causal links in narrative construction, measured against the conventions of realist narrative. This is most evident in key irresolutions of plot. For example, Frank Eloff goes to an abandoned army camp in search of his lover Maria, who disappears after an abortion. He finds nothing, except a formless and malicious ghostly presence which rises up out of the dark and terrifies him. Further, Eloff subsequently finds Colonel Moller at the only pub in town and informs him that the Brigadier can be found in the deserted army camp. The dialogue that follows emphasises the absent motivation for Eloff's conclusion:

'Did you see him there, Doctor?'
'No, I didn't see him. But I know he's there.'
'How do you know?'

'I can't explain, Commandant¹⁵. But I know.'

(Galgut 2003: 184)

Eloff's means of knowing is not revealed by the end of the novel, and his conviction that the Brigadier haunts the camp is to remain unexplained and unconfirmed. However, there is little mystery about the undefined presence which frightens him at the abandoned camp. It is (at least at the level of plot) a McGuffin, Hitchcock's term for a filmic device that is used principally to advance the action: the ghost gives rise to knowledge of the Brigadier's presence, Eloff informs the colonel of this "fact", consequent action taken by the Colonel leads to the shooting of Tehogo and abduction of Laurence Waters, which in turn leads to the resolution of the novel.

This code of absence is also reflected in the manner in which Eloff gives this information to the colonel. Eloff finds him and says, without preamble (183): 'If you want to find what you're looking for [...] go to the old army camp outside town.' Eloff then walks off rapidly, and drives back to the hospital, confident not only that the colonel will follow him, but that the colonel will know what he is talking about in the first place. This proves to be the case: Moller does follow Eloff back to the hospital, where the above dialogue takes place.

This elaborate procedure of communication, in which the key referent is held in abeyance, is a generic thriller mode of conveying information to hostile parties. Indeed, Galgut (183) tips a theatrical wink to the audience: 'It was easy, in that crowd, to disappear from view in a moment. And that was what I wanted: a rapid exit, after a mysterious pronouncement.' The aura of representivity does not proceed from anything that has happened in the narrative so far, or in fact subsequently; it lies in the generic figure, in its hackneyed familiarity, and the action is meant to be taken for granted largely because this motive device is familiar.

¹⁵ The term 'Commandant' here is a slip of the tongue on Eloff's part – it reflects Moller's rank when Eloff first encounters him during the Angolan war, prior to the action of the novel.

In the most pointed ritual of absence, Eloff returns to the abandoned army camp where he believed on no grounds known to himself that the Brigadier could be found, despite the fact that his first visit turned up no Brigadier, in order to beg the absent Brigadier for the safe return of Waters, who has been kidnapped by the brigadier (as presumed by Eloff, and never confirmed by the narrative). Again he finds no-one, except Moller, who is only there in the first place because Eloff said he would find the Brigadier there. The absence of the Brigadier must be read against the emptiness of the army camp in which this absence is located. Both are images of an abandoned social order; much emphasis is given to their quality of dereliction. In this light, Eloff's insistence on the relevance of the abandoned army camp, and on the presence of the Brigadier at this site, is remarkable. The novel does admittedly give overt recognition to the role of the Brigadier as a representative of sinister social forces that have not died, but have merely gone underground, from where they continue to exert corrupt influences. However, although Galgut has been compared with writers as precise in their effects as J. M. Coetzee and Graham Greene (Christopher Hope, in *The Guardian*, 20 September 2003, n.p.), as well as Lessing, Gordimer and Conrad (Julie Wheelwright, in *The Independent*, 8 July 2003, n.p.), the nature of these influences and their workings are vaguely presented and remain suppositional throughout the narrative. In this sense, the novel subverts the Brigadier's role as a corrupting force in the present with as much energy as it attempts to depict it. He is deployed unambiguously in only one respect, and that is as a literary form of political anachronism.

Two unformed presences underscore the manifold representations of absence in *The Good Doctor*. One is an encounter with an apparition which occurs in an abandoned house in the countryside:

There was nobody with me, but it felt as if somebody was there, just at the edge of my sight, moving around the corners before I got there. It was a

faceless figure, on the verge of being human, not a personality so much as a force. Malevolent but amused. Something that this country had thrown up between me and it, conjured out of ruin and wilderness and not belonging completely to either, a shape, an outline, a threat. It meant me harm.

(Galgut 2003: 75)

The second is the ghostly encounter already noted, which occurs on Eloff's first visit to the abandoned army camp:

And then something moved. Right in front of me, when I'd stopped looking for it. I didn't see it, I sensed it; a sudden little burst, a flexing of the dark. It had a will and life of its own. And in a second all my terror was back. Everything I most feared and dreaded, all the phantoms of the mind, had drawn together into a knot – a presence that had risen out of the dark.

(Galgut 2003: 179)

These two ghosts reflect a cluster of qualities: they come out of abandoned places that are associated with the past; they are nameless, formless and faceless; and their real substance is that they have none. I would argue that the narrative tension discussed above – the tension between presence and absence, between history and anachronism – is most strongly focused in these two appearances.

These apparitions also relate the novel to an enduring quality in South African literature. Stephen Gray (cited in Rich 1984a: 121) observes that Schreiner, Plomer, Pauline Smith, Lessing, Paton and Gordimer all reflect an inner fear that English South Africans feel in relation to the African landscape, leaving in their work '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'. Gray argues further that the South African liberal realist novel is fundamentally different from its English model:

In a George Eliot or a Hardy one finds the focus of the entire moral and aesthetic universe at the core of their fictions: in Schreiner one finds –

nothingness. It is only once one feels the Southern African novel in the imitative liberal mode to be a game played about a void, a vacuum, that it can be seen to emerge as a fundamentally different type of novel from those with which it, to its discredit, is constantly forced to bear comparison.

(Gray 1979: 155)

Gray's argument rests only partly on the relationship with the African landscape. It also involves a sense of pessimism – indeed of exhaustion – that comes from trying to relate liberal instincts to the ethical and political practices of the colonial and apartheid settings (155):

The English Southern African writer as an outsider has lived within the panic-stricken void of the absurd for so long, and so unrelievedly, that one may say that moral paralysis has become his stock-in-trade.

(Gray 1979: 155)

Like *The Healing Process* by Wilhelm, *The Good Doctor* appears to run true to form in this respect. However, there is an important difference between the latter novel and its predecessors. The displacement reflected is not only a question of landscape and belonging, but an historic inversion. Among Galgut's 'walking dead' are apartheid-era revenants. My objection to a figure such as Moller does not rest on its presence or absence in the post-apartheid polity; the object of my criticism is the repetitive gesture in its use as a stock villain, a stereotype that evokes Ndebele's (1984a: 43) critique of the 'spectacular' in black writing discussed in chapter one. Further, the 'panic-stricken void of the absurd' in this case emanates not from the dynamics of apartheid, but from what has replaced it.

I cited in chapter one Lukács's (1963: 19) view that the protagonists of great realist fiction are inseparable from their social and historic environment. While *The Good*

Doctor appears to conform to this dictum by addressing the social and historic environment through its protagonists, its representative qualities are undermined by elements already noted: Eloff's maze of unconfirmed suppositions, weakly motivated or unmotivated actions, the central role of anachronistic figures, and the related and densely enacted principle of absence. One might propose in consequence that *The Good Doctor* is not meant to be taken as a realist work, that it subverts the realist premise it appears to endorse. Again, this is a structural ambiguity; there is ample contrasting evidence of a realist intention, particularly its direct address to the social context, its positioning as a 'social problem' novel (Rich 1984a: 120), and those parts of the text which recapitulate the realist anti-apartheid tradition of form and content.

In an interview (*The Observer*, 28 September 2003, n.p.), Stephanie Merritt asks Galgut if Frank Eloff's bleak cynicism reflects the writer's own attitude. Galgut replies in the following terms:

'Some of my more unkind friends might say that Frank is me,' he acknowledges. 'It's partly true - I belong to the last generation that was forced to do military service in South Africa, like Frank. I'm fascinated by how much has changed from one generation to another. There are young people growing up now for whom apartheid is just a distant memory and the idea of military service is an abstract notion.'

'When I taught at the University of Cape Town, I had a student who told me he wished he could have served in the army because he thought it would have been a formative experience, just like Laurence, the young doctor, says to Frank. He had no idea that you were expected to go out and kill people, and the massive distortion of values that was involved. So I wanted to oppose voices from those two generations.'

(Galgut, in Merritt 2003, n.p.)

It is probable that the absent Brigadier, the empty army camp, the anachronistically sinister colonel, reflect the writer's determination to juxtapose/oppose 'voices from those two generations'. However, the use of anachronism as a central device in a novel framed by contemporary historic developments comes at a price, namely the weakly connected narrative structures and other ambiguities discussed above; and the

ethical inversion that this choice dictates. The latter is evident in the fact that the absent Brigadier, empty army camp, and the associated complex of absence, all signify something that is not in the book, but which the book takes as its subject matter: a presentation of apartheid in which its demise is read not as a ground of celebration, but as ground of despair. In consequence of this choice, the novel attempts to deploy literary convention shaped in response to an altered political dispensation without modifying it in any essential respect, except for this particular form of inversion. In *Novel Histories: Past, Present and Future in South African Fiction*, Green notes that

[W]e have defined the most successful deployments of 'history' in fiction to be those which allow the past to resist being appropriated by the present. Fiction which recreates the past in its difference powerfully enough to challenge the present shifts us from the rather insignificant category of 'historical fiction' to the more important activity of historicising form.

(Green 1997: 174)

For Green, this 'challenge [to] the present' lies in a text taking cognisance of its own constructedness so that the assumptions of the productive moment, and inherent in the conditions of production, are not anachronistically imposed on the subject under construction. Where this is achieved, the result is 'historicising form' rather than 'historical fiction'. Galgut has inverted the terms of Green's concept of historicising form by writing a narrative in which the present in its difference is appropriated (without noticeable resistance) by the past. In effect, the novel justifies its disillusionment by writing *forward* the apartheid past into a present to which it cannot do justice in any other way.

If my argument so far has validity, the positive reception of the novel demands explanation. It does have positive qualities that lie outside the scope of this discussion: its strong readerly qualities, dark humour, and elegant prose. However, transcending these strengths is its positioning. In his interview with Merritt (*The Observer*, 28 September 2003, n.p.), Galgut states that

While apartheid was in operation, the set-up was a gift for writers if you were looking for a big theme... When apartheid ended, I think South African writers found themselves in the same vacuum. What most thinking people wanted had been achieved and now we have the freedom to write about things like love, for example, which would have been considered slightly immoral as a theme until apartheid crashed.

But the books that are regarded as important in South Africa are still those dealing with the big political issues.

(Galgut, in Merritt 2003, n.p.)

It is clear that the novel has been widely understood to represent the temper of post-apartheid South Africa, as is the case with J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*¹⁶. The widely positive reviews – and indeed the (Man) Booker Prize trajectories of these two novels – suggest that books which predict failure for the new dispensation most accurately define the properties of South African political writing under present conditions, at

¹⁶ Christopher Hope, writing in *The Guardian* (20 September 2003, n.p.) comments that '[i]n *The Good Doctor*, Galgut makes mincemeat of the sustaining hypocrisies, slogans and political pieties of the South African dream. And yet this is not a bleak book; mostly, I think, because it has the brazen ring of truth'. Julie Wheelwright, in *The Independent* (8 July 2003, n.p.) comments as favourably on its social insight: 'Whatever expectations are raised for rebuilding the country, they are poisoned by the realities of political corruption and the terrible economic disparities which still exist... *The Good Doctor* offers a gripping read, laced throughout with powerful emotional truth and Damon Galgut's extraordinary vision.' So too Lin Sampson in the (South African) *Sunday Times* (31 August 2003): 'It was not the plot or the characters or even the superb structure. It was, I believe, just the simple authority of good writing and a story told from a point of truth.' Likewise Ed Halliwell in *The Observer*, (21 September 2003, n.p.): 'With his narrator's sparse and poignant use of language, Galgut brilliantly encapsulates the languor of a society still reeling from the past, not yet confident of its future, and unwilling to confront the hard *realities* of either' (my emphasis).

least as far as the UK market is concerned. Christopher Hope (2003, n.p.) has argued that this is not a bleak novel because of its 'brazen ring of truth'; but one might ask whose truth this is, or what might be gained from licensing it as such.

An answer can be found in the constitution of the English public within this former colonial power. It is a truism of postcolonial studies that the culture of the coloniser has powerfully influenced the culture of the colonised. However, in *Maps of Englishness*, Simon Gikandi (1996: x – xi) argues that Englishness 'was itself a product of the colonial culture that it seemed to have created elsewhere' (x). 'As a student of Englishness, I too seemed unable to comprehend the extent to which colonialism had shaped the character of the domestic [English] space' (xi).

Laura Chrisman (2000: 3-12) particularises this view, contending that the British publishing industry appropriated anti-apartheid writing in the interests of constructing a domestic (British) postimperial identity. She argues that up till the early 1990s, British publishers used the anti-apartheid movement to confirm a postimperial English identity which asserts itself as 'the neo-colonial, intellectual agent of South Africa's social redemption,' (10-11) a positioning which assumes that such a transformative agency is not only viable, but that it is the 'birthright of white Englishness' (10). However, various factors which have compromised the status of that social redemption, such as the escalation of violence prior to the 1994 election, and other postcolonial disillusionments, have led to a more pessimistic version 'of postimperial English sovereignty that is characterised not, as before, by its intellectual authority to lead anti-racist transformation, but instead by its superior knowledge of the futility of such a project' (10).

Chrisman's argument is an accurate diagnosis of *The Good Doctor*. If Africans (i.e. black Africans) are the owners of the new South Africa so represented, their represented properties become the blood test by means of which the Eloff-Waters debate – the contest of pessimism and hope, of social failure or redemption – might

be judged. The Africans who occupy the pages of *The Good Doctor* fail that test without exception. Dr Ngema, the supervisor of the hospital, claims to welcome innovation, but is defensive as a person, entirely ineffectual as an administrator, and incompetent as a doctor. She is motivated more by the stagnant bureaucratic politics of her position than by any medical ethic. Tehogo, the unqualified nurse, is indifferent to his job, lazy and corrupt. He is a thief, associated with unknown criminals. His destiny is to become a murder victim as a consequence of the bad company he keeps. Tehogo's friend Raymond occupies very little space in the novel, but uses one of his brief appearances to threaten Frank Eloff with violence: he slowly passes his forefinger across his throat, gesturally cutting Eloff's. The nameless Brigadier is at once absurd and ominous, possibly a criminal, certainly a representative of the old regime: he becomes a version of Emmanuel Goldstein in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), a contrived and (mostly) absent scapegoat for everything wrong with the social order.

Eloff's lover Maria is more complex, but even so passes beyond anonymity with difficulty, thus iterating a different form of absence. Her name is not really Maria; the villagers with whom she lives do not recognise it; her real name remains unknown to Eloff and so to the reader. In this important respect, a European construct masks her aboriginal identity. Their sex is emotionless, echoing the distance to be found in J.M. Coetzee's representations of sexual encounter. Eloff pays her for sex, though not consistently, and despite the fact that she does not necessarily require payment. The impersonal qualities of this relationship are reflected not only at a sexual level, but also in terms of her repressed speech:

And we weren't allowed to kiss – when I tried she turned her head sharply away and said, 'No, no.' I asked why, but it was never explained, and the silence suited me. It suited me too that we weren't able to talk in any real way. We came together for the primal, intimate act, while keeping a huge distance open between us.

(Galgut 2003: 26)

This linguistic alienation extends into the narrative at a different level. Maria's speech is characterised by an inconsistently truncated syntax shorn of subjects and articles, and sometimes marked by the absence of interrogative inversion, locating her otherness, her subjugation, in speech itself.

If white Africans are taken as joint owners of the new South Africa, the above depiction of blackness shades into a broader continuum that maps a more detailed topography of corruption on ethnic grounds. Colonel Moller is Afrikaans, an unambiguous villain, the nexus of unreconstructed apartheid malice. Frank Eloff's surname suggests that he is an English-speaking South African of Afrikaans provenance: while not obviously malicious, he is ineffectual, passively complicit with Dr Ngema's uselessness, politically complicit with the old order, and without hope for the new. Laurence Waters is an English-speaking South African of English provenance; he is also the only character capable of idealistic hope, although it is an idealism compromised by self-deluding and self-seeking qualities.

The full schema can be represented in the following terms: there is a base of black criminality shading up to ambitious incompetence in Dr Ngema. Layered upon this is a white base of Afrikaans criminality centred (as in the apartheid years) on that nominal upholder of the law Colonel Moller; it shades in English-speaking Eloff into a cynical complicity (as in the apartheid years) with a corrupt, mediocre order; and rises at last beyond mediocrity in Waters, but only through a South African English idealism which (as in the apartheid years) is dishonest and appropriative. In this stratified ethnography, the novel unwittingly recapitulates the structure of apartheid politics: a black underclass destined through its essential qualities of inferiority, mediocrity and criminality to remain precisely that; the oppressive Nationalists represented by Moller; the moderate yet complicit English-Afrikaans United Party visible in Eloff; and in Waters, the ostensibly liberal Progressive Party. In so doing, at a different level, the

novel again superimposes an image of the past onto the present.

If this is an image of the past – more particularly, of the political system of apartheid – it is no doubt an oversimplified one, stripped of nuance and detail. In this respect it suggests a view from outside: South Africa as seen, for example, from the metropolitan centre. I suggest that the reading public which Galgut addresses is precisely the metropolitan audience that Chrisman posits. However, I do not propose to confine this readership geographically to the metropolitan centre. There are no doubt many people in South Africa who identify with the imperial centre, or their image of it, and to whom such a racialised social topography would appeal.

Chrisman (2000: 5) bases her study partly on '[t]he cultural labour of blurb writers, whose efforts to render non-commercial books into crossover commodities, and more generally, to make South Africa resonate with metropolitan white Englishness, make a significant if generally neglected archive for cultural sociology'. While this source of information no doubt reflects the positioning of publishing houses and the constitution of their lists, the other side of the coin is that blurbs also reflect (at least indirectly, given the fact that the novelists concerned do not necessarily write them) the positioning of the writer and the stance of the text itself. I would argue that the intellectual agency of 'South Africa's social redemption' (10-11) that Chrisman postulates can usefully be seen not exclusively as a property of a postimperial British identity vested in the British reading public, but as a property of the South African literary canon as well. In an argument concerned with canon-formation, Michael Green (1997: 11) observes that although the South African literary canon was formulated in opposition to the metropolitan canons, its structure remained derivative of these dominant literatures. It thus 'contained within itself the same principles of selective *appropriativeness* it was attempting to avoid in establishing itself' (Green 1997: 11, my emphasis). The assumption of redemptive agency, now replaced by 'superior knowledge of the futility of such a project' (Chrisman 2000: 10) – as evident in *The*

Good Doctor – is in fact an element of ‘selective appropriateness’ which Green (1997: 11) sites within the local canon.

It is likely that Damon Galgut has successfully negotiated, if only in terms of reception, a particular crisis facing any novel that attempts to site itself both within the South African canon so formulated, and within contemporary history. I return to Green’s question, cited above:

How can a body of texts generated within, and in terms of dissemination and reception still held within, the episteme of *anti-apartheid* [...] be meaningfully related to one beyond apartheid? [...] Above all, perhaps, how do we register in the shift towards a more relevant discourse that this shift is all the more painful and difficult for its material conditions not yet being firmly in place?

(Green 1997: 7, original emphasis)

Galgut’s predicament has been precisely this, to maintain his novel within the South African literary canon – and by implication, within the ‘episteme of *anti-apartheid*’ – while attempting due attention to the brittle political and material conditions of post-apartheid South Africa. I suggest that the remarkable similarities between *The Good Doctor* and Wilhelm’s *The Healing Process* have little to do with plagiarism, despite the comprehensive similarities I have demonstrated. They come from Galgut’s attempts to maintain his novel within the South African literary canon, while the differences between the two novels stem from his attempt *at the same time* to do justice to the changed conditions of post-apartheid South Africa.

It is an elegant solution to this awkward problem to convert the first term of Chrisman’s argument (the intellectual agency of ‘South Africa’s social redemption (10-11)’, read as a property of the South African literary canon) to the second, namely ‘superior knowledge of the futility of such a project’ (Chrisman 2000: 10), i.e. the project of social redemption. This strategy might enable a writer to retain established properties of the canon – in particular its

ingrained oppositional stance, and the near-obligatory use of realism, coupled to a pessimistic indictment of societal norms – while relating them to the social dynamics of post-apartheid South Africa.

However, this strategy fails in a crucial respect: *The Good Doctor* fails to move towards the invention of what might become a post-apartheid episteme: towards reshaping the South African literary canon, rather than stretching it curiously out of shape.

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Chapter Three

The Afrikaner Grotesque

Bad Western characters may include children of Tory cabinet ministers, Afrikaners, employees of the World Bank. When talking about exploitation by foreigners mention the Chinese and Indian traders.

(Wainaina 2005, n.p.)

In the first two sections of this chapter, I explore ways in which the figure of the conservative white Afrikaner male is used either to recuperate, or to transmute, the racial dynamics of the apartheid past within post-apartheid fiction. For the sake of economy I use the term 'Afrikaner' to denote 'white Afrikaans male'. The texts under consideration are *Karoo Boy* (2004) by Troy Blacklaws, and *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002) by Zakes Mda. I consider these texts with reference to Afrikaner identity, to the relationship between the historic setting of the novel and its moment of publication, and to the manner/s of Afrikaner power. In the third section of this chapter, I relate these observations to Gikandi's (1996) assertion that 'our relationship to the space of the savage' (171) is marked by the tensions between desire and prohibition intrinsic to the notion of taboo; and to Huggan's (2001) definition of the 'exotic' as a sign which combines the familiar and the strange within a structurally complex relationship capable of shifting its content according to political need and agenda. In particular, I argue that the texts in question insert the Afrikaner figure between the (coloniser) Self and the (colonised) Other as a double hybrid, a figure in which coloniser and colonised status, and Self and Other, are uniquely fused. In other words, the Afrikaner figure partakes at once of European sameness and African otherness; further, this mediate position allows the Afrikaner figure police the zone of contact, to exercise mastery and domestication. Drawing on Agata Krzychylkiewicz's

paper 'Towards the Understanding of the Modern Grotesque' (2003), I argue that the Afrikaner figures so presented exemplify a convention that I shall term 'the Afrikaner grotesque'.

In chapter two, I observed that Damon Galgut's *The Good Doctor* (2003) uses topoi of anti-apartheid writing in a decontextualised post-apartheid setting, in what I describe as a failed attempt to relate the episteme of anti-apartheid to the post-apartheid condition. The militant Afrikaner figure, Brigadier Muller, is instrumental in this process of recuperation. In chapter seven I will show that in the person of Lieutenant Du Boise (whose Afrikaner identity is explicitly confirmed only towards the end of the novel (Dangor 2001: 245)), the apartheid past returns, disrupting the 'rainbow nation' ideology of the transformation vested in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The relevance of these two figures to the current chapter is thus worth noting.

1

Karoo Boy (2004) by Troy Blacklaws is set in a fictitious Karoo town named 'Klipdorp' (Stone Village), in the time of apartheid. 'Stone Village' carries obvious implications of harshness and suggests an unyielding surface. This must be related to the fact that the text is rich in ethnic references. There is relentless essentialised categorization of bystanders, often with stereotypical accents and dialects to match, and stereotypical cultural beliefs. Given this density of ethnic tagging, and the richness of teenage slang in the narrator's idiolect, 'Klipdorp' also hints at the term 'rock' or 'rockspider', which were pejorative descriptors of Afrikaners widely used by English-speaking white South Africans in the apartheid years.

Karoo Boy is a tale of fourteen year old boy from Cape Town, Douglas, who moves to Klipdorp. The society in which he finds himself is dominated both at school

and adult level by its Afrikaans inhabitants. He is dismayed not only by their refusal to engage with him, but by the hostility and cruelty that he experiences from both teachers and pupils. There is one partial exception, the beautiful Marika, with whom he is able to form a relationship. The cruelty of this community is not only directed towards the English-speaking outsider Douglas, but more cogently towards the black inhabitants of the town, a cruelty dramatised by the pair of gun-toting thugs who terrorise Douglas's black friend Moses, and by Marika's shotgun-wielding father. The atmosphere is suggested by Marika's first words to Douglas's black friend Moses:

- My pa does not want me to talk to blacks. He says blacks smell, and they rape white girls if they catch them in the veld. That's why he does not want to take me out by the reservoir.

(Blacklaws 2004: 99)

Although *Karoo Boy* was published in 2004, it is set in 1976. This setting marks it as an apartheid-era novel, in which a confident ideology of racial supremacy, and unreflecting acts of racial violence, are sharply delineated and criticised. This would appear to place the novel squarely within the tradition of realist anti-apartheid fiction. However, its publication date defines it as a production of the first post-apartheid decade. The difference in timing between setting and publication must challenge the generic assumption that it is in fact an anti-apartheid novel. Indeed, two interesting anachronisms in the text suggest exactly this retrospective gap, this hiatus between narrative and historic perspective: the pink Cadillac set into the roof of the Hard Rock Café in Seapoint over a decade before its historic time¹⁷, and James Dean making a brief appearance as an icon over a decade too late. The writer need make no apology for setting his novel whenever he wishes. However, there is a difference between a

¹⁷ This is not accidental. According to Blacklaws's South African publisher, Russell Martin, the anachronism was pointed out to Blacklaws during the editing process. The author insisted on its retention (Martin 2005, personal communication).

novel that engages with contemporary social conditions as a vital act of protest against them, and one that uses such conditions to frame its narrative purely for narrative purposes. The social and political engagement of such writing must be calibrated against this difference. In *Karoo Boy*, the historic social conditions are a static element in the context of which a personal, anhistoric crisis matures.

The Afrikaners in *Karoo Boy* exhibit a monolithic quality of power, namely brutality of thought, speech and action. Marika's father, for example, is concerned to protect his daughter from the contagion of social contact with black people, or even with those who like black people:

Marika's father snatches Marika's arm and he rattles her as if he wants to free a fishbone caught in her gullet.

- I told you I don't want you hanging around kaffirs, or Cape Town kaffirboeties. Hoor jy my?

- One day I will go to the black township, Marika shouts at him. You can't stop me.

Marika's father backhands [her] across the cheek.

(Blacklaws 2004: 103-4)

When in fact she does go to the black township, he follows her there, shotgun in hand. This has fatal consequences for him: his actions precipitate a response of crowd violence that results in his death. There are other depictions of racist violence and abuse, such as the sadistic treatment of Douglas's black friend Moses by two young Afrikaans men whose weapon of choice is also a shotgun. Indeed, the phrase 'shotgun cowboys' is used a number of times (e.g. 137ff). This is a suitable image for practitioners of apartheid whose praxis is direct physical action.

This presentation of shotgun-toting Afrikaners, who replicate one another in diction, action and weapon, suggests that their hate-filled violence is an essence named "Afrikaner". It does not allow one to imagine the possibility that the term "Afrikaner" might embody anything other than properties of racial hatred and violence. There is no exploration of any dynamic of history that might render it legible, if not

acceptable. In sum, violent racism is a form of closure with which characterisation begins and ends. The otherness of these Afrikaners is therefore unmitigated and insuperable. There is no possibility of seeing into these monoliths of ugliness and violence, and so the narrator does not interact with the crises of the novel so much as survive them. If there is growth, it is through ageing and hardening, and because Douglas's defences against a particular inner secret (concerning the death of his father) are eventually dislodged by the harsh accidents of his life in the Karoo.

The grotesqueness of these Klipdorp Afrikaners can be read against Agata Krzychylkiewicz's interesting paper (2003) on the history of the grotesque. Drawing on the work of Bakhtin (among others) on the grotesque, she remarks that

The most potent grotesque images are those which manipulate our perception of a human being. Thus the human body retains all its "real characteristics" but is no more than an empty shell completely devoid of inner humanness.

(Krzychylkiewicz 2003: 220)

While the Afrikaners of Klipdorp might not have the hooves, horns or other animal features to be found in more ancient forms of the grotesque (Krzychylkiewicz 2003: 209), as characters they remain within the limits of this description.

One might object that it is problematic to link Bakhtin's association of the grotesque¹⁸ with subversion of and rebellion against hierarchy to militant Afrikaners, who take violent measures to preserve the racial hierarchy of apartheid. However, the concept of the grotesque cannot be exhausted by a Bakhtinian reading of it. What remains visible in this instance is an inverted politics of the grotesque: it is not the hierarchical order of Medieval Christianity or Stalinism that is disrupted, but the human rights ethic against which apartheid has been universally measured and found wanting. The Afrikaners of Klipdorp this disrupt a humane order from below, with an anarchic energy of their own, inhumanly disrupting humane hierarchy. This is in effect

¹⁸ See for example Bakhtin (1968: 3 and 109), cited in Stallybrass and White (1986: 7).

a cold and negative grotesquerie, stripped of the libidinal dimensions of the carnival and associated themes of anarchy, but it remains nonetheless grotesque. The otherness of the Afrikaner – this Afrikaner grotesque – is thus taken beyond the scale of individual personality in a realist sense: it becomes an allegorical property in a contemporary morality play, a fixed marker of barbarism that is deeply familiar to an audience founded on the hermeneutics of anti-apartheid fiction.

2

The Madonna of Excelsior (2002) by Zakes Mda casts a number of Afrikaners, who represent a range of social meanings, and bear different implications of discourse within this postcolonial text. I will discuss only three of these figures, namely Johannes Smit, Tjaart Cronje, and Adam de Vries.

As in *Bitter Fruit* (Dangor 2001), sexual transgressions that occurred under apartheid play into the post-apartheid present; however, these events are not presented as a back story, but occupy the opening chapters of the novel. *The Madonna of Excelsior* thus also revisits the past as a means of constructing the present. The germinal past moment is a fictionalised account of an historic event: a series of incidents (including orgies) of miscegenation that took place in Excelsior in the Orange Free State in 1971, between powerful Afrikaans men and disenfranchised African women. As I will show below, Mda differs from Blacklaws with regard to representing an essentialised and monolithic form of Afrikaner power. Mda is more nuanced, allowing for a degree of change. Several of his Afrikaner male figures are capable of it, while one (Tjaart Cronje) proves otherwise. It is only in this exceptional case that the generic Afrikaner qualities appear to be entirely fixed. Mda avoids an essentialising practice by means of two narrative strategies. The first is to deploy satire to subvert the master narrative of patriarchal Afrikaner power. The second is to

chart a series of changing subject positions within Afrikaner men in response to post-apartheid social change.

Both narrative strategies can be seen in the farmer Johannes Smit, the first to participate in the orgies of Excelsior. He begins by raping Niki, a rural African woman, so establishing a moral baseline for the text, establishing as well the asymmetry of power between white men and black women. At first, Smit's male Afrikaner power seems absolute. However, he is one of the figures in whom Afrikaner patriarchy is not entirely essentialised. Although he remains objectionable throughout the narrative, he does demonstrate a measure of change.

Satire begins with Smit's sexual difficulty, namely premature ejaculation, and in the images of disgust constantly associated with the farmer, for example, 'He just lay there like a plastic bag full of decaying tripe on top of her' (Mda 2002: 16). Indeed, an aura of distaste surrounds him: 'On every occasion in the yellow fields, she just lay there and became a masturbation gadget' (18 – 19). Mda elaborates this beyond the isolated example of Smit to the other Afrikaner orgiasts. Miki Flockemann (2004: 253) notes the subversive description of 'carnavalesque communal copulation sessions in which the women (for a small financial reward) reduce the respectable citizens of Excelsior to a cacophony of inarticulate howling, squealing and bleating' (a literary application of the grotesque more directly consonant with Bakhtin than the *Karoo Boy* Afrikaners, as I have noted above). The effect of this, argues Flockemann, is to subvert the language of power not only in Johannes Smit's case, but the power possessed generically by the Afrikaner men of Excelsior. The sessions evoke

a typical sense of rampant sexuality that disrupts the master narratives of power; this is clearly evident in the way desire enables the women to obliterate their master's language which is reduced to inarticulate bleats, squeals and grunts.

(Flockemann 2004: 256)

Bell (2003: 67) and Sewlall (2003: 340), the latter with regard to *The Heart of Redness* (Mda 2001), make similar observations about Mda's use of satiric and carnivalesque elements to subvert the 'master narratives of power' (Flockemann 2004: 256).

The second of the three Excelsior Afrikaners to be discussed is Tjaart Cronje. At the time of Niki's first sexual encounter with the white men of Excelsior, Tjaart is only a child, and Niki is his nanny. At the age of seven he insists on being carried on her back. He does so because he bears the same sexual fascination with black women that runs through the adult Afrikaans male collective of the town: 'But she stopped when she realised that whenever he was strapped in a shawl on her back, he induced an erection and worked himself up with unseemly rhythmic movements' (9). His sexual precociousness is again evident when his mother orders Niki to strip off her clothing on suspicion of having stolen meat from her butchery: '[Tjaart] saw her as breasts, pubes, lips and buttocks' (42). This objectification of sexual parts is repeated elsewhere in the novel, but the fact that it is evident in a child points to a reading of this trait as an inherent quality of Afrikaans males, a taint of hegemony given grotesque expression.

Tjaart Cronje peaks, as it were, in the transitional years. He grows to manhood and becomes a soldier of apartheid. If he is seven years old in 1971, it is clear that his military service, and his prime years, will see him through the turbulent change from apartheid to democracy. As a soldier of apartheid, he experiences his power, his social cachet, and is confident of both. In the early years of the new South Africa, his confidence becomes resentment. As time goes by without the fruits of hegemony to sustain him, he loses what is left of his confidence, growing so despondent that his health eventually breaks. Mda thus essentialises the one character who is too rigid to adapt to social change.

Ralph Goodman (2004: 63-64) remarks that Mda has abstained from replacing

binary colonial discourse with a counter-discourse that retains a similar, albeit reversed, binary structure:

As the producer of a post-colonial text, Mda refuses to replace one set of binaries with another, but instead sets in motion a process of open-ended dialogue between the indignant patriarchalism of the South African state towards the existence of so-called mixed-race people on the one hand, and the subversive delight in creolisation taken by so many postcolonial texts on the other.

(Goodman 2004: 63)

The open-endedness to which Goodman refers is evident in the fact that Mda articulates a range of possibilities in attitudes not only towards creolisation, but towards political and cultural hybridisation of society in larger terms, as can be seen in the differing political stances of the three Afrikaner men under discussion. Where there is a dialogue in this text between 'indignant patriarchalism' and 'subversive delight' in hybridity, whether conceived in literal or ideological terms, Tjaart Cronje represents one of its fixed poles, bitterly resenting the irruption of what he repeatedly calls 'affirmative action people' (e.g. Mda 2002: 172, 187, 215) into his world as bearers of power in their own right. Where society has transformed, Tjaart is unable to transform with it, and so dies in the end, grotesquely, of political rigour mortis.

If Tjaart Cronje represents the pole of 'indignant patriarchalism' (Goodman 2004: 63), Adam de Vries stands elsewhere on this spectrum of political attitude, developing, as the narrative proceeds, a more open-ended response to the advent of democracy. It is probable that de Vries does not participate in the Excelsior orgies. There is room for doubt in that five men take part in the initial orgy (51ff.), set in a barnyard, but only four are named; it is possible that he is the fifth. However, there is nothing further in the novel to suggest his direct participation. The discursive versatility in Mda to which Goodman points can be seen in the case of de Vries, who might be unlikeable in the beginning of the novel, but he is not give grotesque

manifestation. His relevance to my argument lies in the contrast this illustrates between Mda and Blacklaws. Mda is able consciously to exploit, modify, and abandon the Afrikaner grotesque topos, where Blacklaws reiterates it in essentialised, fully stereotypical form, thereby evoking Ndebele's (1984a: 43) critique of the 'spectacular'¹⁹.

The discursive movement that Mda shows in *De Vries* is reflected in his unpromising opening position: he is a staunch Nationalist, and a champion of apartheid legality. As a member of one of the founding families of Excelsior, as its mayor, and a prominent lawyer, he bears with him the full weight of Afrikaner hegemony. As the town lawyer, he defends the Afrikaner men charged under the Immorality Act. His defence reflects not only the asymmetries of power in gender and race, but also the selective vision of apartheid: as he presents the case, the white men have been framed by the black women, and are entirely innocent. This denial foregrounds the way in which the colonised Other is used by the coloniser to project outwards his own inner world of uncertainty, sensuality and disorder without reflecting on it consciously, without admitting the nature of the project.

In *Maps of Englishness* (1996), Simon Gikandi draws on Freud's (1912) essay 'Totem and Taboo': '[o]ur relationship to the space of the savage, Freud would assert, was equivalent to the notion of taboo – something simultaneously sacred and dangerous, defined by both desire and prohibition' (Gikandi 1996: 181). This Freudian assertion is probably drawn from 'Taboo and Emotional Ambivalence', the second of four essays published as *Totem and Taboo* (Freud 195 [1912]). In this essay, Freud argues that the tension of ambivalence between desire and prohibition, in which the obsessive patient 'is constantly wishing to perform this act (the touching), and detests it as well', necessarily leads to repression: '[t]he conflict between these two currents

¹⁹ As I also noted in chapter two with regard to the figure of Commandant Moller in *The Good Doctor* by Damon Galgut.

cannot be promptly settled because... they are localised in the subject's mind in such a manner that they cannot come up against each other' (1950 [1912-1913]: 29).

De Vries is satirically presented at this early stage of the novel as a champion of apartheid-derived legality and morality. In Freudian terms, however, what he champions is the repression of the above complex of desire, precisely because its admission would undermine the putatively moral and Christian ideology of apartheid. However, as the fledgling democracy begins to forge its precarious identities, De Vries enters a space in which cross-cultural communication is possible. He therefore retains a productive role in society precisely because he has managed to adapt to the new, despite his retention of a somewhat softened hegemonic perspective. In the discourse which Mda has established around the three Afrikaner figures under discussion, de Vries is offered as a more positive example of adaptive positioning within the new polity. The substance of this positioning can be articulated through Wendy Woodward's (2000: 21) argument that a paradoxical set of conditions is necessary for cross-cultural communication. In her view, such communication 'is feasible only if selves are able to move into a different order of relationships beyond colonising patterns of domination and subjugation, beyond notions of essentialised identities, *while acknowledging the effect of social constructions often imposed by essentialisms*' (my italics). Historical identities, she argues, still come into play: '[p]aradoxically, then, this relational space does not depend on a denial or a transcendence of historicised and racialised identities; instead, social and political legacies inform the place from which one speaks' (21). While figures such as Tjaart Cronje and to a lesser extent Johannes Smit exemplify only the second condition ('acknowledging the effect of social constructions imposed by essentialisms'), Adam de Vries is able to enter a relational space to the degree that he does because he embodies both conditions (including the ability to move 'beyond notions of essentialised identities').

The post-apartheid novels discussed above employ Afrikaans figures as antagonists with strong apartheid connections. It is not insignificant that the books under discussion have been well received. This is true of *Bitter Fruit* (2001) by Achmat Dangor, and Damon Galgut's *The Good Doctor* (2003) as well, both of which give a central role to such antagonists, and both of which were shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. While Blacklaws has not achieved such distinction, according to his South African publisher Russell Martin (personal communication 2005), rights to *Karoo Boy* have been acquired by American, British, Dutch and French publishers, and a film of it was to have been made by the South African producer Anant Singh. *The Madonna of Excelsior* has received substantial – and mostly favourable – critical and academic attention. While their successes can no doubt be attributed to many factors, it seems clear that the market for South African writing, both national and international, continues to see an important place for apartheid-defined novels with reliably grotesque, sometimes caricatured, Afrikaans antagonists.

An explanation for this enduring appeal of Afrikaner villains can be found in the fixed position of fascination which Africa holds for European culture, and how the Afrikaner figure is tasked with a certain mediating role with regard to this fascination. In 'The Horror of Incest', the first essay in *Totem and Taboo*, Freud (1950 [1912-1913]: 1-14) presents a detailed description of the extreme measures which 'savages' who live by the totem system take to avoid the possibility of incest. He notes that while these measures are partly justified by the strong possibility of committing incest, their scope extends far beyond the prevention of *biological* incest. These measures also forbid a wide range of sexual contacts within extremely complex but non-biological kinship systems. In the closing pages of the essay (14-17), Freud explains the extent of these measures according to the psychoanalytic method: by relating

them to libidinal conflicts to be found in neurotic 'civilised' people, in which the first choice of sexual object for men (mother, perhaps followed by sister) have not been successfully resolved. While the details of Freud's thesis are not pertinent to my argument, the premises underlying it are, namely that in 'savages', hidden aspects of individual and sexual development within 'civilised' people become visible; and that these hidden aspects are at once forbidden and intensely desirable. 'Civilised' people are therefore driven to repress knowledge of such libidinal aspects. However, the fascination which 'savage' people hold for 'civilised' people can partly be explained by the shared tensions between desire and prohibition which are made visible for the colonial spectator/reader within narrative presentations of the 'savage' Other.

According to James Strachey, the translator of the 1950 edition cited in this discussion, *Totem and Taboo* was originally published in German as *On Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics* (in Freud 1950 [1912-1913]: vii). These 'points of agreement' for Freud are a matter to be recovered within the discourse of rational enquiry. For 'civilised' individuals, such knowledge is to be repressed, out of 'distaste which human beings feel for their early incestuous wishes' (17). For the colonial project, these 'Points of Agreement' lead no doubt to an agenda of external repression, of policing forbidden, detested, and yet intensely desirable forms of contact between coloniser and colonised. For the colonial and postcolonial text (and the industry built around its propagation and distribution), this conflict of desire/repression contributes no doubt to the formation of the exotic, precisely because the narrativised savage renders audible within African objects what is unspeakable for European minds. Indeed, V.Y. Mudimbe argues that it was 'fifteenth- and sixteenth century Europe that invented the savage as a representation of its own negated double' (1994: xii).

Huggan (2001) defines the exotic as a sign which combines the familiar and the strange within a structurally complex relationship capable of shifting its content

according to political need and agenda. For Huggan (2001: 13), the word 'exotic' is generally misunderstood in that it is taken to mean an inherent quality found within the exotic object. However, Huggan regards the exotic as a mode of aesthetic perception which renders 'people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them, and which effectively manufactures otherness even as it claims to surrender to its immanent mystery' (13). Further, this paradoxical modality of the exotic is something which can be manipulated to serve interests as diverse as the need for reconciliation or to justify, ideologically 'the need for plunder and violent conquest' (13). In short,

[e]xoticism, in this context, might be described as a kind of semiotic circuit that oscillates between the opposite poles of strangeness and familiarity. Within this circuit, the strange and the familiar, as well as the relation between them, may be recoded to serve different, even contradictory, political needs and ends.

(Huggan 2001: 13)

Mudimbe, too, argues that constructs of perception can be bent to political objectives. He describes the development of colonial writings as 'a body of knowledge constructed with the explicit purpose of faithfully translating and deciphering the African object', arguing further that this literature was used to support the political objectives of colonialism, namely to master and domesticate the African object (Mudimbe 1994: xii).

I would suggest that the Afrikaner figure combines in itself qualities of sameness and otherness as a specialised form of Huggan's strangeness/familiarity dichotomy: the Afrikaner figure partakes at once of European sameness and African otherness. Further, precisely because of this mediate position, the Afrikaner figure is uniquely well placed to police the zone of contact, to exercise mastery and domestication.

It was the self-declared mission of apartheid to police 'civilised' and 'Christian'

values of social order, maintaining the boundaries of whiteness in all conceivable spheres. This mission of policing the boundaries of whiteness led to the imposition of what was, at least on the surface, a harsh form of order. However, in its obsessive and savage application, and in its fascination with taboo objects, it showed as much disorder, as much unreason, as the putative unreason of the dark Other it is meant to suppress.

This dichotomy of Afrikaner disorder-within-order has the ideological advantage of enabling savage repression while remaining at a suitable moral distance. This advantage accrued during the apartheid years to many interested parties, as diverse as collusive white liberals and colonial readers inside South Africa, and post/imperial readers outside the country. In this context, the colonial subject (or indeed the metropolitan reader) might then entertain the benefits of social order, combined with fascination at the violence required to impose this order, as well as moral distaste at the crudity of the requisite methods. All of these benefits could only support the ambiguous needs of the imperial project (and indeed the related projects of colonialism in general and apartheid in particular), to repress and to civilise at once.

Interesting evidence for this assertion can be drawn from N.D. Hoffman's *Book of Memoirs: Reminiscences of South African Jewry* (1966 [1916]). Part of the interest lies in the fact that, as a Lithuanian Jewish immigrant to South Africa in the early twentieth century, Hoffman is a similarly marginalised figure to the Afrikaner in relation to the imperial centre. Despite this marginalisation, Hoffman speaks from the centre, expressing precisely the ambivalent attitude to 'the Boers of South Africa' (Hoffman 1966 [1916]: 10) that I have suggested above, in that he describes with admiration their repressive style in dealing with Africans, while disparaging it not long after:

We must give credit to the *Boers* of South Africa, because they are the only ones who understand how to deal with the black people, that is how to keep

them subdued so that they are obedient. The years of cultural contact with the Europeans have made little native impression on the native black man. His natural disposition is one of slavery, requiring the strong hand of the master [...] The black man must be restrained with a strong hand, otherwise he can be dangerous. The Boer is in a position to do so [...]

Hoffman (1966 [1916]: 10)

Only four pages later, Hoffman is critical of the harshness of the regimen he has described in such glowing terms:

Generally his treatment of his servants is barbaric. He considers them to be slaves, and has no sympathy for them. He requires them to the hardest work while he stands over them with a whip, like a Russian Cossack with a lash. The Boer despises the Hottentots and holds them in contempt. He considers them to be inferior to whites and not much better than the animals.

Hoffman (1966 [1916]: 14)

The Afrikaner therefore becomes a useful proxy in the projection of imperial order, not only because he mediates the distance between Self and Other in subjective terms, but because the power he wields is not projected from a geographic distance. Conveniently, ignoring the distraction of his earlier colonial provenance, the Afrikaner is seen to *originate* from colonised ground. He partakes of both colonised and coloniser status; he is both Self and Other.

Hoffman again provides evidence for this assertion. Having described blacks as 'lazy, careless and negligent' (10), he goes on to describe Afrikaners in nearly identical terms:

The Boer is lazy by nature and negligent in his farming activities... The Boer is bone idle. He struts around all day, drinking coffee, smoking his pipe and looking for ways to occupy his time.... Thus he whiles away his time with these light tasks, trying to avoid going crazy with idleness.

Hoffman (1966 [1916]: 14)

I have suggested above that while the sameness of the Afrikaner registers as European, his otherness registers as an African property. For example, the idleness of

the Boer as a sign of alterity finds a strange echo in colonial descriptions of the Khoi-San. In his essay 'Idleness in South Africa', J.M. Coetzee observes that the idleness of Hottentots is repeatedly recorded in early colonial writings as a distinguishing feature of the indigenous people of the Cape. The trope of idleness, he remarks, is also used by the writers as a distancing device, as a mark of otherness: 'Idleness, indolence, sloth, laziness, torpor – these terms are meant both to define a Hottentot vice and to distance the writer from it' (Coetzee 1988b: 18)²⁰. Further, this quality, amongst others, constitutes 'some of the more obvious *differences* between the Hottentot and the West European, or at least the West European as he imagined himself to be' (13, original emphasis). While Coetzee does allow for 'a framework of *samenesses*' (13, original emphasis) onto which this and related differences are fixed, it is the radical sameness of species, but only of species: '[...] although the Hottentots may seem to be no more than beasts, they are in fact men' (13).

I would argue that the element of difference (registered as near-bestiality) is exacerbated rather than diminished by the element of sameness. It is more fascinating to be confronted by a man-animal than by an entirely distinct category of being, precisely because it is grotesque fusion of categories. Blacklaws's generic Klipdorp Afrikaner, and Mda's more articulated Excelsior Afrikaners – and indeed Hoffman's representation of the Boer – reflect a similar tension to these narrativised Hottentots, namely of sustaining within the sign meanings (of alterity/sameness) in violent collision. In the case of the Afrikaner figure, it becomes more complex: to reap the full benefit of having a coloniser/colonised proxy in the ground of contact, the half-otherness of the Afrikaner has to be sustained while his half-sameness is to be deployed in its task of suppression of the full Other, i.e. the black African. This oxymoron is in accord with Huggan's description of exoticism as 'a kind of semiotic

²⁰ See also Coetzee's comments elsewhere in 'Idleness in South Africa' (1988b: 25ff) on the idleness of the Boers, including: 'But the true scandal of the nineteenth century was not the idleness of the Hottentots... but the idleness of the Boers' (28).

circuit that oscillates between the opposite poles of strangeness and familiarity' (2001: 13).

With regard to the forms of the grotesque, rather than its intent, Krzychylkiewicz defines it (2003: 220) as a mode of expression that defamiliarises a real world 'by drastically altering its proportions and perspectives'; by deliberately fusing realms that in representational work would be kept apart, such as the animal or human; by ludicrously distorting the natural sizes and shapes of animals or people; or, in its most potent form, through 'images... which manipulate our perception of a human being' (220). In the latter case, 'the human body retains all its "real characteristics" but is no more than an empty shell completely devoid of inner humanness' (220).

In the above discussion I have noted the grotesquerie, for example, of Tjaart Cronje's sexual precociousness as a child, in which the sexual rapacity of his elders is reproduced in his seven year old being, a fusion of prototypal childhood innocence and lasciviousness. I have also discussed how the Klipdorp Afrikaners in *Karoo Boy* become 'empty shell[s] completely devoid of inner humanness' (Krzychylkiewicz 2003: 220), and the grotesque fusion of categories (of difference and sameness) evident in Hoffman's figure of the Afrikaner. One might also refer to the 'depravity, corruption, hatred, and the malicious misappropriation of intellect for cunning and deceit' (206) evident in a character such as Johannes Smit in *The Madonna of Excelsior*. It seems apposite then, to describe this representation of Afrikaners in English South African writing as instances of what I will term 'the Afrikaner grotesque'.

An obvious objection to the argument I have advanced is that while an author such as Blacklaws might be described (however unfairly) as speaking out of postcolonial interests, can the same be said about "postcolonised" authors such as Dangor and Mda? One might ask in response if a writer such as Zakes Mda could see the Afrikaner stereotype through multiple perspectives: as an African who has

experienced the bitterness of apartheid, as a travelled, highly educated person who will see the same image through a cosmopolitan lens, or as a sophisticated practitioner directing the image towards a cosmopolitan audience. Much the same can be said about Dangor.

One might argue further that an enduring topos such as the Afrikaner grotesque draws its properties not initially from the isolated work of an individual writer but from the imaginative reservoir of a literary system as constituted by the combination of anti- and post-apartheid writing, in much the same way, for example, that Elizabethan playwrights drew on, and progressively modified, the figure of the stage Machiavelli. It is thus clearly an anti-apartheid trope that continues to speak into post-apartheid literature.

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Chapter Four

The Politics of Originality: reading Ivan Vladislavić through J.M. Coetzee's Early Fiction

[J.M. Coetzee is] a superb writer. It's impossible to write in South Africa without being influenced by him.

(Vladislavić, in Warnes 2000a: 176)

Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different.

(Eliot 1967 [1920]: 47)

A number of South African critics and scholars read Ivan Vladislavić as a magic realist, and many regard his political engagement as oblique or elusive at best. His rejection of the anti-apartheid literary imperatives of political engagement and realist form is therefore clear. On this basis, he has been widely recognised as an important and genuinely innovative voice. I take the position, however, that Vladislavić is not a magic realist – a more appropriate description of his work would be ironic fantasy, a distinction I will elaborate below – and that the evaluation of his inventiveness and originality therefore cannot be estimated on this basis. I argue that Vladislavić's most impressive innovations are, firstly, his fusion of aesthetics and politics in a satire of commercialised language, and of middle class suburban culture, both of which he regards as complicit with epistemic apartheid (the racism vested in knowledge- and cultural systems)²¹. A second hallmark innovation is the nature of his political engagement: Vladislavić displaces it from the allegorising form typical of engaged realist novels, into discourse, in particular the speech of his narrators and characters.

²¹ Cochrane (2002: 3-6) discusses 'epistemic violence'.

Despite Vladislavić's originality, commonalities between the early writing of J.M. Coetzee and his own are evident. These commonalities are sufficiently numerous and significant to justify their characterisation as an intertextuality of technical means. I therefore trace the influences of Coetzee in Vladislavić's writing, in particular analogous literary constructs that appear in both Coetzee's first novel, *Dusklands* (1974) and *The Restless Supermarket* (Vladislavić 2002). While these commonalities do not suggest imitation or untransformed influence, it is clear that Vladislavić writes within a stream of literature introduced into South African writing by Coetzee. Two key elements recur in this intertextuality: a rejection of realist form in favour of postmodern experiment, and a rejection of *direct* political representation, i.e. of any historical or documentary model of fiction (which is not to suggest an absence of political intent). As I have shown in chapter one, Coetzee was widely criticised through the 1970s and 1980s for these qualities. As I show below in this chapter, Vladislavić has been praised for strongly related qualities and hailed as an innovator.

I conclude that this difference can partially be explained by a diminution in the demand for committed realism that accompanied the ending of apartheid. Further, a partial explanation lies in the gradual acceptance and ascendancy of post-structural literary theory. Finally, I suggest that Coetzee is an exceptional case in South African letters, and that his early work anticipated changes in cultural theory and in literary practice that only fully emerged into broad acceptance approximately two decades later, and that are to some extent characteristic of the emergent post-apartheid canon. In this sense, I regard Coetzee as an anticipatory contributor to the post-apartheid literary paradigm. I therefore pay approximately as much attention to his first novel *Dusklands* as I do to Vladislavić's post-apartheid novel *The Restless Supermarket*.

As I demonstrate below, a number of critics have welcomed Vladislavić as an innovative force on the grounds that he is a magic realist. However, the fantastical transformations that mark Vladislavić's fiction depart from magic realist convention in certain respects. The first is that they lack supernatural actors (ghosts, spirits, reincarnated souls, living ancestors) that interpenetrate the world of material reality, and are accorded an uncontested status of reality in their own right. It is true that fictional characteristics of this nature, albeit typical, are by no means exhaustive or definitive of the fantastical elements deployed in magic realism. For example, Chanady (cited in Cooper 1998: 16) has observed that in Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1978), there are supernatural motifs not drawn from indigenous belief systems; indeed, Brenda Cooper concludes that 'the magical is defined as the fictional device of the supernatural, taken from *any source that the writer chooses*' (16, my italics). However, my point is that supernatural devices drawn from indigenous worldviews and traditional systems of belief are seldom entirely absent from magic realist fiction. Vladislavić's fantastical distortions of the mundane have, without exception, no supernatural provenance. Indeed, they are counter-miraculous, offered as absurdist and ironic deviations from readerly expectation of the mundane. These fantastical irruptions into the real stem from absurdist motives contained within the paradigm of western material thinking, and are unrelated to any form of mythic, precapitalist or pretechnological belief system. As Cooper (1998: 15-17) has noted, magic realism typically emerges from zones in which capitalist and pre-capitalist societies merge and collide. This dis/junction entails a series of related polarities: between cosmopolitan and village perspective, between traditional past and technological present, between mythic belief system and rational materialism. Gerald Gaylard (2005a: 44) has similarly observed that African magic realism in particular

exploits an existing belief system incorporating life after death, sympathetic magic, animism, and interpenetrating realms of being that unify, for example, life and death, or past and present (which is certainly true of magic realists such as Zakes Mda or Phaswane Mpe).

This secular quality of fantasy is shown in Vladislavić's short story 'The Box' (in *Missing Persons*, 1989). Its focaliser, Quentin, reaches into a television set, hauls out the Prime Minister (identifiable as P.W. Botha, the penultimate apartheid premier), and detains him as a Lilliputian captive in a cage. This has nothing to do with the miraculous or marvellous, however ironically conceived. It is an absurdist fantasy rooted in the postmodern stream of Barthelme, Brautigan, Vonnegut and John Barth²² (and, it seems to me, with deeper roots in Sterne, Swift, Brecht, Pirandello and Beckett) whereby the elasticisation/distortion of the material world, and of narrative sequence, operates on a spectrum ranging from the ridiculous to the satirical, but not including the magical.

A more crucial distinction, perhaps, between magic realism and what I shall term ironic fantasy is registered in the reading process. In magic realism, the two eponymous worlds intersect, sharing on the page their claim to the real. This is reflected in a willing suspension of disbelief in readers that contains an element of mythic resonance balanced in turn by an element of scepticism. As Francesco Orlando (2006: 217) observes, there is a balance of trust (that magic exists) and critique (of the idea that it exists). However, in forms of ironic fantasy, such as Vladislavić exemplifies, there is no balance of scepticism and belief. The reader is not meant *at any level* to believe in the transformations and distortions of the mundane world and its objects that the text offers. Such devices (e.g. Vladislavić's landscape of Alibia in *The Restless Supermarket* (2002)) invite the reader to react with dry humour, to

²² In an interview with Christopher Warnes (2000a: 176), Vladislavić names these writers as formative influences, noting that they 'were dealing with postmodern questions, although "postmodernism" wasn't yet current as a set of ideas'.

perceive the layers of a sustained and complex intellectual joke, to appreciate oblique political satire. While these grotesqueries might intersect with the carnivalesque energy of magic realism, ironic fantasy is not mythic in its effect. There is no irradiation of the material by an alternative dimension of reality – the writer of ironic fantasy flexes and distorts the mundane to satiric purpose, to expose its banal or oppressive underside rather than to reveal any luminous or marvellous aspect. Vladislavić's writing, in particular, is not a case of village consciousness encountering that of the city – it is a case of the urban mind satirically contemplating its own found properties and finding them risible and yet horribly disturbing.

A second ground of innovation attributed to Vladislavić – further distinguishing his work from the imperatives of engaged realism outlined in chapter one – is that his political critique is seen as oblique or allusive. For example, Gaylard (2005b: 129ff) describes Vladislavić as a writer who 'is more allusive and elusive than that of most other African satirists' (131)²³. This elusiveness takes the form of a refusal to engage directly or even allegorically with political content which, Gaylard surmises, may be a result of Vladislavić's 'postmodern leanings' (132), and of a desire formed during the apartheid era to avoid repressive attention from the apartheid authorities by flying under the radar of the security apparatus (132). In ascribing to Vladislavić this latter motive, Gaylard implicitly explains Vladislavić's allusiveness in terms that are conditioned by the political framework of apartheid. However, I suggest that Gaylard's first suggested motive ('postmodern leanings' (132)) is more probable. In three different interviews (all conducted safely within the post-apartheid period, namely in Warnes, 2000a; Wood 2001a; Marais and Backström, 2002), Vladislavić makes no mention of this latter motive. In these interviews, he lays emphasis instead on questions of narrative instinct, for example commenting in detail on his distaste for 'obviously political

²³ See also Warnes (2000b: 76).

writing', and his excited reaction to postmodern writers such as Barthelme, Barth, Brautigan and Vonnegut (in Warnes 2000a: 275-6). In an interview with Wood (2001a: 57), Vladislavić expresses a dislike of programmatic writing; he even describes the thought of deliberately opposing a 'non-realist and fantastical' style to what Wood terms a 'deliberately restricted realism' as too programmatic. Again, in Marais and Backström (2002: 122), Vladislavić notes that South African art often 'has been tilting at the easy targets and making judgement too simple for the reader or viewer'. It would appear then that Vladislavić's distaste for oversimplified political schemata in writing can be more safely ascribed to creative choice – his 'postmodern leanings' – rather than to motives of security.

In my view, Vladislavić's most forceful innovation really lies in a dual shift of narrative gravity. Firstly, he has fused political engagement with a cultural and aesthetic critique that exposes material privilege through satire of banal and commercialised language. Secondly, he has displaced political engagement from allegorising form into the discursive structures embedded in speech (of narrators and characters). In consequence of these two shifts, it is easy to minimise the nature, or even the presence, of his political engagement.

The first shift of narrative gravity lies in Vladislavić's merging of the aesthetic with the political²⁴. He approaches the political through a filter of cultural satire. His target is banality, sloppy language, imprecise signification. This merges with political engagement in renditions of a bourgeois culture that is comfortable within the matrix of apartheid as much for its 'banality of evil', in Hannah Arendt's phrase (expressed in its acquiescence to the platitudinous bourgeois culture of apartheid, its unthinking and unquestioned cultural-political assumptions), as for its structural privilege. Further, as exemplified in his short story cycle *Missing Persons* (1989), Vladislavić represents the world of commercialised language, the material pretensions and aspirations of the

²⁴ See also Stefan Helgesson (2004) for related argument.

middle class, and its political unconsciousness, as a single construct.

This convergence of political and cultural/aesthetic satire can be seen in Vladislavić's short story, 'Journal of a Wall' (in *Missing Persons*). The story is a monologue in which the narrator describes a wall that his neighbours are constructing between his and their property. At the same time, it is an interior monologue in which the narrator rages against suburban blandness, suburban indifference, inventing his identity of indignation and loneliness as he proceeds. The narrative projects an unusual form of class warfare: the class of self-castigating artist intellectuals against the class of bafflingly inarticulate middle class citizens. It avoids reflecting any of the obvious racial themes of anti-apartheid discourse, yet remains deeply (and yet subtly) political in depicting the social indifference, the class smugness, that made apartheid so tolerable, indeed congenial, to a majority of white South Africans.

In what I regard as a substantial misreading of Vladislavić's fused cultural and political critique, Ina Gräbe, in a paper subtitled 'An Exploration of Narrative Strategies for Engaging with Current Socio-Political Issues' (1995), regards Vladislavić's *The Folly* (1993) as an unambiguous political allegory. In this novella, a squatter named Nieuwenhuizen settles on a vacant plot of land next to a house belonging to Malgas, a hardware store owner and bourgeois householder. Nieuwenhuizen proceeds to construct an entirely imaginary dwelling on the vacant plot. By force of personality, and the sheer energy of his acts of delusory construction, he co-opts Malgas as a collaborator and fellow constructor, overwhelming his personality and his sense of reality in the process. Gräbe reads this initial co-option, and then betrayal, of Malgas as a somewhat literal narrative of property and trust, arguing that '[t]he bourgeois Mr Malgas gradually comes to appreciate the different lifestyle of the "neighbour" squatting on the piece of land adjoining his property [...] [Malgas] has truly gone through all the processes required for a material and spiritual identification with the homeless person' (Gräbe 1995: 35). In reaching this

conclusion, Gräbe writes as if Nieuwenhuizen can with any validity be conceived as a realistically portrayed squatter. The scale of this misreading is shown by the following account of Nieuwenhuizen's building technique, which one struggles to describe as social documentary:

But his technique . . . What could one say? It was flawed. He spent an inordinate amount of energy on purely decorative effects. Between blows he liked to hum a bar or two from a march and lay about him with the spade, inscribing fleeting arabesques and curlicues on the moted air. He also enjoyed twirling it like a baton, whirling it like an umbrella and tossing it up like a drum-major's mace. In a different context these affectations might have served to demonstrate his dexterity, but strange to say here they had the opposite effect: the implement, moving gracefully through space, acquired a life of its own. Rather than guiding it Nieuwenhuizen seemed to trip after it like a clumsy dancing partner, flinging his limbs in many directions.

(Vladislavić 1993: 46-7)

The central narrative fact she ignores is that Nieuwenhuizen builds an entirely imaginary dwelling, on a grand imaginary scale, so grand that it impels the bourgeois Malgas to join him in this same folly. One might argue with more conviction that what Nieuwenhuizen represents is creative energy, while Malgas represents suburban banality. It is not class conflict that is anatomised so much as conflict between creative and stagnant elements of personality and/or culture. Gräbe's misreading epitomises the danger of attempting to restrict a reading of Vladislavić to the political. The danger, more particularly, is not that her political reading is necessarily invalid; the problem is that it fails to notice other, and perhaps more central, concerns of the text.

The abstractly antagonistic relationship between the dynamism of Nieuwenhuizen and spiritual torpor of Malgas is a further instance of what I have raised above, namely that for Vladislavić the difference between creativity and stagnancy is a *political* issue. Nested in this relationship is a complex set of contrasts and linkages. For example, it is an aesthetic rather than political

observation that Nieuwenhuizen is as destructive as he is creative, while Malgas, in allowing himself to be suborned into folly, demonstrates a surprisingly mercurial element. Yet there is a political element in that Nieuwenhuizen is a homeless person, while Malgas is an embattled bourgeois property owner, whose home is bombarded with television images of a society suffering the political convulsions of the late apartheid States of Emergency. A political reading is again subverted, however, in that Malgas's home is also suffocated by kitsch furnishings and material possessions, while Nieuwenhuizen is a trickster agent of nonsensical change. These complex ambivalences again serve to undercut inadequate binary assumptions, for example that Nieuwenhuizen represents one side in class conflict. Above all, it is the seamless fusion between political critique and cultural satire that is demonstrated in the text, and that Gräbe ignores.

Vladislavić's second innovation to which I referred above is his displacement of political engagement from the broader canvas of form to the discourse of narrator/character. This can be explained by contrast with the practise of the realist 'social problem novel' (Rich 1984a: 120), in which racial schism is allegorised through the formal centre of the plot and consequent crisis of character. Instead, political argument becomes audible in the speech of narrator and characters (often synonymous), rather than visible in the action represented. Further, it is not the content of this speech that matters principally, but the constructs reproduced within this speech. In consequence, political form in Vladislavić becomes a linguistic meditation that structures discourse rather than narrative form, as shown in *The Restless Supermarket*. The real interest of this novel is the lexical maze it stages; the action is relatively inconsequential, other than as a backdrop for linguistic reflection in the form of satire and ironic fantasy. In sum, Vladislavić has displaced political engagement from form into discourse.

The case for this shift in the terms of political engagement has been made

convincingly by Marais (2002: 101-17)²⁵. He does not read the distinction between Tearle's linguistic and social obsessions as a polarity. He argues that in *The Restless Supermarket* (2001), Vladislavić elides the distinction between the protagonist Aubrey Tearle's '*linguistic proofreading* and his *social proofreading*' (Marais 2002: 101, original italics). Marais expresses this relationship between *linguistic* events in Vladislavić and social meaning in the following terms:

...that which [Tearle] sees is mediated and produced by a network of differential relations in which the signifier 'white,' and its numerous attendant terms – such as 'Europe,' 'civilised,' 'order,' 'knowledge' and 'reason' – occupy a privileged position in relation to the signifier 'black' and its attendant terms – such as 'Africa,' 'barbarous,' 'disorder,' 'ignorance, and 'emotion'.

(Marais 2002: 103)

He argues further (104) that Tearle's ethical blindness to the singularity of others arises because he is embedded in a colonial discourse that in turn structures his perceptions, generating in effect his insensitivity and cruelty. Referring to Tearle's constant habit of normalising judgement – which is so insistent and comprehensive as to define the scope of his personality – Marais states that 'in its habitual exclusion, elision or homogenisation of radical difference, Tearle's interpretive activity is the ordering mechanism through which [a colonial] discourse seeks to construct itself as a circumscribed totality' (103). In short, the persona and interpretative language of Tearle together encode a (satirical) political argument: it is not what Tearle does that counts, but what he says and thinks.

²⁵ See Wood (2001b: 21ff) and Nuttall (2004: 740) for analogous views, albeit on different grounds.

Four years after apartheid reached its institutional end with the first democratic election in South Africa, Elleke Boehmer expressed a desire to welcome 'in South African fiction the return of endings that allow for new beginnings, for gestative mystery, the moments and movements following apocalypse, as the dramatization of different kinds of generation and continuity' (1998: 51, cited in chapter one). If engaged realist form constituted the narrative platform from which such new beginnings must embark, many studies written in the late nineties, and as recently as 2005, note that Ivan Vladislavić is not constrained by such engagement and form. By virtue of this freedom, implicitly or explicitly, he is seen as one of the principle beginners of Boehmer's new beginning.

To take a single example, Valeria Guidotti (1999) suggests that Vladislavić uses magical realism to '*renovate* a narrative language conditioned and chained by the oppressive model of social realism' (1999: 235, my emphasis) by placing reflexive metafiction at the centre of his writing, rather than the material and political dimensions of apartheid expressed as content. She hails Vladislavić's writing for its 'meta-narrativity and the refusal of the linguistic and fictional dimensions of the text to identify with the material dimensions of oppression and apartheid' (1999: 242).

For Guidotti, the polarity between political commitment and postmodern textuality appears to be both extreme and innocent of nuance, as her remark below indicates:

This is the danger Vladislavić probably sees for the South African writer: there is *no freedom* in writing for freedom, in the total commitment of one's creativity to the struggle for political liberation.

In the post-apartheid era it is very important *to liberate* the language of the imagination.

(Guidotti 1999: 234-5, my italics)

By implication, committed realist literature is incapable of imaginative achievement, and the 'language of the imagination' is restricted to the party of the postmodern. Guidotti envisions Vladislavić as a champion of the reinvented South African canon, a collective imagination formerly and paradoxically oppressed by the yoking of political realism to the wagon of the anti-apartheid struggle. For Guidotti, Vladislavić's creative distortion of form is thus a release from the banality of political realism²⁶.

Vladislavić has undoubtedly been a remarkable innovative presence, as I have argued above, although not because his postmodern practice intersects with magical realism. His writing, however, shows a significant number of narrative analogies with the early work of J.M. Coetzee, in particular the latter's first published work of extended fiction, *Dusklands* (1974). I do not assert that Vladislavić has duplicated these influences without creative transformation, or in any sense plagiarised them. He has systematically transformed what he has gathered from Coetzee, elaborating these influences to a hyperbolic degree, and giving them a ludic twist, in stark contrast with Coetzee's characteristically tragic or otherwise dark imaginative texture. I therefore do not imply any kind of creative failure. What I do imply, however, is that there appears to be a certain amnesia among critics who, in welcoming Vladislavić's originality, appear to have forgotten analogous inventions in Coetzee's early work. These commonalities are sufficiently comprehensive to constitute an intertextuality of device. The factor of this intertextuality most relevant to my argument is its joint rejection of realist form, and of any role for fiction that is supplementary to history.

One such convergent point between the writing of Coetzee and Vladislavić is the subject position occupied by Jacobus Jantsoon Coetzee, the speaker in the second part of *Dusklands*, 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee', and that of Aubrey Tearle, the

²⁶ Similar views are expressed in Pechey (1988: 72), Viola (1988: 215), and Wood (1991: 33-36 and 1997: 160-162).

speaker in *The Restless Supermarket*, evident in the following two extracts:

I had forgotten the terrors that the communal life of the Hottentots can hold for the established soul. A skeletal hound thumped the earth with its tail, its neck tied to a rock with a thong too thrifty for its teeth to reach. Odours of the slaughtering pole drifted on the air. Desolate stupidity in the women's eyes. Flies sucking mucus from the lips of children. Scorched twigs in the dust. A tortoise shell baked white. Everywhere the surface of life was cracked by hunger. How could they tolerate the insects they lived amongst?

(Coetzee 1974: 76-77)

Perhaps the Queen of Sheba or one of her consorts, whose rotten kingdom this was, would find my *disjecta membra useful* to kindle fire when they cooked their tripe and tubers, to cover themselves at night when they slept like the dead, to wipe their illiterate backsides when they did their business.

(Vladislavić 2001: 113)

The first segment is sited at a point of early contact between settler and indigene, north of the 'Great River' (presumably the Orange) in the late 1750s, where "Coetzee" encounters a group of "Hottentots" in the land of the Great Namaqua. The second is sited in Johannesburg in 1993, in transitional South Africa, a more recent historic moment which nonetheless reiterates many elements inscribed into early contacts. The first is extracolonial territory, a space both virginal and waste in the eyes of its colonising describer; the second is urban wasteland in the eyes of Aubrey Tearle and no doubt in the eyes of the white bourgeoisie he both satirises and represents. "Coetzee" contemplates a future of conquest and incorporation; Tearle mourns not only the ruin of a past colonial order, but ejection from his own place in it.

Despite these symmetrical oppositions, the subject positions noted above share significant commonality, in particular a stance of threatened difference. This is registered in the premise of white superiority (read as exclusive membership in a civilised order of being); reactions of offended white sensibility to uncontained body fluids and smells; attributions of squalor and moral inferiority to the dark Other; and in all of this a thread of unstated fear. In both Coetzee's and Vladislavić's narratives,

these subject positions are later to be compromised in analogous ways, their white distinctiveness (ethnic purity, superiority, command) compromised and tainted, their spatial zone of exclusion breached, and with it, the aura of hegemony. Jacobus Coetzee is to be sodomised (Coetzee 1974: 96), while Tearle is to be tarred, if not feathered, with black shoe polish (Vladislavić 2001: 271-2). There are other differences, of course, that at the same time register similarity. "Coetzee's" molesters are an homogenous group of "Hottentots" while Tearle's are polyglot. Yet Tearle renders his molesters homogenous by naming them "*babewyni*" (Vladislavić 2001: 271, original italics), a term derived, according to Tearle, from an etymological forebear of "baboon", the Latin *babewynus*: 'an Old World monkey with naked callosities on its buttocks' (269). They are further homogenised in that they stand for a new social order in which differences are merged, and which Tearle finds distasteful; indeed it is the substance of his complaint.

The node of symmetrical difference between the two narratives appears again where the body of Jacobus Coetzee is penetrated, a political reversal that he denies by a remarkable rationalisation that extends his surface into his interior, so denying interiority itself for men:

It had fallen on my shame, a judicious point of attack; but it had been baffled from the beginning, in a body which undertook too of the labyrinth, by the continuity of my exterior with the interior surface of my digestive tract. The male body has no inner space. The Hottentots knew nothing of penetration. For penetration you need blue eyes.

(Coetzee 1974: 103)

It is the surface of Tearle, on the other hand, that is reconfigured in a like act of political reconfiguration. However, where the impact of Coetzee's narrative is dark and violent, Vladislavić offers carnivalesque farce with a bathetic twist: Tearle at first believes he is being violently set upon, only to discover that he has merely been discoloured with black shoe polish. This does perpetrate a playful lexical – and yet

political – violence, of course, to be repainted, redescribed, as the Other he despises.

A third intertextuality of device is scripting a condition of flux that is set apart from the main/stream of narrative, and which generates further possibilities for the regular narrative stream, while reserving a space in the text in which (in both authors) a bizarre metafictional reflection is made visible. In Vladislavić's case, as Sarah Nuttall (2004:745) notes, *The Restless Supermarket* 'depicts a city that has become fluid to itself'. In this description, she refers to the fictional characteristic whereby objects lose their obedience to Newtonian laws, to the axioms of physical and spatial identity and coherence: things melt and dissolve, reconfigure themselves, or detach from their moorings. In the 'Proofreader's Derby' section of *The Restless Supermarket* (2001: 182-229), this trope is a major dis/ordering device by means of which the physical topography of Johannesburg hyperbolically echoes the linguistic and social flux that so offends Aubrey Tearle's sense of order. However, it is not Tearle himself who confronts this stream of disorder, but his alter-ego Fluxman, chairman of the Society of Proofreaders. Where the literal Proofreader's Derby devised by Tearle begins as a lifetime collection of errors and corrigenda, and ends up as a proofreading competition (envisioned by Tearle but never actualised), in the 'Proofreader's Derby' sequence both Tearle and Hillbrow are transformed. Metonymic Hillbrow becomes the metaphoric landscape of Alibia, and Tearle is transformed into Fluxman. In this mercurial zone of Alibia, parts of the city detach and float away, the suburbs reconfigure themselves at random, buildings shift off their sites, body parts wonder off their moorings and are discovered wrongly attached, or not attached at all. There are also more atomised sites of disorder, such as the drowned human figure that confronts Fluxman, filled with 'broken springs, oily feathers, shattered lenses, [eye] sockets filled with ground glass and riverweeds' (189). Vladislavić's description of this figure summarises what happens to the world in general: it becomes '[a] cacophony of categories, a jumble of kinds, an elemental disorder, wanton and fatal' (189).

Similarly, the eponymous supermarket becomes a site of disordered elements in which material fixities dissolve, merge, flow into each other and otherwise defy Newtonian laws, lapsing into and re-emerging from 'an irreducible compound' (222). In this chaos, Fluxman's role is to restore order to the geography of the city and the boundaries of its objects, which he does by wielding with Herculean commitment his proofreader's blue pencil and eraser.

The analogous, precursor condition of generative flux in Coetzee's case is evident in 'The Narrative of Jacobs Coetzee', the second part of *Dusklands*. It can be seen in the extract below, which occurs at the moment of first encounter between Jacobus Coetzee and the 'Hottentots' of Great Namaqua, who 'had never seen a white man' (70). I quote at some length in order to show its reiterative and yet progressive structure:

Tranquilly I traced in my heart the forking paths of the endless inner adventure: the order to follow, the inner debate (resist? submit?), underlings rolling their eyeballs, words of moderation, calm, swift march, the hidden defile, the encampment, the graybeard chieftain, the curious throng, words of greeting, firm tones, Peace! Tobacco!, demonstration of firearms, murmurs of awe, gifts, the vengeful wizard, the feast, glut, nightfall, murder foiled, dawn, farewell, trundling wheels, the order to follow, the inner debate, rolling eyeballs, the nervous finger, the shot, panic, assault, gunfire, hasty departure, the pursuing horde, the race for the river, the order to follow, the inner debate, the casual spear in the vitals (Viscount d'Almeida), the fleeing underlings, pole through the fundament, ritual dismemberment in the savage encampment, limbs to the dogs, privates to the first wife, the order to follow, the inner debate, the cowardly blow, amnesia, the dark hut, bound hands, the drowsing guard, escape, night chase, the dogs foiled, the dark hut, bound hands, uneasy sleep, dawn, the sacrificial gathering, the wizard, the contest of magic, the celestial almanac, darkness at noon, victory, an amusing but tedious reign as tribal demi-god, return to civilization with numerous entourage of cattle – these forking paths across that true wilderness without polity called the land of the Great Namaqua where everything, I was to find, was possible.

(Coetzee 1974: 70-1)

The 'forking paths of the endless inner adventure', namely what the narrator imagines as possible, also suggest the worn exterior paths snaking through tales of colonial encounter. The extract forms, if only satirically, a germinal grammar of narrative.

Specific narratives of encounter might then be generated from the matrix of this grammar by selecting its elements in different order and combination, playing, in modified Saussurean terms, *langue* to the *parole* of the specific text. While the surface text, albeit at a tragic and violent level, is a satire of colonial encounter, this subtext diverts attention to a dimension of the narrative that mimics and subverts the putative authority of the surface text. If anything is the machinery of realism, it is what Roland Barthes (1974: 203-4) terms the proairetic code, i.e. the code of external action (discussed in chapter one in more detail). By exposing this machinery, Coetzee illuminates the constructedness of narrative, thereby denaturalising the reading experience. In this reflection on narrative praxis, as I have argued with regard to Alibia above, an analogous counter-dimension of reading opens up, and again a seam of ludic metanarrative is exposed, so shifting attention away from the grim necessities – given the fact that *Dusklands* is a South African text written in the early 1970s – of realist fiction. The significance of this similarity between Coetzee in 1974 and Vladislavić in 2002 cannot be underestimated, because what has changed is the context of reception into which these two works were released. As I show below, Coetzee was widely criticised at the time for failing to represent the material conditions of apartheid, while Vladislavić was praised for his metafictional inventiveness in performing analogous textual practices.

A further analogy between the practice of the two writers lies in their proliferation of alter-egos. Vladislavić's 'irreducible compound' is a subtext of a particular kind in *The Restless Supermarket*. The flux, decay and dissolution that Tearle's alter-ego Fluxman encounters at a fantastical level in 'The Proofreader's Derby' section mirrors the social flux and dissolution that dismay his primary ego, Tearle, at a realist level. This is related to the layered irony of reading Aubrey Tearle himself that Michael Marais (2002: 101-117) observes. Tearle is not merely an object of satire which the implicit reader might consume as an external locus of

entertainment. His antisocial, reactionary persona also figures more ironically as a point of reaction within the implicit reader towards the same social flux. In other words, Vladislavić invites the reader to contemplate the reactionary Tearle within him- or herself. In Marais's terms,

[i]t follows that the irony not only distances the reader from Tearle but, in foregrounding the hermeneutic nature of the activity in which the former is engaged, *identifies* him/her *with* Tearle.

(Marais 2002: 109, original italics)

One might also argue that there is a third level of irony possible in the reading of Tearle²⁷ as a burlesque form of Vladislavić, a satirised "Vladislavić" within the text. Vladislavić's penchant for caricature and self-caricature is evident not only in the person of Wessels in *The Restless Supermarket*, who crudely imitates Tearle's compulsive annotation of the speech acts around him, but also in the character Boguslavić, a name in which Vladislavić's own patronymic is yoked to "bogus". Lest there be any doubt concerning this latter satirical intention, Tearle dubs Boguslavić "Patronymić".

The proliferation of alter-egos in Vladislavić's writing (Tearle/Fluxman, Tearle/Wessels, Vladislavić/Boguslavić/Patronymić) is anticipated in *Dusklands*. In the first part of *Dusklands*, 'The Vietnam Project', the narrator Eugene Dawn has to report to "Coetzee", a 'powerful, genial, ordinary man' (Coetzee 1974: 1). It might be considered unwise to reflect on the person of the author in any contemplation of his/her writing, but this description of "Coetzee" appears to be a self-mocking gesture towards the famously reserved persona of the extra-textual Coetzee, which also anticipates Vladislavić's self-mockery noted above.

In the second part of *Dusklands*, 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee', the

²⁷ As does Marais (2002:109), but the point he makes, namely that there is an implicit Tearle within the implicit "Vladislavić" inscribed in the text as well as in the reader, differs from mine.

narrative is penned by an elaborate series of hands. Apart from the obvious fact that it is written by J.M. Coetzee, the narrative is 'Edited, with an Afterword, by S.J. Coetzee' (55), the fictive first publisher of the work, fictively first released in 1952 as a scholarly document replete with bibliographic notes and Appendix; it is 'Translated by J.M. Coetzee' (55), his fictive son. Finally, the first person narrator of this historical contact narrative is Jacobus Jantsoon Coetzee, who releases it into textual form by giving an oral account of his adventures to one 'O.M. Bergh, Councillor & Secretary' in the 'Political Secretariat at the Castle of Good Hope on the 18th November 1760' (134), and signing it with his mark.

There is a further layer: as Coetzee records in his collection of essays *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews* (cited in Easton 2006: 10), the textual Jacobus Coetzee was partly motivated by a remote extratextual ancestor, Jacobus Coetzee (or Coetsé (11)), who did in fact depose an account of his travels to the interior, *circa* 1760. According to Easton (12), Coetzee drew on this original account for 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee' from 'EE Mossop's 1935 English translation of the Dutch *Relaas* originally transcribed by EC Godée Molsbergen'²⁸.

If layers of reading are legible in the figure of Aubrey Tearle in *The Restless Supermarket* which, as I have shown above, bear significance for the political engagement of the text, much the same can be said of reading the array of "Coetzees" in *Dusklands*. In particular, the roles of protagonist and author are elided in both texts. As Vladislavić authors Tearle who authors Fluxman and the territory of Alibia, J.M. Coetzee authors the son and translator "J.M. Coetzee", who translates S.J. Coetzee (whose own voice is heard in the Afterword), who authors in turn Jacobus

²⁸ It is tempting to comment on the evident irony of Coetzee's use of historic sources in drafting 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee' in the light of his subsequent and much quoted assertion in the *Weekly Mail* Book Week of 1987 that the novel is obliged to choose between rivalry with or supplementarity to history. However, to do so would miss the point that 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee' is an imaginative transformation of the *Relaas*: it clearly has chosen a position of rivalry.

Coetzee. In this postmodern writing and reading process, the proliferated personae sharing the narrative burden reflect on and against each other, as in contraposed mirrors where images reflect only other images in a compounding series. Moreover, the discrete narrative sections likewise invest the full narrative framework with a multifoliate structure of reading in which the parts problematise rather than merely provide sequential parcels of substance for the whole. One might contrast this with George Eliot's 'faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in [the writer's] mind' (in Morris 2003: 79, cited in chapter one above), a binary picture of the writing process on which a naïve understanding of realism is founded. Of course it is not only documentary realism that is transcended by the compound reflexivity of both writers under discussion. Also transcended is the genre of political commitment that, at least within the paradigm of anti-apartheid realist fiction, requires a quasi-documentary form of realism as a necessary component of its social mission.

Stefan Helgesson (2004: 777) has commented on a trope frequently used by Vladislavić, namely the satiric reiteration of commercialised language, portmanteau words, advertising jargon and product names. Helgesson views this trope as a postmodern deviation from 'the romantic legacy of English letters in South Africa which has seen literature as an ideal expression of an inner truth' in order to emphasise 'the materiality of the sign' (777). In doing so, Vladislavić targets 'the instrumentalised English of advertising and commercial media' (777). In my view, in this postmodern deviation from linear narration, and in a limited sense, Vladislavić's intent is thus to authenticate his voice by compulsively foregrounding the banality of the culture he satirises, to the extent that it is reified, becoming an essence for the reader. Presence is thus registered in the materiality of the sign, rather than through the authenticity of representation in the broader currency of plot or characterisation. For example, in the short story 'Flashback Hotel * TYYY' in his collection *Missing Persons*, Vladislavić obsessively

reiterates lists of product names ('Johnny Walker, Sealy Posturepaedic, Toyota Corolla, Eno, Southern Suns' (Vladislavić 1989: 11). In *The Folly* (1993), linear narration is similarly disrupted by what amounts to a cultural catalogue of materialised petit bourgeois aesthetics ('particoloured' has no initial capital in the original text, though it heads the paragraph, foregrounding its small rebellion against syntax, and by extension, syntagm):

particoloured. Castanets, chromium-plated, Clackerjack (regd. T.M.). Willow-pattern Frisbee. Mickey and Minnie, blessed by Pope (Pius). Pine-cone. Crucifix, commemorative, balsa-wood and papier-mache, 255m X 140mm. Calendar, Solly Kramer's, Troyeville, indigenous fauna painted with the mouth, 1991. Clock, Ginza, broken (Toch?)

(Vladislavić 1993: 70)

There are also similar product lists in *The Restless Supermarket* (30, 36, 41, 109-10); elsewhere (91-92), product names, which are usually confined to Tearle's first person narration, spill into dialogue and enter the speech of other characters.

Again there are precedents in *Dusklands*, predictably on a more germinal scale. Eugene Dawn, narrator of 'The Vietnam Project' enters the lists with 'Right Guard', 'Coca-Cola', and 'Sunsilk' (Coetzee 1974: 35). This too is part of a satiric comment on the culture of consumption. In 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee', it is S.J. Coetzee who delivers a blazon, not of products but of human secretions and ejecta:

From scalp and beard, dead hair and scales. From the ears, crumbs of wax. From the nose, mucus and blood (Klawer, Dikkop, a fall and blows respectively). From the eyes, tears and a rheumy paste. From the mouth, blood, rotten teeth, calculus, phlegm, vomit. From the skin, pus, blood, scabs, weeping plasma (Plaatjie, a gunpowder burn), sweat, sebum, scales, hair [...]

(Coetzee 1974: 126-7)

I have asserted above that Vladislavić's intent is to authenticate presence and materiality. Coetzee's device here serves a similar function. Coetzee, however, in this case lists body rather than consumer products, and the linguistic target of this satiric

Braille is by no means commercialised English. Instead, he satirises his own narrative by concentrating its habitual gruesomeness to the point of absurdity, a *reductio ad absurdum* of a different kind. This irruption serves an analogous purpose to that of Vladislavić, namely to materialise the sign and so densify the engagement of reading, albeit in a different context.

There is a further convergence between Vladislavić and Coetzee in that this list of secretions, of which I have quoted only a section, evokes a world of corporeal dissolution similar to the drowned man that Fluxman encounters in *The Restless Supermarket*:

He rolled the bobber over, shuddering at the touch of gizzard flesh and bristles, the crab apple of the eye, the broken springs, the oily feathers, the webbed fingers, the shattered lenses, the sockets filled with ground glass and riverweeds. Beyond repair, he thought desperately. A cacophony of categories, a jumble of kinds, an elemental disorder, wanton and fatal.

(Vladislavić 2001: 189)

However, Coetzee's dissolute materials form a striking (and indeed symmetrical) antinomy to Vladislavić's, constituted as they are of somatic rather than material wastes. They are also drawn largely from a matrix of pain and violence, a more dire and sadistic context than Vladislavić's relatively bloodless, tragicomic world of social and cultural impacts. The physical/material disorder of the Alibia sequence refashions the disorder of cultural/linguistic migration in the Hillbrow sequences as fantasy; the chaos of Coetzee's list of secretions and ejecta refashions the moral and existential chaos of violent colonial encounter as a parodic chorus within the narrative. What unites these two devices is their departure from linearity, their interpellation of a reflexive (and yet paradoxically materialised) dimension into the narrative. In sum, these linked antinomies speak to a stable aspect of the intertextual relationship I have raised above, rather than to the absence of such relationship: again Vladislavić transforms and elaborates tropes initiated by Coetzee.

In 'The Vietnam Project', Coetzee raises issues of power pertaining to a contemporary colonial project, namely the Vietnam war. Speaking as a 'mythographer' (i.e. propagandist), the narrator Eugene Dawn discusses how voice and image should be deployed as Machiavellian instruments of power. The date and political circumstances of its publication are an indication of Coetzee's stance regarding political realism. While 'The Vietnam Project' significantly predates his assertion of the independence of fiction from history, raised at the *Weekly Mail* Book Week in 1987 (Coetzee 1988 [1987]: 3, cited in chapter one), it offers no explicit comment on South African experience. Although the meditation on power it does present focuses specifically on the American incursion in Vietnam, its 'mythography' clearly anticipates what Jeffrey (2005: 2, original italics) ascribes to Vladislavić, namely a critique of 'the *ideas* of power and control' abstracted from specific politics. Indeed, the fact that Eugene Dawn's political analysis is restricted to the power of image and voice, rather than any more overt form of power, alienates this text a degree further from anti-apartheid particularity, from the realist tradition of reflecting apartheid injustice and brutality in documentary terms.

A further stage of alienation is evident in the fact that 'The Vietnam Project' was coupled in a single volume with 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee'. The latter, given its multifoliate narrative framework, is in its own right a problematised and reflexive account not only of colonial encounter, but of narrative itself, one that gestures towards the particularity of anti-apartheid narrative without reproducing it. However, read consecutively with 'The Vietnam Project', the combination becomes *Dusklands*, a narrative in two superficially unrelated parts. In this material divergence of its halves, the text dispenses with realist closure, at the same time articulately rejecting the documentary burden of political realism. The two parts of the narrative, both in their internal structure

and in their mutual interrelationships, therefore enable divergent readings that transcend (though they do not exclude) any particularised anti-apartheid allegory.

Guidotti (1999: 242) has argued that Vladislavić's writing foregrounds 'meta-narrativity and the refusal of the linguistic and fictional dimensions of the text to identify with the material dimensions of oppression and apartheid'. Indeed, she holds Vladislavić to be a champion of innovation – moreover an isolated example of such a champion – precisely because of this refusal. In this respect, she is typical of commentators who, in welcoming Vladislavić as an innovator, ignore what Coetzee introduced to South African letters a couple of decades earlier. One might contrast this with the critics, cited in chapter one²⁹, who pilloried Coetzee on precisely the same grounds for being divorced from the more urgent exigencies of history.

3

In conclusion, I briefly explore three explanations for the difference in reception noted above. The most obvious of the two is that what Louise Bethlehem terms the 'elaborate *rhetoric of urgency*' – the privileged status of realism, invested in safeguarding 'the ethical claims of South African literary culture' (2006: 3, original emphasis) – diminished towards the end of the 1980s as the demise of apartheid could at last be anticipated with confidence. In 1990, the ANC was unbanned, Mandela was released, and talks between the Nationalist government and the ANC were initiated (Reddy 1992, n.p.). This led to a relaxation of attitudes towards the instrumental uses of art, exemplified by Albie Sachs's address to an ANC in 1989, and an expectation amongst critics and scholars that a wave of literary experimentation

²⁹ Knox-Shaw (1982:28), Kohler (1987: 3-23), Rich (1984b: 386-7), Vaughan (1982: 137), Gordimer (1984: 3), and JanMahomed (1985: 73).

might follow (both discussed in chapter one). A second explanation lies in the gradual spread of post-structuralist literary theory into the South African academic establishment. As Clive Barnett observes, there was 'an increasing acknowledgement of the value of formal pluralism in current cultural debates in South Africa', a change which 'coincides with the ascendancy of post-structuralist theories of interpretation' (297), and which led to a more positive re-evaluation of Coetzee's fiction³⁰. For example, in 1984, Paul Rich criticised Coetzee's novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) for its failure of historic understanding:

Coetzee's novel thus reflects the tradition of cultured defensiveness of Western civilization against external invasion and fails to offset this against any wider historical understanding of empires and their rise and fall.

(Rich 1984b: 387)

Rich concluded that the novel is flawed, in 'reproducing in a simplistic and ideal form many facets of the Western imperial imagination without at the same time being able to perceive any moral transcendence of this' (388). One might compare this with his affirmation of Coetzee in 1993 for 'dissecting and deconstructing dominant cultural myths' (1993:1), rather than merely 'reproducing' them:

[r]ealism in the South African novel has increasingly interacted with a variety of other literary forms in the course of the 1980s. It has, in particular, been challenged by postmodernism in writers such as J.M. Coetzee, whose novels have been concerned with dissecting and deconstructing dominant cultural myths and revealing their opposite at the heart of modern culture.

(Rich 1993: 1)

Against this change in background, it is not surprising that a postmodern writer as subtle and complex as Vladislavić should be as warmly received as he has been. However, as I have shown above, key aspects of his innovation – his postmodern

³⁰ See for example Dovey (1987), Watson (1986: 390), Attwell (1990: 580ff), Castillo (1990: 1109ff), Macaskill and Colleran (1992: 434ff), Moses (1993: 115ff), Parry (1994: 15ff), Boehmer (1998: 51ff), and Brink (1998: 18-22).

experimentation and oblique political approach – have been anticipated in Coetzee's early work.

A third possible reason for the difference in reception might lie in the simple fact that Coetzee, through his early literary innovations³¹, anticipated trends that were still nascent. In this sense, he began to contribute to what was later to become the emergent post-apartheid literary paradigm. One might express the case in the following terms. Vladislavić is undoubtedly seen as one of the exemplars of the 'new beginnings' called for by Boehmer (1998: 51), as one of the defining voices of the emergent post-apartheid literary paradigm. However, Coetzee, as early as 1974, introduced many of the postmodern narrative practices that recur in modified form in Vladislavić's work. If practices of this nature partially define the post-apartheid literary paradigm, it follows that Coetzee emerges as one of its early shapers, albeit during the period of apartheid. While this statement might appear to be self-contradictory in the literal sense, Coetzee was criticised precisely because he did not fit the conventions of anti-apartheid writing. What his early work does fit very well is a literary paradigm that begins to emerge approximately twenty years later. Had *Dusklands* or his second novel, *In the Heart of the Country* (1982), been published in the 21st century, it is unlikely that they would have attracted any kind of ideological hostility. Few would dispute that Coetzee has always been an exceptional case in South African letters: I extend this exceptionalism to the position that, as early as 1974, he prefigured characteristics of post-apartheid writing.

In chapter one, I discussed Lukács's (1938 [1977]: 46) theory of the 'prophetic figure' which embodies underlying social forces which might not yet be evident in the surface of public life. For Lukács, realist writers who create such prophetic figures form the true avant-garde 'because they express the wealth and diversity of reality, reflecting forces as yet submerged beneath the surface, which only blossom forth

³¹ Innovations at least in the context of South African literature.

visibly to all at a later stage' (47-8). Lukács's 'prophetic figure' refers to characters in great realist novels, while the social forces they embody and anticipate are properties of extratextual society. I propose that in Coetzee's case, Lukács's postulated relationship between life and art is reversed. Here it is the writer who becomes the 'prophetic figure', anticipating and embedding in his fiction currents of change that had yet to emerge in the general body of fiction, and in literary and cultural theory.

Finally, in suggesting that Coetzee's early work anticipates and contributes to development of the post-apartheid paradigm, I do not exclude the material aspect of influence. Writers such as Vladislavić and others of his generation undoubtedly read Coetzee in their formative years, as Vladislavić has affirmed in his own case (quoted in Warnes 2000a: 176), and were thereby influenced. In this material and mediate sense, Coetzee contributed to the development of a successor paradigm through the seminal force of his example, as much as he anticipated it directly in his own writing.

Chapter Five

Dreaming of a Humane Society: Death and Orature in Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying* and Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*

The criteria for the post-apartheid canon are clear. In terms of content, no concentration on race and little mention of apartheid – instead, engage with one or more of AIDS, crime, xenophobia, homosexuality, returning exiles, urbanization, new forms of dispossession, and identity displacement. In terms of style, take as much latitude from the standard realism associated with struggle literature as possible – association with "magic realism" is acceptable, as long as it is made clear that this is drawn from African tale-telling traditions rather than any particular international influence.

(Green 2005: 6)

Ways of Dying (1995), by Zakes Mda, and *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001), by Phaswane Mpe, depict numerous and often grotesque deaths. Both texts use death as a signifier of traumatic social transition, rather than reflect it as an accidental consequence of transition. Indeed, the narratives are structured around a bewildering variety and frequency of deaths, allowing characters to form different responses not only to ubiquitous death itself, but through these responses to learn to engage with the texture of their changing societies. The context of social transition, however, differs. Mda's book reflects the vicious and chaotic interregnum between the dying order of apartheid and the still unborn democracy. Mpe's is set in a post-apartheid South Africa that continues to transform beyond any conceivable moment of inception, destabilising expectation of a humane society even as it is generated.

In writing out of these unstable post/colonial conditions, both authors split off some of the narrative burden, sharing it with a fictionalised communal voice. In other words, they consciously use the medium of orature. More particularly, they use

orature to position themselves as African speakers, aware of indigenous tradition as they are of cosmopolitan literary practice. Paradoxically, it is in this commonality that Mda and Mpe diverge most sharply from each other: Mda in *Ways of Dying* uses orature as a humane and elevating principle that relieves the oppressive universality of death; Mpe uses orature as a destructive agency that on occasion becomes literally murderous.

It is through this crucial difference that Mda and Mpe stake out contrasting positions. While Mda's text focuses on national political events, he nonetheless turns from motives of protest or mobilisation to community development. Mpe's focus, on the other hand, is communitarian rather than national. However, what he depicts is set of disintegrating communities, and the consequent degradation and crisis of individuals trapped between conflicting urban and rural epistemologies.

In their anatomisation of society through variegated tropes of death, and in their assertion of African voice (and by implication, African epistemology), Mda and Mpe adopt formal structures and subject positions typical of African magic realism rather than of the western realist tradition. In this regard, and in their abandonment of any motive of political mobilisation, both authors diverge from the imperative of committed realism that marked the anti-apartheid canon.

The deaths in *Ways of Dying* are metaphors of social distortion, devices that measure the brutality of the society represented, and reflect diagnostically the degree and kind of dehumanising change that afflicts it. These tropes structure the narrative, creating a hierarchical framework of social meaning upon which the more personal and immediate narratives of the focalisers, Toloki and Noria, play out. This can be seen in the arrangement of deaths which Mda erects as the infrastructure of the novel.

The first element of death can be described as cultural, or traditional: the child chorister who is shot out of jealousy at her beautiful singing; the patriarch who is murdered by his sons in a dispute about precedence in the family hierarchy; the muti murder of a child. These deaths reflect a culture enfolded within itself, internally fractured by its own pressures rather than by the impact of colonial or class hegemony.

A second element of death arises from personal loss, such as Jwara, who starves himself slowly to death on losing his creativity; the death of Noria's first husband Napu, who falls apart after Noria has abandoned him for a second time; and the associated death of Vutha the First (Noria's son), whom Napu leaves chained to a post under a bridge, so that he dies of starvation after Napu has died. Again, these deaths reflect a horribly stressed society, but they are not directly symptomatic of political struggle.

A third element of death is directly attributable to white oppression, such as the mill worker over whom petrol is poured and then set alight by his white employer as a 'joke' (Mda 1995: 65). This element directly indicts the power- and racial binary of apartheid, a narrative modality that is traditional to apartheid struggle writing.

A fourth element of death is generated by the conflicts of interregnum. This includes death caused by Third Force vigilantes who attack and murder train commuters; those arising from the internecine war between the hostel-dwelling followers of the 'ethnic chief' and the 'Young Tigers'; and the necklacing of Vutha the Second (Noria's reborn son), who is presented as a casualty of the conflict between the 'Young Tigers' and the ethnic hostel dwellers. Vutha's second death is seminal to the narrative because his death becomes a platform from which the leadership of the 'Movement' (read ANC) is pilloried for betraying the promise of justice inscribed in the revolution it leads. These interregnum-specific deaths thus reflect a multifoliate rather than binary struggle for hegemony, with various forces contending for power.

In view of the social reading that these categories of death enable, particularly those deaths related directly to apartheid oppression and interregnum struggle, it is hard to agree with Shaun Irlam's view that there is a 'certain parochial insularity to the township community [Mda] describes and *an acute sense of detachment from any broader national entity*' (2004: 712, my emphasis). On the contrary, *Ways of Dying* sites its action in historic events: there are detailed and thinly veiled allusions to Winnie and Nelson Mandela, and Mangosuthu Buthelezi; to Inkatha, and the Young Lions of the ANC; the role of 32 Battalion in the conflict between the armed self-defence units of the ANC and armed units of Inkatha; and the vicious conflicts between the Inkatha-affiliated hostel dwellers and ANC-aligned inmates of informal settlements. In fact, these national events and figures become a structural component of the novel's discourse. However, while this level of political documentary is a typical property of the struggle canon, *Ways of Dying* diverges in a crucial respect. In his representation of interregnum power struggles, Mda is not aligned, in the traditional binary sense, *with* the anti-apartheid struggle *against* apartheid. His narrative shows instead how small and powerless people are brutalised and manipulated by the struggle itself, and by the major participants of the struggle – in this case 'the Movement', the 'Young Tigers', the 'ethnic' hostel dwellers, *as well as* the forces of apartheid. As the players jockey for position, the struggle for power becomes an end in itself, subverting the struggle doctrine of popular liberation and threatening to replace it with hegemony of a different kind. Precisely because Mda's critique includes in its scope the 'Movement' that prefigures postcolonial government, the text begins to move into postcolonial rather than struggle territory.

The deaths in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* construct their narrative in analogous ways. However, they follow a different tenor, reflecting post-rainbow nation disillusionment rather than the paroxysm of liberatory change. Richard Samin (2003: 2) has argued that Mpe's project in this novel is to reappraise, given the massive and

enduring material asymmetries of the country, the 'mythic image of South Africa as the country of reconciliation and rebirth, which served the miraculous transition to democracy so well'. However, Samin implies that Mpe is concerned with deconstructing, in response to an unstated materialist agenda that Samin projects on Mpe's behalf, the officially propagated myth of national reconciliation. As I will argue, Mpe seems more anxious to reflect a society in which human nature itself is reliably corrupt, albeit capable of integrity. While social and economic oppression do inform the society represented, its failures are functions as much of vicious human nature as of postcolonial government. Conversely, as individuals react helplessly to social change, their fallible natures dominate their actions.

As in *Ways of Dying*, there are four classes of death in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* that open up an infrastructure of value upon which the narrative moves. Again, these different kinds of death are tropes of conflicting value, diagnostic windows into a society tormented by transitional forces it does not understand. I will argue below that the thematic instabilities encoded in these deaths generate, at the formal level, a destabilising narrative.

The opening deaths of *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* reflect the urban frenzy that is contemporary Hillbrow. The first death is a child hit by a wildly circling motorist celebrating the 1995 victory of Bafana Bafana over the Ivory Coast. This is followed by hijacking deaths, shoot-outs between police and criminals, five murders by butcher's knife, eight deaths caused by bottles thrown out of flat windows in Hillbrow's New Year's Eve celebrations, a character run over by hijackers speeding away from the police, and so on. One might describe these as contextualising moments that speak to identity: portrayals of an unanchored, dispossessed, and largely migrant society. What is contextualised is therefore an urban condition that Irikidzayi Manase argues is represented in Southern African fiction in terms of 'the dialectical links between poverty, wealth, life, death and homelessness which result in the constitution of

restless and dislocated identities for a majority of urban dwellers' (Manase 2005: 88).

The second set of deaths stem from more immediately personal and malicious motives. Two of these, like *Ways of Dying*, use the device of necklacing, but in both cases necklacing is linked to the destructive and malicious power of village gossip, and not to political circumstances such as those sketched by Mda in *Ways of Dying*. In one case, a young villager, Tchepo (the first to leave the village of Tiragalong and go to Hillbrow), is killed by a bolt of lightning. His mother dies in reaction to this event, 'choked to death on her grief' (Mpe 2001: 45). The oldest woman in the village is accused by the villagers of Tiragalong of bewitching him, i.e. sending the lightning to kill him, and is consequently necklaced (45). In the second example, Refentše's mother slips into his grave after his suicide. As the villagers know, 'only witches could fall into a grave on burial' (43), a sure sign that she has bewitched the deceased, thereby causing his death. She too is necklaced. Both incidents foreground the way in which the villagers construct their values in a kind of orature consisting of what Tiragalong says in its communal voice. While the term 'orature' was originally coined to denote the written representation of oral narrative performance (Ngũgĩ 1998: 111), I use it in this chapter in accord with Zakes Mda's useage in *Ways of Dying*, namely narrative represented as originating from 'the all-seeing eye of the village gossip' (Mda 1995: 12). In Phaswane Mpe's novel, too, the collective knows, and the collective speaks:

Sheer jealousy was her motive, Tiragalong has suggested. The suggestion quickly became accepted as valid fact. A bone thrower confirmed that the woman was indeed a witch.

(Mpe 2001: 45)

The epistemological and ideological implications of this approach to orature will be discussed in more detail below.

The third set of deaths, consisting of the suicides of the central characters,

Refentše and his lover Lerato, are triggered by a combination of unhappiness, disillusionment, and a linked series of sexual betrayals. However, these suicides are also thematic sites of important tensions in the novel. The betrayals and suicides portray the claustrophobic world of Tiragalong from which the characters struggle, and ultimately fail, to emerge. For example, Refentše commits suicide by jumping from the twentieth floor of his Hillbrow flat because he finds his friend Sammy and his girlfriend Lerato 'moaning together in [Refentše's] bedroom' (Mpe 2001: 40). Complementary causes of his suicide are Refentše's mother's insistence that he leave Lerato, or be disowned as her son; the pressure to succeed, with the 'weight of Tiragalong's expectations on [Refentše's] back'; and guilt over '[Refentše's] own betrayal [of his friend Sammy] with Bohlale' (40) after parting on bad terms. Lerato later commits suicide by taking tablets because Terror, a sinister citizen of Tiragalong with rapist habits, threatens to inform Lerato's mother of Lerato's sexual betrayal of Refentše with Sammy; and because Refentše seems to be alienated from her in consequence of his mother's ultimatum. In this sense (as in the necklacing deaths of old women), Tiragalong becomes an agent in its own right, an incestuous vocal community that sentences its members to death, only partly (as in the necklacing deaths of the two old women noted above) through the malicious power of its orature. A related aspect of this agency is that the consciousness of Tiragalong stretches into distant Hillbrow, remaining in the minds of the two suicidal protagonists, despite their new-found learning and sophistication:

You discovered, on arriving in Hillbrow, that to be drawn away from Tiragalong also went hand-in-hand with a loss of interest in Hillbrow. Because Tiragalong was in Hillbrow. You always took Tiragalong with you in your consciousness whenever you came to Hillbrow or any other place.

(Mpe 2001: 48-9)

Finally, in Refilwe's death of AIDS, the illness becomes a symbolic site in which

the novel's discourse on xenophobia and the foreign Other is concentrated. It is not merely that Refilwe acquires AIDS from a Nigerian lover; as Attree (2005b: 172) remarks, the illness is seen, at least by Tiragalong, as cosubstantial with the foreigners who have invaded the social body. Yet in bringing her illness home, Refilwe demonstrates the integrity of which fallible human nature is capable: her original pride and malice give way to reconciliation with a universalised human nature, transcending at last binaries such as 'local-foreign', 'self-other', 'rural-urban', 'moral-decadent', where the first term in each binary unites to portray Tiragalong as it sees itself, and as it speaks about itself.

As the above discussion of death shows, an atmosphere of compound social dispossession and crushing personal uncertainty pervades the novel. This instability is echoed in a destabilised reading experience, in two key respects. Firstly, the narrative form departs from the realist model so typical of struggle writing. The chronology of the narrative is strongly disrupted, with the focal point continually returning to successively earlier moments, then shifting forward again to advance the timeline in a manner that, in its insistent anti-linearity, can be confusing. It may loosely be described, therefore, as a spiral rather than a linear narrative order. Samin (2003:9) notes that this spiral movement, in its repetitive disclosure, adds to a 'general impression of confusion and complexity'. While the events represented are chronologically and causally sequential, it is the representation itself that disestablishes sequence, thus subverting the experience of narrative coherence.

The novel is written, moreover, in the second person, a device which has attracted a great deal of critical attention, and little consensus. While the 'you' of this narration principally addresses the focaliser Refentše, the reader instinctively relates this address to him- or herself. At the same time, the narrative speaker remains disembodied, because the key word 'you' is never uttered by an explicit 'I'. This differs from the disembodiment of an omniscient narrator because the 'you'

address evokes the virtual presence of a personified listener, who in turn presumes a personified speaker. Then, in the 'Refilwe on the move' section of the novel, Refentše is predicated conventionally in the third person singular (111, for example), while the addressee signified by 'you' abandons Refentše and shifts to Refilwe in 'The Returnee'. This complex disturbance of a key narrative element subverts realist convention. Carrol Clarkson (2005: 457) describes a similar tension related to the titular refrain, 'welcome to our Hillbrow', and its associated complexities of address and reception, which inevitably destabilise the position of the reader:

The phrase, 'welcome to our Hillbrow', is addressed specifically to Refentše, and when it is taken this way, it is as if the reader is overhearing the second-person address to Refentše in the novel. Nevertheless, on first picking up the novel, it would be difficult to assert with confidence that the vocative 'Welcome' is not addressed to you, the reader. The performative force of 'Welcome' presupposes that you are already at the site of the address, so that a simple non-response is not possible.

(Clarkson 2005: 457)

The second person address thus problematises the narrative, negating its consumption as a realist artefact. The complexity of this 'you' address is evident in the scale of discussion and paucity of consensus it has evoked³².

This generation of destabilised form out of a matrix of endemic societal instability can be contrasted with the doctrine and practice of apartheid struggle writing. In the latter context³³, political, culture and labour organisations required a literature that would mobilise the victims of apartheid to political struggle, and reflect the daily narratives of their experience. However, this requirement went further than content: the objective of mobilisation was to generate a form of

³² See Attree (2005: 176), Blair (2002: 165), Clarkson (2005: 456-7), Dannenberg (2004: 6), Dass (2004: 165 and 178), Green (2005: 8-9) and Kruger (2005: 84).

³³ As typified by the People's Culture Campaign run by the United Democratic Front in the mid-1980s, amongst others (discussed in chapter one).

writing accessible to a proletariat with limited education as well, namely an accessible and committed realism. This contrast indicates the extent to which Mpe diverges in his content, and in the form generated by that content, from the anti-apartheid canon.

I have cited, and disagreed with, Shaun Irlam's (2004: 712) comment that Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying* is isolated from national politics. Strangely, it is more relevant to *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*. Unlike Mda's novel, the categories of death in Mpe's are not related to national *political* events. They point instead to problems of identity and dispossession amongst a rural community displaced into a particularly concentrated urban space, in which its village epistemology continues to function unadaptively in this violently alien environment, with disastrous results. Mpe (2003:189) has observed that demographic and cultural change in Hillbrow has led to a 'new consciousness' related to diversity, and about which he is ambivalent. While he identifies this consciousness as seeing oneself through the sometimes hostile and judgemental eyes of the other, he also identifies it as potentially 'a far more multi-layered consciousness, with each social group serving as a mirror for itself and the other groups' (189). However, it is interesting that in his novel set in Hillbrow, the new consciousness of the city is unable to free itself from the mind of the village, with particularly destructive consequences. What is reflected is not the formal political struggle of the new nation, so much as the steep existential difficulty of living in it.

This difficulty was not confined to Mpe's fictional production alone, but contained an autobiographical element. The author has commented publically, and frequently, that he wrote *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* as an alternative to suicide (Nichols 2004: 160; Green 2005: 9). In an interview with Lizzy Attree (2005a: 140-141), Mpe affirms that he was depressed at the time, and that the writing process served a therapeutic purpose. Another demon evoked in the novel is AIDS. His character Refilwe dies of it, and Mpe's own struggle with the disease is poignantly captured in

his poem 'Elegy for the Trio' (Mpe 2004: 38-9). It is probable that Mpe died of AIDS, as Samuelson (2005: 179) and Green (2005: 9) suggest.

Writing a novel of existential complaint strongly differentiates Mpe's novel from the struggle canon in the first place. However, in creating a literary image of his own suicidal tendencies, Mpe diverges further from political engagement in its classic anti-apartheid form, as K. Sello Duiker does in *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* (2001). Yet *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* is not without a political dimension, one that takes on a definitively post-apartheid shape. In writing a novel that engages with AIDS as centrally as does *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, a complex political/literary space is created. It is evident in two dimensions that are related not only to each other, but to the dialectic of village and city discussed above. These are the micropolitics of AIDS, and xenophobia, both core properties of Green's (2005: 6) 'post-apartheid canon' quoted in the epigraph of this chapter. I use the term "micropolitics" to denote the informal network of reactions to AIDS in a community, at once rural and urban, that is haunted by the disease, rather than the highly contested complex of non/responses to AIDS that plays out on the formal national stage. This distinction, between the micropolitical perspective chosen by Mpe at the expense of national AIDS politics, is typical of his political focus – there is no representation of structural national politics, as there is in *Ways of Dying*. It is true that the AIDS pandemic was already strongly politicised by the turn of the century, and of course it has assumed even greater importance since. However, there is considerable distance between the background political documentary that informs dystopia in *Ways of Dying*, and the more diffuse social background that informs Mpe's novel.

The differences between the two texts presented above are further reflected in the construction of their orature. I introduce this section with a brief account of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's view of orature and the epistemological framework which it suggests for him. I then position Phaswane Mpe and Zakes Mda within this framework, with regard to their different uses of orature. I argue further that these differences reflect a degree of canonical change.

In chapter one I quoted Green's (1997: 7) question: 'How can a body of texts generated within, and in terms of dissemination and reception still held within, the episteme of *anti-apartheid* [...] be meaningfully related to one beyond apartheid?' A fitting answer can be found in the use of orature in the two novels. The concept of orature articulated by Ngũgĩ reaches into the epistemological domain. It is an assertion of African identity, and African worldview, sited in the post/colonial world. How then do Mpe and Mda assert themselves as African artists and intellectuals in a post-apartheid world through the medium of orature? How do they begin to redefine, within the context of orature, the nature of South African writing?

Gaylard (2005a: 102) wrongly ascribes the coining of the term to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o'. Ngũgĩ himself (1998: 105) attributes it to the Ugandan linguist Pio Zirimu in the 1960s, noting that it was 'the difficulties of containing the world of the oral text within that of the literary' (111) that led to the neologism. Ngũgĩ makes sweeping claims for orature³⁴. The meaning of the term, in his view, transcends its denotation, namely the written representation of oral narrative performance traditions. It becomes for Ngũgĩ a system of oral aesthetics which incorporates not only the relationship

³⁴ These claims are so sweeping, in fact, that they verge on the grandiose and uninspectable. However, they form an appropriate and relevant frame for my discussion of Mpe's and Mda's imaginative use of the concept of orature.

between performer and artist (110), but also the fusion it affords of spoken and written text. This becomes in turn a prototype of more comprehensive and wider fusions of artistic media (114). Orature, in this sense, incorporates performance genres of various kinds, so transcending the narrow binaries of written and spoken that condition the originating views of the concept, extending across theatre, cinema and even cyberspace (118-119). More pertinent to my argument, Ngũgĩ makes two claims concerning the Africanness of orature. The first is to relate it to an African metaphysics that sees a unity underlying elements as diverse as the elemental world, the nurturing function of society, human spirituality, and the time/space continuum. This unity is written into the oral sources that constitute African narrative traditions (116-7). This unity also constitutes a vision which removes the hermetic Western boundaries between life and death, and which understands time as a circular organism rather than a linear sequence (117), so allowing for rebirth, and for continuity between spiritual and material dimensions and personae. The second is a compound ideological claim of Africanness, which asserts that orature gives an owned voice to Africans dispossessed within the world diaspora (113), and that (more abstractly) it asserts African identity and self-perception within national and geopolitical arenas (119). One might take issue with the extent of these claims if orature is understood as a written representation of oral narrative performance. However, it is more than plausible that Ngũgĩ refers in making these claims to the various African oral traditions from which orature is drawn, rather than to orature itself.

Mda's presentation of orature is consistent with this vision, not only with regard to the written representation of an oral voice, but with regard to the broader epistemological claims made by Ngũgĩ. The much repeated observation that *Ways of Dying* is a magical realist work rests on the permeability between death and life that allows the spirit of Jwara to communicate from beyond the boundaries of death, for example, or Vutha to be born twice. Mda has specifically linked the principle of magic

to the oral tradition: in an interview with Elly Williams (2005: 70), he asserts that the magic in his novels comes from 'the magical oral traditions of the various peoples of South Africa'. Christopher Warnes (2001: 248) has argued that 'the "code of the natural" enjoys a far greater representation in this novel than does the "code of the supernatural", signifying [...] South African literature's struggle to liberate itself from a legacy of realism'. However, this observation begs the question of the continuity between the material and magical worlds that is as much part of African oral tradition as it is of African magical realism.

Mda's use of orature involves a further element. It is strongly reflective of a humane community, a moral image which continues to surface despite the virtual sea of death which marks this novel. As Toloki remarks, '[O]ur ways of dying are our ways of living' (Mda 1995: 98). In addition to the imaginative resources of Toloki and Noria, orature is one of the 'ways of living' which relieve this dark, tragic environment, adding a humane, humorous community voice. In his sense, Mda idealises the role of orature, which is evident as he introduces it:

We are the all-seeing eye of the village gossip. When in our orature the storyteller begins the story, 'They say it once happened ...', we are the 'they'. No individual owns any story. The community is the owner of the story, and it can tell it the way it deems it fit. We would not be needing to justify the communal voice that tells this story if you had not wondered how we became so omniscient in the affairs of Toloki and Noria.

(Mda 1995: 12)

Mda has affirmed the influence of the African tradition of orature in on his own work (see for example Williams 2005: 71, and Mda 1994: 144-5). However, the device of orature in *Ways of Dying* is narrative sleight of hand: in fact, the first person plural masks a conventional omniscient narrator, and the chorus is attributed an entirely nominal authorship. If one were to substitute 'we' for 'I' and acknowledge that 'I' as a disembodied proxy for Zakes Mda, it might change the texture of the narrative, but

would not affect the action in any significant way.

To say that 'the community is the owner of the story, and it can tell it the way it deems it fit' (Mda 1995: 12), when the facts of the matter dictate that Mda is the owner of the story, points to the real content of that statement, which demonstrates an Africanist viewpoint. Mda wishes to reflect an African narrative tradition, and to align that reflection with his developmental commitment. In this tradition, the individual is related through oral narrative to the community. Liz Gunner (2003: 137), for example, observes that the oral tradition of *imbongi*, or praise singers, use the 'we' form, even when the 'we' signified are long dead, so incorporating these historic events into 'our' identity. She also records (140) that praise singing is used to relate the actions of an individual to the larger social organisation. Mda, writing in the context of theatre for an African audience, gives an indication how this might be done:

We advise the characters how to conduct their lives and how to solve their problems [...] It is because in our culture we just cannot be passive consumers of art. We want to contribute to the creation and development of the narrative.

(Mda 1994: 145).

There are occasions in which the orature in *Ways of Dying* implicitly advises the characters on how to approach their immediate crisis. To take a single example:

We felt that Toloki should not have been overly jealous of Noria. Although we always remarked, sometimes in his presence, that he was an ugly child, he was not completely without talent.

(Mda 1995: 32)

Redistributing the narrative task (albeit principally at a symbolic level) back to the community, from which oral narrative originates, affirms and expresses this developmental commitment³⁵. In writing this collective voice, Mda, like Mpe,

³⁵ Sam Radithlalo makes a related point concerning how the person of Toloki reflects Mda's developmental viewpoint: 'What Mda achieves with his portrayal of Toloki is two-fold: to re-visit

characterises the community, extending its properties beyond omniscience to a certain narrowness of judgement. Margaret Mervis (1998:48) remarks that 'the witness-narrator's judgements and interpretations of events also provide information about the collective 'character' of the community within the fictional world and as such subject it to the many criteria which are indicative of fallibility'. Yet it is at this point that Mda diverges from Mpe in the construction of a communal voice. While Mda's communal voice often shows traditional, somewhat insular judgements, his stream of orature also contributes a wry humour to the text. Through this splicing of conventional morality and gentle irony, Mda addresses the reader, subtly but directly, as the *individual* 'owner' of the narrative, establishing a sly cosmopolitan distance for himself from this conventional African wisdom, yet also affirming its continuing vitality and importance.

I would argue that in this dual address to the reader, particularly in its knowing affirmation of an African collective voice, Mda redefines his political role as a writer, moving from a literature of struggle and protest to a literature of development. Mervis (1998: 41-42) traces this transition in Mda's work, arguing that while his plays, written up to the early 1990s, were protest works, his novels turn to the needs of nation-building and development appropriate to a transitional society, away from the need for political mobilisation in the context of struggle. Mda has affirmed this suggestion, arguing that performance art, such as plays and poems, with its more immediate address to a live (and by definition, collective) audience, is more suited to the task of mobilisation. Novels, however, given their more reflective and leisure-oriented consumption, are more suited to contemplation by the solitary reader (in Williams 2005: 69). Yet it must be clear that for Mda this redefined role remains political:

a horrible and terrifying period of South Africa's recent history, but more importantly, to restore to the so-called 'surplus people' *a measure of pride denied them by the state*' (2005: 179, my emphasis).

In my view every work of art makes a political statement, even if the artist does not intend so. It may not be overtly political, but if it is set in the real world that we know, it is going to touch on politics. It will be informed by the political environment. It will respond to situations that may not be overtly political but that emanate from or are generated by political hegemonies.

(Mda, in Williams 2005: 66)

His plural use of 'hegemonies' is instructive. Where this diverges in its politics even more sharply from a struggle-defined, instrumental role of art is that in *Ways of Dying* the effects of hegemony are not shown to be unidirectional: as I have argued above, the people are oppressed by a four-way competition for hegemony, between 'the Movement', the 'ethnic chief' (read ANC and Inkatha respectively), the 'Young Tigers', and the masters of apartheid. It is this more complex struggle for hegemony that plays so tragically into the lives of Noria and her child.

It is equally significant that the resolution Mda offers for the players in this historically-defined tragedy is imaginative transformation in the context of a deeply-felt human relationship. Richard Samin (2000a: 190) has suggested that in *Ways of Dying*, Mda responds consciously to arguments that have contributed to canonical redefinition, namely Albie Sachs's paper 'Preparing Ourselves for Freedom' (1990 [1989]), and Njabulo Ndebele's 'The Rediscovery of the Ordinary' (1991 [1984])³⁶, in which Ndebele urges a more nuanced and ambiguous literature drawing on individual human lives, as opposed to 'an aesthetics of the spectacular (or political protest)' (Samin 2000a: 190, original parenthesis). Mervis (1998:40) draws similar conclusions with regard to the influence of Ndebele on the writing of *Ways of Dying*. Mda has thus attempted to energise his work not only by opening up 'vistas of inner capacity' (Ndebele 1991:56, cited in Mervis 1998: 40) in its imaginative content, but by transforming the politics of protest to a politics of development.

In *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, orature takes on a dark and tragic timbre. I have

³⁶ See chapter one for a more detailed treatment of both these papers.

discussed above how Mpe's orature acquires a malicious agency, directly and indirectly causing the deaths of several characters. It also becomes a vessel bearing within itself two infectious disorders, namely AIDS and xenophobia. Indeed, a subtle association is forged between xenophobia and AIDS, and carried in the gossip of Tiragalong. For the citizens of this home village, the source of AIDS is firstly the *Makwerekwere* women (i.e. foreigners from elsewhere in Africa) who can be found in the 'whorehouses and dingy pubs' of Hillbrow (Mpe 2001: 3), where they intersect with the migrants from Tiragalong. It is known that 'AIDS... was caused by *foreign* germs that travelled down from the central and western parts of Africa' (3-4, my emphasis). This process of othering widens to include 'the bizarre sexual behaviour of the Hillbrowans' (4), i.e. homosexuality. It is in discussions of this nature that the orature of Tiragalong makes its malice felt:

Surely, this large group argued, it was the shit that the greedy and careless penises sucked out of the equally eager anuses, that could only lead to such dreadful diseases?

(Mpe 2001: 4).

I have noted above Attree's (2005b: 172) observation that AIDS in the novel is associated with a xenophobic attitude to foreigners in a particular way: the disease itself is 'treated as the "other" that has invaded their community'. She links this further to the layer of orature, citing Mpe's (2001: 116) reference to the 'ignorant talk of people who turned diseases into crimes' (172). I have noted above the trial by orature, and execution by necklacing, of two old women accused of witchcraft (Mpe 2001: 43 and 45). Attree describes the content and effect of this destructive discourse – registered as association, stigma and taboo – in the following terms:

These very associations, stigma and taboo, and their location within the local community, within the city, are shown by Phaswane to be more deadly than AIDS itself, leading to accusations of witchcraft and violent retributions such as necklacing ([Mpe 2001:]121).

While the two necklacings I cited are not related to AIDs, others are, as Mpe (2001: 121) indicates towards the end of the novel: 'Bone throwers sniffed out the witches responsible [for AIDs-related deaths], and they were subsequently necklaced'.

In sum, Mpe is iconoclastic in his treatment of orature, linking it actively with death and inscribing into this communal voice a culture of xenophobia, and of self-inflicted malice as well. In doing so he subverts not only the traditions of anti-apartheid writing, but older African traditions which honour the community through orature. Further, in sharp contrast with Ngũgĩ's view of orature as an assertion of African belonging, Mpe's African voice is to a degree self-hating.

The vision of African community that Mpe evokes is despairing rather than affirmative. He also constructs orature differently from Mda, in that it is written in the third person, uses the passive voice, and does not claim explicit ownership of the narrative. However, despite being less foregrounded in this respect, Mpe's orature plays a stronger role in the plot, becoming a causative agent in its own right, and creating a moral stage on which the more central events play out. It is also allowed more space, literally, than Mda's. For example, a six-page sequence in a 124-page novel (Mpe 2001: 41-46) is devoted to relating various events caused directly or indirectly by the community discourse. These include Refilwe's disinformation crusade that rewrites the facts surrounding Refentše's suicide; the alternative narrative generated by Tiragalong of the same events; reconstructing Lerato (Refilwe's rival for Refentše's love) as a *Makwerekwere* woman; and the two necklacing deaths of old women for witchcraft already noted. This sequence terminates in a presentation of the suspicion of others with which Tiragalong speaks to itself:

In any event, Refilwe's version of things provided good diversion for a large section of Tiragalong's story-loving population. Opinions were divided as to

whether her version was true or not. Some said it didn't matter, that whether you died because of a *Lekwerekwere* or a Johannesburger did not make much difference. Were the two not equally dangerous? Immoral ... drug dealing ... murderous ... sexually loose ... money grabbing ...

(Mpe 2001: 46)

The moral landscape depicted through Mpe's orature reflects a post-liberation disillusionment, as Samin (2003: 2) has observed, deflating the ideal of a just society captured in rainbow-nation imagery. Yet the injustice depicted does not emanate from the oppression of apartheid. It is in fact overdetermined by economic pressure, cultural forms, human nature, migrancy and other transitional forces. There is no hegemonic author of a grand narrative against which to write. Further, unlike Mda, Mpe shows no commitment to develop the community about which he writes. Instead, he represents the disintegration of communal values, and the degradation, and destruction, of individuals trapped in colliding, hybridising worlds.

What the novel does attempt is a redefinition of community, and a widening sense of humane value. Simultaneously, however, it casts doubt on whether this idealised community can be achieved. The narrative moves from a baseline of xenophobia, suspicion, bias, vengefulness and jealousy, which appear to be inscribed not only in the *Makwerekwere* and Hillbrowans, but also in the lives of Tiragalong, Heathrow, Oxford and Lagos. In other words, these values constitute a universal human shadow brought into play by the restless migrant condition through which all the characters move. As Minesh Dass (2004: 165) remarks, the novel 'must register the loss of traditional notions of what constitutes a community, while engaging a new, humane community characterised by both hybridity and similarity'. This can be seen in the narrator's posthumous address to a likewise deceased Refilwe:

Now you can sigh with resignation, child of our Hillbrow and Tiragalong and Oxford, as you think of your imminent entry into Heaven. You are wondering what Refentše will say to you when he sees you again. You know that you are not the same Refilwe that you were when he was

alive. You can no longer hide behind your bias against Makwerekwere. You do not blame them for the troubles in your life, as you once did. You have come to understand that you too are a Hillbrowan. An Alexandran. A Johannesburger. An Oxfordian. A *Lekwerekwere*, just like those you once held in such contempt.

(Mpe 2001: 122-3)

However, this humane awakening is limited by the fact that the characters only achieve it once they are dead, and are by definition unable to live it. Their self-recognition is accordingly represented in a curiously subjunctive style:

You did not now how that part of the story had come about. Had you known, you would perhaps have forgiven your Lerato, instead of taking that spectacular route to the world of the Ancestors. You have since come to learn the facts, because Heaven affords you the benefit of retrospect and omniscience.

(Mpe 2001:47)

It is hard to escape the pessimism written into such suspended moral resolution. It is true that the narrative gestures towards reconciliation, towards the ideal of a just and humane community. However, even as the text postulates such reconciliation, the possibility of achieving it is refuted by its posthumous unfolding.

This mordancy confirms Ralph Goodman's view (2004: 92) that the novel is consistently ironic and ambiguous, even to its concluding refrain: 'Refilwe, Child of our World and other Worlds... Welcome to our Heaven' (Mpe 2001: 124). Moreover, even Heaven offers no site of resolution. As Goodman argues, what welcome heaven offers 'is never made clear in this text, except as a place of impotent knowledge and conversation which is at least exempt from the suffering of the world – though it is also devoid of the passions which accompany life on earth' (Goodman 2004: 92).

Loren Kruger (2005: 84) also notes that Mpe allows the deceased only passive roles, rather than the active role traditionally accorded ancestors: 'The dead are no longer

revered elders but contemporary and clueless with the living' (84).

In sum, while *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* dreams of a just and humane society, there is no politics underwriting the text by which such a society might be achieved. There is no politics of protest or mobilisation, nor any politics of development. What is most remarkable, given this absence, is the largely enthusiastic reception the novel has enjoyed, as I will elaborate below.

3

It is not only the two novels that register a degree of canonical transition. A related measure of change is evident in the critical reception accorded *Ways of Dying* and *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*. In the literature reviewed for this chapter, there is no ideological criticism of Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*. There is criticism of an aesthetic nature, such as Ezeliora (2005: 158-9), who complains that the novel fails to convince in its representation of a social crisis, or Peter Blair's (2003: 167) criticism of Mpe's trite and stereotypical representations of English life and customs. However, the sample of the literature under survey contains no viewpoints which dispute, on ideological ground, Mpe's place in the canonical sun.

In the case of *Ways of Dying*, most of the critical responses in the literature surveyed have been positive in aesthetic/literary terms, and little ideological criticism has been registered. Grant Farred, however, has criticised *Ways of Dying* on grounds that have interesting ideological implications. Given the role an instrumental view of art has played in defining the canon of South African writing, these ideological implications are also significant in canonical terms.

Farred (2000: 184) criticises what he describes as Mda's opposition to anti-apartheid radicalism, asking 'Why is anti-apartheid radicalism so untenable to Mda?' (184). He contends that the novel 'has largely given up social intervention, repeatedly

demonstrating a reluctance to account for the several deaths that mark settlement life' (186). One of the centres of his critique is that the artistic disengagement represented in the apolitical figure of Toloki is unjustified in the light of post-apartheid economic conditions, noting that post-apartheid literature will have to '(re)negotiate its relationship to a black underclass whose living conditions resemble the disenfranchisement of the apartheid past' (187). Farred's language presents this as something akin to a betrayal, protesting as he does that 'in the apartheid moment such disengagement was unimaginable' (195). This struggle indignation is perhaps also evident in Farred's surprising description of Toloki as 'an upwardly mobile figure' (192). While Farred does not justify his use of the term, the fact that Toloki has, and loses, a sausage roll stand, and elsewhere tries to earn a living with meagre success, does not really qualify him as 'upwardly mobile'.

Farred's view is symptomatic of an ideological pressure that has missed a particular turning point. What Farred does is attempt to reimpose the hegemony of political realism. It becomes evident in Farred's critique of Toloki's 'solipsistic' (189) profession as a mourner. Farred criticises the reconfiguration of township funerals in Mda's novel from a site of political mobilisation to an experience for Toloki of aesthetic creativity. Farred links Toloki's 'solipsistic' artistry, both in his funereal masquerade and his skill with crayons, to his relationship with Noria. The problem, for Farred, is that this artistically charged relationship becomes a merely private affair:

In Mda's novel the community functions only as a backdrop, a canvas against which Toloki can work out his relationship with Noria (a figure from his rural past who has reemerged with an erotically tinged spiritual force in his urban present, and his deceased father, Jwara).

(Farred 2000: 189)

It is also an Oedipal affair, as Van Wyk (1997: 90) has also observed. This Oedipal rupture is shown in Jwara's constant negation of his son Toloki, and in the fact that

both father and son are only artistically productive in the inspiring presence of Noria; they are, in effect, libidinal rivals. This schism is healed long after Jwara's death, when Toloki accepts the gift of his father's grotesque metal figurines and decides to sell them to raise money for a township child care centre, or give them to the children who find them amusing and pleasurable. Farred (2000: 189-190), ignoring the community awareness Toloki thus demonstrates, argues that this too is a merely private matter. In his view, this resolution of subliminal conflict between father and son

does not take place at a national level... The post-apartheid nation lives, much like Toloki (except in his posthumous relationship with Jwara), at a remove from its own psyche and the complicated history which produced it.

(Farred 2000: 190)

Implicit in Farred's critique is a Lukácsian argument, namely that Toloki is a failed Lukácsian 'type'. In other words, the character fails to represent significant, progressive, underlying social forces. It is in this light that Farred's description of Toloki as 'upwardly mobile' (192) is revealing: his script seems to be that Toloki has isolated himself from his proletarian struggle obligation in favour of two eminently bourgeois occupations: as a merchant initially, then as a solipsistic and uncommitted artist.

A canon might be construed as a system that embraces both the original texts in their various genres, and scholarly or critical responses to these. The turning point that Farred misses registers at both levels. With regard to the novel itself, Toloki does instantiate progressive social forces. However, they are not vested in class so much as in a developmental ideology. With regard to the layer of critical reflection, Farred's response seems anachronistic, in the sense that his familiar Marxist perspective would have been representative, fifteen years before, of a broad consensus to the kinds of issues he raised in 2000. In this context, it is isolated.

While Farred reads the novel as a withdrawal from national politics, Mervis (1988: 40-43) constructs Mda's ideology as a nation-building impulse, as noted above.

Durrant (2005: 441) attributes a different but related identity to Toloki, which points to a revised ideological role for the writer as a healing figure. Durrant views Toloki as a cathartic figure expressing mourning on a behalf of a community deprived of such expression by a 'resistance struggle [that] instrumentalised literary production and politicised funerals' (441). In enabling mourning that is set free from the larger hegemonic narrative of emergent nationhood – such as typified by the ritualised mourning of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission – Toloki enacts by proxy a new ideological role for the artist/writer – not to mobilise the nation for political struggle, but to set individual suffering free of societal obligation and allow it not only expression (441), but also healing and resolution through creativity. David Attwell (2005) reads Toloki's performance as a professional mourner in similar terms. The 'space' to which he refers below is the 'wasteland of city and township in that narrow interregnum of South Africa between 1990 and 1994' (194-5), with its abundance of deaths by Third Force atrocities, township necklacings of child activists, and vigilante murders.

To the African subjects who inhabit this space, Toloki offers not words of consolation but a symbolic presence whose function it is to symbolise. What Mda places before his readers is a performance that stands for the symbolic function, the point being to restore the image of the man-of-ritual, and the maker-of-culture.

(Attwell 2005: 195)

Whatever the validity of these views, they differ in a particular respect from Farred's critique. In 'Mourning the Post-apartheid State Already? The Poetics of Loss in Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying*', Farred (2000: 183-206) attempts to expropriate a moral high ground that could only be presented as self-evidently justified in a condition of struggle. In this sense, Farred tries to recuperate a canonical consensus that has moved on in response to historic change. He differs from every other commentator reviewed for this chapter in voicing an ideologically motivated critique that, in the

death throes of apartheid, would have been unexceptional. It would be unexceptional precisely for reflecting a political dogma that demanded instrumentalism of art. It is spelt out in the criticism of Mda by Farred (2000: 195), cited above: 'in the apartheid moment such disengagement was unimaginable'.

In contrast with Farred, the response of commentators such as Mervis (1998), Durrant (2005), Irlam (2004), and Attwell (2005) suggests an acceptance of ideological change within the critical environment, a further movement away from the conventions of anti-apartheid realism. Indeed, as Irlam (2004: 714) has retorted, the very unimaginability of Toloki's disengagement is a signal of a new and more contemplative voice for South African writing.

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Chapter Six

From Interracial Desire to Interracial Rape: Displacing the Site of Transgression in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*

I haven't read it, and I'm sure the writing is excellent... but I could not think of anything that would depress me more than this book by Coetzee - *Disgrace* - where we've got to accept the rape of a white woman as a gesture to all the evil we did in the past. That's a load of bloody bullshit. That white women are going to accept being raped as penance for what was done in the past? Jesus!

(Fugard 2000, n.p.)

There is a game going on between the covers of a book, but it is not always the game you think it is. No matter what it may appear to be doing, the story is not really playing the game you call Class Conflict, or the game called Male Domination or any of the other games in the games handbook.

(Coetzee 1988 [1987]: 3-4)

White-authored novels of interracial sexual encounter, written before, during and after the formal period of apartheid (approximately 1948 – 1994) reveal in the structuring of their narratives a certain political imagination. This imagination criticises proscription of sexual freedom across the colour line, and yet subliminally endorses the code of transgression against which it protests. This ambivalent racial anxiety is partly embedded in reactions to interracial sexual contact: not only the reactions of protagonists (their anticipation, experience, and sense of consequences), but those of surrounding characters as well. More particularly, these novels depict a chorus of outrage in white society at the interracial union which performs the underlying – and ambivalent – racial discourse. Part of this racial ambivalence can also be read in the discourse of the narrator or focaliser, as well as in the responses of his or her community. A further stage of ambivalence can be read in the asymmetry of

representation between white and black characters. Narrative attention is far more extensively focused on the white protagonists than on the black, white characters are fleshed out in greater detail and with more complexity. For the writer, and therefore the reader, the black partner in racial/sexual transgression remains unknown and undisclosed as a personality. Thus, while the novel performs a critique of the taboo against racial intimacy, and of the racial politics underwriting this taboo, such asymmetrical narrative attention affirms *at a structural level of narrative* the subaltern status assigned to the black protagonist within the social hierarchy that is criticised *within the content* of the novel.

However, as the literary canon responds to societal shifts in the historic passage from apartheid to democracy, the modes of representation which produce this embedded racial anxiety change in certain respects, and yet maintain important continuities across apartheid and post-apartheid literature. I initially discuss *Turbott Wolfe* (1977 [1926]) by William Plomer³⁷, and Alan Paton's *Too Late the Phalarope* (1953), prior to demonstrating how the post-apartheid novel *Disgrace*, by J.M. Coetzee (1999a), registers both continuity and discontinuity with these two earlier novels.

There is a crucial, albeit obvious, difference between the social conditions represented in *Disgrace* on the one hand, and in *Turbott Wolfe* and *Too Late the Phalarope* on the other. In the former novel, sex across the colour line is not forbidden, and thus offers a reduced possibility of transgression as a narrative strategy. However, I will argue that the genre of interracial sexual contact within white South African writing is structured around the signifier 'transgression'. Further, I will argue that J.M. Coetzee retains this signifier as a stable point within the genre by shifting its manifest content from interracial desire to interracial rape. Given the

³⁷ While *Turbott Wolfe*, strictly speaking, predates apartheid, many of the legal and statutory systems of apartheid were already in place, as were the conditions of a racist culture underpinning white hegemony.

degree to which rape has metastasized in recent years within South African social life, and the amplified transgressive force that obtains, I will argue that the ambiguity concerning race shown in the two earlier novels under discussion is thus translocated, and thereby reproduced³⁸.

1

Turbott Wolfe and *Too Late the Phalarope* exemplify the convention of embedded racial ambivalence towards interracial sexual encounter. Both narratives imbricate their crises of interracial sexual encounter within complex strata of social reaction. The strata of reaction are not confined to the players; in both texts, despite the taboo status of interracial sex, witnesses anticipate the forbidden encounter, fear it, express a range of reactions to it, and in different ways, share the consequences. These diverse reactions not only externalise the complexities of the central character's response; they also represent the social milieu against, and despite which, the protagonists act.

For example, the eponymous narrator in *Turbott Wolfe* is principal witness to the events surrounding the central act of miscegenation. While the novel is sprinkled with minor characters who express unambiguous racist attitudes, Turbott Wolfe's reactions suggest as much distaste as enthusiasm for miscegenation. In narratively presenting the case for miscegenation, he embraces two contrary positions. One is that in a country like South Africa, racial hybridisation is inevitable; the other is that while black Africans are charming, they are in fact inferior, and their human status is self-evidently diluted by animal qualities.

Sympathy for miscegenation is shown in Wolfe's attraction to a young Zulu

³⁸ The theme of rape will be revisited in chapter eight in a different context, namely the use of rape as a literary trope in nation-building discourse.

woman, Nhliziyombi. It climaxes in his confession of love to her in a forest grove, to which she responds by tenderly holding his head for more than an hour (Plomer 1977 [1926]:39). This is where his direct participation ends. A case for miscegenation, however, is articulated in the founding of a society called Young Africa, established to promote the following principles:

1. That Africa is not the white man's country.
2. That miscegenation is the only way for Africa to be secured to the Africans.
3. That it is inevitable, right and proper.
4. That if it can be shown to be so, we shall have laid the true foundations for the future Coloured World.

(Plomer 1977 [1926]: 70)

However, a newspaper article on the founding of Young Africa (70), written by an African member, is condescendingly simplified, no doubt for the amusement of Plomer's cosmopolitan and colonial audiences. Indeed the narrator makes this explicit, observing that the article 'turned out to be rather amusing' (70).

The most spirited advocacy of such principled miscegenation is left to Friston, an enthusiastic and sometimes deranged clergyman. A conversation between Wolfe and Friston (100) presents Friston's views as garbled. As he is the chief spokesman for miscegenation in the text, his confused and satirically presented views cannot be taken at face value: I suggest that Plomer's own ambivalence towards miscegenation can be read in the satirically delineated figure of Friston.

Surfacing throughout the narrative are many other reflections of Turbott Wolfe's unreflecting racism, and therefore most probably Plomer's as well. Africans are described as 'simian' (14), compared directly with monkeys (19), and their animal charm (30) is endorsed. There are also invocations of an exoticising and yet demeaning aesthetic, typified in descriptions like 'that old wonderful unknown primitive African life – outside history, outside time, outside life' (31), or 'the

monstrous intangible darkness of the native point of view' (77). Slighting references to 'dagos' and 'Jews' are embedded in the narrative (as distinct from the dialogue) with sufficient carelessness and frequency to suggest that Plomer did not regard such discourse as offensive.

Several clear strands emerge from these layers of embedded meaning, not all in harmonious relationship with each other. Firstly, that miscegenation is acceptable and should be endorsed. Secondly, the English-speaking colonials and 'Dutchmen' (Afrikaners) collectively are a reprobate branch of Europe in Africa who – because they lack beauty and philosophy – are worthless. Thirdly, because they are worthless, they are doomed to vanish in a flood of miscegenation. Finally, although miscegenation is a regrettable, ludicrous but inevitable mistake, it is the only political solution available for colonised Africa. Plomer's advocacy of miscegenation thus becomes the novelistic equivalent of a throw-away line, a nihilistic gesture arising from disillusionment with colonial morals, aesthetics and manners, rather than a considered political view.

If Plomer intended his novel to shock, he succeeded, ironically because his advocacy of miscegenation was taken literally. Roy Campbell's defence of the novel in *Voorslag* (1977 [1926]: 128-131), and Laurence van der Post's introduction to the 1965 edition of *Turbott Wolfe*, confirm that he created a furore. However, as I have shown above, there is some evidence that he also intended to placate his readership to some degree by shocking his own narrator – not with the *idea* of miscegenation, but with the *fact* of it as realised in the union of Zachary Msomi and Mabel van der Horst. This ambivalence is laid bare in Wolfe's declaration to van der Horst, surprising for a founder member of Young Africa: 'I'm going to take the liberty of asking what you're playing at with that nigger' (98). Enmeshed as Plomer was in the value system his novel criticised, his tolerance of interracial union expressed at best a dilettante aesthetic, rather than political conviction.

The racial ambivalence I have discussed can thus be seen in three conventions

that interact: firstly, the represented voices of colonial society, a chorus which overtly expresses outrage at the forbidden act; secondly, the voice of the narrator, which speaks for miscegenation, but embeds a subliminal outrage of the same nature; and thirdly, the voice of the writer, which embeds a politics of racial superiority consistent with the views of the colonials it criticises for their racism. A fourth element is implicit in this threefold topos, namely anxiety that black/white intimacy will erode white power.

In *Turbott Wolfe*, this vision of miscegenation as 'the true foundations for the future Coloured World' (70) is presented with as much satirical relish as distaste. In Alan Paton's *Too Late the Phalarope* (1953), published at the height of grand apartheid, the core transgression is subject to hegemonic force, and sanctioned with absolute disgrace. Indeed, this disgrace is underwritten by the Immorality Act³⁹, described in the novel as 'the greatest and *holiest*' (Paton 1953: 118, my italics) of all the apartheid laws designed to entrench white power. While the threefold topos of embedded ambivalence towards black/white sexual encounter is also evident in Paton's novel, the political fear it invokes is sharpened, though this is never made explicit. As I will show below, the discourse of the novel inscribes white power into a theocratic/legalistic language forbidding racial dilution, presented in the register of the sublime. The guaranteed outcome of such transgression would be to 'destroy a man and his house and his kindred' (230), the subtext⁴⁰ of which is that white power stands to be dismantled. With regard to this complex (ambivalence towards miscegenation/anxiety about the future of white power) I argue below that J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999a) also reproduces these conventions to a significant degree.

In *Too Late the Phalarope*, the principal witness to Pieter van Vlaanderen's temptation and fall is the narrator, his spinster aunt Sophie. Part of her knowledge of

³⁹ Forbidding sexual relations between races, amongst other kinds of sexual activity.

⁴⁰ As distinct from the literal meaning, which is that the direct legal and social consequences of such cross-racial transgression will destroy the perpetrator.

Van Vlaanderen's crisis is retrospective, feeding information that will be gained only in the future back into the narrative as hindsight. Part of her knowledge is a mixture of intuition and suspicion, a loving dread that reads something terribly amiss in van Vlaanderen's life without knowing what it is. Her reactions are embedded in a fourfold cultural formation, of which the elements combine into a dense and comprehensive definition of taboo. Its components are the legal-political system of apartheid, particularly where it is expressed as the Immorality Act that forbade sexual relations across the colour bar; a bedrock racism that is presented as an essence of Afrikaner rural life, coming to particular expression in the theme of repulsion and outrage at interracial sexual transgression; a Puritan theology which renders moral value absolute and immutable; and a seamless and comprehensive patriarchy, in which the word of senior white males is as binding as God's own. Paton's psalmodic rhythms animate this matrix with a particularly vivid, albeit suffocating, energy.

What Sophie witnesses is the slide of her beloved nephew into moral darkness; what she protests against even more poignantly is her failure to prevent it. What Paton ostensibly witnesses and protests is the racial injustice and moral hypocrisy exposed by his narrative. However, as with *Turbott Wolfe* and William Plomer, it is difficult to separate Paton's witness and protestation from Sophie's. The theological underpinning of sexual and racial taboo, conflated as it is with the Immorality Act, is delivered to the reader in an insistent, grandiloquent style, amounting to a fugue of tragic declamation. Ironically, Paton's style itself signifies a not inconsiderable measure of awe at the social formation that the author paradoxically condemns.

In fairness to Paton, the eventual destruction of Van Vlaanderen's self-worth, career and community standing is shown to be a tragic waste, and the character is finally shown to be the flawed victim of an iniquitous system. Moreover, the thoroughness with which the linked cultures of apartheid and Afrikaner patrimony are presented speaks to the development of Van Vlaanderen's character, motivation, and

fatal flaw. In other words, *Too Late the Phalarope* is a consistently projected realist novel in tragic mode, one that takes pains to explain its terms and depict its protagonist as authentically as possible. However, I believe that in linking the register of the sublime to the principle of transgression, Paton allows the convention of ambivalence – and perhaps unconscious or uninspected values of social conservatism – to speak through him.

There are many invocations to the sublimity of Afrikaner patrimony, and the legal structures underwriting it. Van Vlaanderen 'was like a god' to the black community (Paton 1953: 24). 'The white man's law' is not merely puissant, it is ringed about with 'certitude and majesty' (42). Of these laws, the Immorality Act is 'the greatest and holiest of all the laws' (118). Where the law is transgressed, it is not merely a matter of breaking the law; it reflects the universal war against sin, which is tantamount to a war of light against darkness (70-71). Pieter van Vlaanderen expresses a revulsion at dirt (119) which is soon expressed as a horror of physical contact with black humanity (120). After a sexual encounter with the black woman Stephanie, he rises from the ground 'stinking' of khakibos, 'which stinking was a symbol of his corruption' (148). In sum, Pieter van Vlaanderen's fall is a Luciferic one, out of the grace of divine light and presence, into a condition of the deepest and most repulsive corruption.

The hermeneutic difficulty this presents is encapsulated in the following ringing endorsement of theological-legal authority:

For once a charge is made, a charge is made; and once a thing is written down, it will not be unwritten. And a word can be written down that will destroy a man and his house and his kindred, and there is no power of God or Man or State, nor any Angel, nor anything present or to come, nor any height, nor any depth, nor any other creature that can save them, when once the word is written down.

(Paton, 1953: 230)

The passage conflates judicial with Biblical authority, which really endorses the authority of the Immorality Act the novel purports to critique. The narrative, moreover, allows nothing redemptive about Pieter's sex with Stephanie, nothing innocent: there is only lust for the forbidden. It is utterly one-dimensional. This is the weakness in Paton's argument, that neither the narrator nor any of the characters assert some kind of innocence for interracial sex. Stephanie is manipulative, ultimately treacherous; Sophie is loving but judgemental; Pieter hates himself and is disgusted by his act; and it all takes place in a moral and physical darkness that inevitably indicts the darkness of black skin. If it were not for the final tragedy of Van Vlaanderen – and the wider context of Paton's work, in fiction, non-fiction and politics – it would be difficult to see, as one progresses through the novel, where Paton separates Sophie's discourse from his own.

One might argue that Paton interpolates himself between an essentialised Afrikaner, presenting this figure in all its stark tragedy to the cosmopolitan English-speaking world, and doing so with such empathy that his own perspective is held in abeyance. However, if he shares the narrative burden with Sophie, what he principally causes her to do is voice a warning chorus of disastrous complicity. It comes to light in her thickly laid-down refrain, that she should have 'hammered on the door, and cried out not ceasing' (233, for example). This dramatises Paton's own liberal commitment to witness; however, the manner of Sophie's protestations still supports the legalism of apartheid, and the legitimacy lent to it by its theological infrastructure.

I would be far from the first to suggest collusion between liberal (textual) politics and apartheid. In his 1976 paper, 'The Colonizer: a critique of the English South African culture theory', Mike Kirkwood criticised liberal, English-speaking opposition to apartheid in the following terms:

Our political opposition to the evolution of apartheid since 1948, whether voiced by the United Party or by the Progressive Party, is limited to a

discussion of the tactics through which domination is to be perpetuated. The racial oligarchy which is the political expression of our culture is not the creation of the Afrikaner alone.

(Kirkwood, 1976: 108)

While this might not be apposite to the Liberal Party of which Paton was a co-founder, it seems to fit well his narrative strategy in *Too Late the Phalarope*.

In both Plomer and Paton's novels, a further (and more structural) layer of narrative is embedded in what the writer does not say about the other central character, the dark co-transgressor of the racial sexual code. These omissions (of characterisation, of dialogue, of complexity of motive and reaction) demonstrate what is invisible to the white writer: the dark partner has either no interior space, or little to speak of. Such absence of personality confers on the dark partner a subaltern role, in a structural narrative sense distinct from the role allocated this figure in the social hierarchy reflected as content. In other words, the black sexual partner/Other is relegated an even deeper subaltern status in terms of the limited scale on which he or she is represented.

The narrative layers I have described combine in their effect. Firstly, the social chorus of outrage fleshes out what the writer knows of his or her represented society. Secondly, the writer stands to some degree outside that society and its sexual mores, yet is unable to separate his own moral stance from what he criticises. It is therefore not surprising that the embedded and complex white social response is drawn with such animation and density. On the other hand, this asymmetry of representation shows exactly what the writer does not know, namely who it is that the white protagonist encounters sexually. This asymmetry not only places the dark co-transgressor in subaltern orbit around the white transgressor within the social hierarchy depicted in the content of the novel; it also inscribes this hegemonic-subaltern binary into the structure of the narrative. In short, despite the

critique of racial taboo that constitutes the subject matter of the text, it is nevertheless a white voice that speaks a white world into which the black figure intrudes.

2

The literary convention I have posited still largely obtains in the case of a very significant post-apartheid novel of interracial sexual encounter, namely *Disgrace* by J.M. Coetzee (1999a). However, there are key differences, which will be the focus of this chapter, as it is in these differences that changing modes of representation can be read. In the two earlier novels under discussion, sexual encounter is desired but forbidden. In *Disgrace*, however, the relationship between transgression and sanction is more complex. A key difference lies in an obvious social change, as I have noted above: sex across the colour line is no longer forbidden, or sanctioned. What remains forbidden and sanctionable is rape and lesser forms of sexual molestation. In this novel, sexual contact between the white academic David Lurie and the black student Melanie mostly reiterates the convention: contact is desired (at least by the white male) but forbidden, and there are formalised consequences of sanction. However, these consequences accrue from transgressing the code of sexual abuse, not of race.

The transgression of abuse here is doubled. Lurie is known by the authorities to have had a liaison with a student, and to have falsified a test mark in her favour, and it is for this abuse of power that he is sanctioned. However, he rapes Melanie as well and gets away with it. In his own mind, it is 'not quite' rape (Coetzee 1999a: 25) because after her initial refusal, she ceases to resist, except passively. Despite his rationalisation, Lurie is well aware that the encounter is 'undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core' (25).

A related narrative displacement occurs in *Disgrace*, one with canonical

implications. In chapter one I cited Michael Green's (1997: 7) question: 'How can a body of texts generated within, and in terms of dissemination and reception still held within, the episteme of *anti-apartheid* [...] be meaningfully related to one beyond apartheid?' In writing a post-apartheid novel of sexual encounter across the colour line, Coetzee cannot resort to the code of transgression implicit in the sexual colour bar; there is none in post-apartheid society. Yet transgression lies at the core of South African novels within this genre; this particular transgression has long been the laboratory in which the wrongness of apartheid has been proven. It therefore makes a great deal of sense for Coetzee to transform desire as the mechanism of transgression into rape. Further, because the particular rapes of *Disgrace* fall across the colour line, a transgression of violence is racialised. The trope, thus transformed and transformed back, strikes a dual resonance. Firstly, and most obviously, rape in South Africa is out of control. Secondly, rape of white women by black men has long been a spectre haunting the colonial imagination, fuelling "black peril" ("swart gevaar") hysteria (Graham 2003: 435). This use of rape as the mechanism of transgression was therefore an ingenious narrative strategy, only partly because it could rely on generating public outrage⁴¹, as did *Turbott Wolfe* in 1924. More arcanelly, also because it succeeds in relating the episteme of anti-apartheid to post-apartheid conditions.

To stop at this point would be to impute to Coetzee a crassly provocative agenda. However, the outrage of rape as a narrative strategy must be read against David Lurie's profoundly compromised state of being, evident in the fact that his rape of Melanie aligns him with those who rape his own daughter, and his habitually exploitative relationships with women. In this sense, *Disgrace* cannot be reduced to an allegory of the precarious condition of whites in post-apartheid South Africa, nor as a racist utterance. The game that Coetzee plays with the convention is far more

⁴¹ Athol Fugard's reaction (2000, n.p., cited as the epigraph of this chapter), and the protest made by the African National Congress to the Human Rights Commission Hearings on Racism in the Media (2000, n.p.) are examples.

complex than either proposal will allow.

Not content with inverting and reinverting the trope under discussion, Coetzee has added to it a further significant variant. After Lurie's daughter Lucy has been gang-raped by three black men, she performs a chain of actions that Lurie finds inexplicable. After the rape, she refuses to leave the farm. When one of the rapists returns to the household of her former employer and now immediate neighbour Petrus, she again refuses to leave the farm. When she discovers that she is pregnant, she refuses to have an abortion. Finally, when Petrus offers to marry her in a blatant attempt to gain control of her remaining half of the farm, she consents, albeit conditionally. The second half of the narrative relates Lurie's failed attempts to understand and come to terms with Lucy's choices. His narration is in fact a sustained interrogation of a different opaque Other, in this case a white woman. And although Lucy is his own daughter, again he is unable to discover an interior in this paradoxically distant Other. The fact that she is lesbian only serves to increase this distance, and to increase his perplexity at her choices subsequent to the rape.

Lurie thus animates a second hegemonic figure in which maleness is the principle property, its opposing pole being femaleness rather than blackness. This maleness is defined by its intellectuality and creativity, and by its assertion of 'the rights of desire' (89), i.e. the right to act on desire without restraint. Indeed, Lurie typically combines intellectuality and the defence of unfettered sexual appetite in quoting Blake: 'Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires' (69). Lurie's archetypal maleness registers further as the ownership of voice itself, signified in his command of languages ancient and modern, his creation of opera, and his relentless interrogation of his world. Opposed to this is Lucy's refusal/inability to explain herself, and to defend her material position and well being, both of which denials emerge as exemplars of female unreason. His position becomes doubly difficult, for the interaction of his two Others undermine his maleness. Lucy's silence,

he fears, will grant victory to her rapists. Because of her refusal to speak out, they will know that 'over the body of the woman silence is being drawn like a blanket' (110); through her shame and consequent silence, they will come to own her story (115). In short, her female silence/unreason conspires with the power of the black rapists to castrate him as a man, and silence him as a voice.

Not untypically, Coetzee subverts this triadic figure (white/male Lurie *versus* blackness *versus* femaleness) even as he constructs it, by merging the oppositions it contains. Lurie's refusal to defend his position at his university disciplinary hearing – more particularly, to articulate a defence – echoes Lucy's refusal to explain her position or defend it other than by passive means. Further, his rape of Melanie might differ from the gang rape of Lucy in nuanced and obvious ways, but it remains an act of rape. Coetzee thus identifies his narrator with the three black rapists who, ironically, so torment David Lurie's understanding.

In obvious terms, *Disgrace* appears to reiterate the convention of interracial sexual encounter, in that the narrative burden of explanation still falls to the hegemonic white figure, David Lurie, who is described by Barnard (2003: 203) as 'the central consciousness of *Disgrace*'. Asymmetry of scale is thus again present, in that a white sensibility is at the centre of the narrative, interrogating an opaque dark Other and finding no interior. The fact that Lurie is such a compromised hegemonic figure is in no way exceptional to the convention – Paton's Van Vlaanderen and Plomer's Turbott Wolfe are similarly compromised focalisers, Van Vlaanderen by his guilt and dread, Turbott Wolfe by his vanity and inconsistency. Indeed, in all three novels the author is anxious to demonstrate weakness within the white centre of consciousness. However, even in rehearsing the convention in this way, Coetzee problematises it, generating further intertwined differences and similarities. I have noted Lucy's configuration as the white female Other, for want of a better term. What constitutes her otherness is her silence, her refusal to explain her choices after the rape.

However, these choices – to stay on the farm, to accept Petrus’s bargain, to marry him under such conditions of duress – are so immensely provocative to white middle class order that they dominate the foreground, demanding explanation. Her obdurate refusal to explain likewise dominates the foreground. In this particular sense, the white female Other demands and receives her fair share of narrative attention, even though she has so little to say. Her opacity to the narrator is thus presented as a central device, a prominent part of the textual dynamic. Conversely, the black antagonists are less opaque. Lurie can infer their motives, though his attempts to interrogate Petrus (in the literal sense) are always defeated. In this sense, the black Other remains little known, though his actions are easily interpreted. For the black figures then, asymmetry of representation is consistent with the convention of interracial sexual encounter.

3

Despite Coetzee’s problematisation of the convention as I have shown, and although reading Coetzee is inevitably a layered activity, it is not clear that he diverges entirely from the racial ambivalence inscribed in *Turbott Wolfe* and *Too Late the Phalarope*. I have noted that the black Other in *Disgrace* is not entirely opaque. A limited content is given to Petrus, introduced to the novel as Lucy’s gardener and ‘dog-man’ (64), i.e. Lucy’s assistant in the kennels she keeps on the farm. He acquires an increasingly prominent role in the novel, as he acquires half her farm, and eventually is to become her nominal husband, protector and landlord. He is described as cunning, unprincipled, and capable of strategy: ‘A man of patience, energy, resilience... A plotter and a schemer and no doubt a liar too...’ (117). After the rape, Lurie suspects him of setting it up to drive Lucy off the farm (116-7). The fact that the rapists are known to Petrus, and that one of them is a member of his family, support this suspicion. The same can

be said for Petrus's eventual offer to marry Lucy, and the offer of protection that goes with it ('Then it will be over, all this badness') (202) in return for the remainder of the farm. Lucy retrospectively supports the view of rape as an economic instrument:

I contribute the land, in return for which I am allowed to creep in under his wing. Otherwise, he wants to remind me, I am without protection, *I am fair game*.

(Coetzee 1999a: 2003, my emphasis)

Petrus is thus characterised as a Machiavellian peasant, intent on acquiring land through ownership of its female owner. He is also portrayed as willing to acquire ownership of the female land owner through a proxy act of extreme sexual violence.

The three black rapists present an equally limited content of their own.

Reflecting on her experience, Lucy believes that they are serial rapists, for whom theft is incidental to what they principally do: 'I think they *do* rape' (158, original italics).

She remarks too that they acted with hatred:

'It was so personal. It was done with such personal hatred. That was what stunned me more than anything. The rest was... expected. But why did they hate me so? I had never set eyes on them.'

(Coetzee 1999: 156).

The youngest of the three, Pollux, is further portrayed as aggressive, dangerous and retarded (132, 206), as well as being sexually incontinent, a rapist and peeping Tom. He is given a repulsive appearance, with 'a flat expressionless face and piggish eyes' (92). The black characters of *Disgrace* are thus uniformly antagonistic: they are calculating, unprincipled, filled with hatred, acquisitive, literally rapacious, ugly, retarded, or a combination of these. Indeed, the African National Congress (ANC) protested this depiction to the Human Rights Commission Hearings on Racism in the Media (2000):

J.M. Coetzee makes the point that, five years after our liberation, white South African society continues to believe in a particular stereotype of the African, which defines the latter as: immoral and amoral; savage; violent; disrespectful of private property; incapable of refinement through education; and, driven by hereditary dark, satanic impulses.

(African National Congress, 5 April 2000, n.p.)

This was widely read at the time as a critique of Coetzee's own views, and a number of commentators leapt to his defence. However, the wording of the full ANC statement does suggest that Coetzee was representing a culturally ingrained mindset rather than expressing his own. By the time Coetzee won the Nobel Prize in 2003, however, the ANC had forgotten the delicacy of this wording; its spokesperson, Smuts Ngonyama, refused to apologise for the attack on *Disgrace* (in iafrica.com, 3 October 2003, n.p.), making the point that Coetzee's talent was recognised, while his political views were nonetheless objectionable.

Whatever the ANC's stance on this point might really be, it is clear that J.M. Coetzee is not David Lurie, and that Lurie does not represent all white men⁴². Nor does this simplistic reading do justice to the reflexive complexity of the text. I argue below, however, that racial ambivalence is in fact expressed in *Disgrace*, despite its formidable metafictional and reflexive properties. As I will show, this ambivalence might be subverted by textuality and hermeneutic positioning, but not erased.

4

In *Turbott Wolfe* and *Too Late the Phalarope*, racial ambivalence is partly written into the chorus of social outrage that surrounds the forbidden encounter. In *Disgrace*, it is

⁴² As Lucy Graham (2003: 435) observes, 'The ANC's argument is built on the idea that Coetzee's novel reflects society, that the views of the white characters in *Disgrace* may be equated with those of white South Africans in general. Yet the corollary of this reading would mean that the black rapists in *Disgrace* are representative of most black people in South Africa, which is exactly what the ANC would like to refute.'

complicated by the fact that rape has replaced voluntary relationship. *Too Late the Phalarope* and *Turbott Wolfe* present the chorus (in different ways) as exceptional to the moral centre of either text, as unacceptable; outrage at rape can never be unacceptable. However, in *Disgrace* the racial taboo is suppressed through most of the narrative, emerging only towards the end. It is absent from the surface narrative in Lurie's encounters with black women, nor is any racially focused outrage (overtly) uttered in connection with the rape of Lucy.

It is significant that David Lurie characterises rape in the following terms: 'Rape, god of *mixture*, violator of *exclusions*' (Coetzee 1994:104, my italics). What exactly is *mixed* by rape, and what *exclusion* is breached? In the context of Lurie's rape of Melanie, and in the gang-rape of Lucy, the coupling of 'mixture' and 'exclusions' links the transgression of rape to the discourse of race⁴³. This is elaborated in the aftermath. When Lucy declares that '[w]hat happened to me is a purely private matter' (112), precisely because it occurs in South Africa, her father's outrage at the rape transforms, taking on a political and racial content: the transgression now is not only that she has been raped by black men. It is also her refusal to cry out against it⁴⁴. Her silence, and the political/economic choice it contains – that she must necessarily be silent in order to survive in this place – anticipates the central political dynamic of *Disgrace* that is embedded in Petrus's offer of marriage, together with its cold-blooded negotiation (i.e. protection in exchange for property). In short, Petrus's strategic use of Lucy as a bargaining chip crosses the moral border between the commodification of women and their human rights: the reader is confronted with the fact that the transgressor of this border is a black man, and his victim is a white woman.

⁴³ Meg Samuelson argues to the contrary: in her view, *Disgrace* does not project a racialised discourse of sexual violence by virtue of its reflection on this discourse. It thereby interrogates perspectives on real rape, thus 'dis-figuring rape' (2007b: 141).

⁴⁴ This raises an interesting analogy with Sophie's despair in *Too Late the Phalarope* that she has not 'hammered on the door, and cried out not ceasing' (Paton 1953: 233).

Stéphanie Robolin (2006: 307-8), in a paper on intertextual links between Zöe Wicomb and Toni Morrison, observes that in racially stratified societies, because women are gatekeepers (through reproduction) to caste membership, reproductive purity in racial terms is carefully guarded. It follows that the transgression of black man/white woman miscegenation in such societies is accordingly more severe than the reverse case of white man/black woman. What is not as obvious, partly because it is more muted in effect, is Lurie's parallel commodification of women in Soraya, his abuse of Melanie and use of Beverly. However, this qualification is offset (and exceeded) by the fact that Petrus's offer crosses a further and more compound border, violating distinctions between gender, race, ownership, and ultimately power. The rape of Lucy thus becomes a profoundly political matter in terms of racial stratification: not only because it is the rape of a white woman by a black man, but also because it involves issues of land ownership as well as social hierarchy in a postcolonial context. The outcome of this overdetermined political transaction is that white ownership and power are overthrown by a ruthless form of black control.

This fractured set of borders nests within it a harder economic and political border. It is expressed literally in the contest for ownership of a piece of 'old Kaffraria' (Coetzee 1999: 122), the historic Eastern Cape border centred on Salem and Grahamstown. This has been characterised by Grant Farred (2002: 17) as 'the most enduring site of antagonism between black and white'; a site 'where race, racism and race relations are most deeply embedded, most resistant to being reconstructed' (17). In this contest, and this site of contest, rape as a metaphor for encounter with the Other transforms into an allegory of struggle for the economic kingdom, to echo Kwame Nkrumah's phrase. Yet rape as a figure of alterity, and as an image of economic struggle, are interlinked. If the black citizens of the "Rainbow Nation" are brutal, cunning, and inclined to rape, what space does this allow for its white citizens?

It is clear that David Lurie is marginalised, partly by his self-imposed state of

disgrace, partly by Lucy's refusal to invoke the sanction of law, but also because he is out of his depth in a state where law itself and the concept of property rights are decayed to the point of impotence, and where unprincipled might and cunning hold sway. In painting a world that falls by violence and manipulation under black control – a world of which ownership and control are successfully wrestled out of white hands – Coetzee takes the ambivalence of discourse evident in Plomer and Paton to its logical conclusion. What begins as subliminal anxiety at taint and contamination ends in overt fear at the prospect of absolute loss of political and economic control. Where Plomer both presents and lampoons miscegenation as the political solution for Africa, Coetzee presents it – in the mode of tragedy – as a mechanism that signifies the ending of the colonial project. In short, *Disgrace* presents a history in which dominance is exchanged for subservience, and ownership for a precarious tenancy.

Reading the political and economic space allowed to Lucy, however, is more problematic, not least because this is where race and gender borderlines merge, becoming fractured and contused at the juncture. What price does Lucy pay for the right to stay on what used to be her property? The case has been made that her condition is an attempt to redefine a novel history, to borrow Michael Green's phrase, free of the binary condition 'dominance/ subservience'. In my view, this is not a convincing argument.

Marais (2001: 32), for example, rejects the view of *Disgrace* as a 'a novel that records liberal fear at the marginalisation of whites in the post-apartheid period', or as a text 'exemplifying whites' acceptance of their peripherality in the "new" South Africa'. He argues that readings of this kind are actually anticipated by Coetzee and staged as a *mise-en-abyme* by Lurie's persistent misreading of Lucy's choices (33). The problem for Marais's argument, which he acknowledges (33), is that Lucy, equally persistently, refuses to provide any corrective to Lurie's misreading. Marais's solution

is to articulate Lucy's position⁴⁵ as an attempt to stand outside the struggle of dominance/subservience that generates history. It is obvious, however, that history will have none of it, as shown in the differences between Petrus and Lucy in their respective definitions of their relationship. Lucy consistently refuses to define her relationship with Petrus in terms that suggest dominance or subservience; he, on the other hand, introduces himself as a humble subordinate (35), and then is shown to work through the novel to invert that status. Lucy Lurie's passivity, for Marais,

is precisely an action that resists the terms of this history and thereby refuse to supplement it. Through her passivity, she refuses to perpetuate the cycle of domination and counter-domination out of which colonial history erects itself.

(Marais 2001: 37)

However, Marais's argument fails at this point: while he asserts that 'history fails to negate' (38) what he says Lucy attempts to do, he fails to demonstrate that this is indeed the case. In sum, I do not see that Lucy does *not* end in a subjugated position. Marais concludes that it is sufficient achievement for Coetzee to *imply* the possibility of refusing the stale binaries of history, particularly South African history; and that to read *Disgrace* as a fable of inverted dominance/subjugation is 'a failure of historic imagination' (38). However, revisiting the topic two years later, Marais (2003: 275) concedes that 'history's conditioning force is exposed when Lucy is reduced, despite her intentions, to a term in a power relationship, an act which foregrounds the fragility and tenuousness of the desire for transcendence.'

Others have read more direct history lessons in the novel. Farred (2002: 19), for example, sees Lucy's condition as a capitulation to antagonistic (and historic) frontier forces. Other critics (Horrell 2002: 30 and Bethlehem 2002: 23) have criticised the guilt-price extracted from a gendered body, whereby Lucy's violation is proffered as

⁴⁵ Marais draws on Hegelian terms that are beyond the scope of this chapter. However, see Marais (2001: 34) for discussion of these terms.

historic propitiation for the collective guilt of apartheid. For these latter critics, gender oppression cannot legitimately be presented as restitution for racial oppression. How then does one read the series of choices made by Lucy that leave her so stripped of power and material status? Does the figure of Lucy show a principled refusal to participate in an historic racialised discourse, or does she represent an abject capitulation to historic border forces?

The same question is exercised in the form of *Disgrace*. Coetzee has in effect staged an abysmal transaction in the public space of a novel in which rape and extortion are presented as a form of retribution for the collective racial crimes of apartheid, exacted on a single female body. In representing this provocative content, *Disgrace* appears to take on the form of a classic realist novel, with its accurate description, its unsqueamish gaze on the sordid details of a life, the masterful orchestration of detail around the central climactic points, the siting of its persons in a particular historic milieu, and its powerful address to the crucial public questions of that history. The novel presents, to appropriate Coetzee's own description of engaged realist fiction, a 'vicarious first-hand experience of living in a certain historical time, embodying contending forces in contending characters and filling our experience with a certain density of observation' (Coetzee 1988 [1987]: 3). It is singularly easy to site this outrageous narrative of rape and race within the aspect of realist form.

However, as David Attwell (1990:585) warns, the 'politics of the referent' is always matched in Coetzee's writing by the 'politics of signification'. To define *Disgrace* as only a realist novel is insufficient; it conducts in fact a postmodern, metafictional exploration of signification as intensely as it examines a certain political history. More particularly, it approaches South African history through a mesh of intertextual enquiry, and through a careful positioning of itself in the history not only of the South African pastoral, but in the context of Coetzee's earlier counter-pastoral works, such as *In the Heart of the Country* (1982), and the *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983).

I propose that the mastery of ethical ambivalence Coetzee demonstrates is also vested in form. While it is probable that a majority of critics regard the realist aspect of the novel as deceptive, I believe that both realist and postmodern readings are legitimate, neither one entirely subsuming or erasing the other. It is typically argued that *Disgrace* is not realist because a certain postmodern factor is present that *negates* its realism. A common alternative is that *Disgrace* is realist, but that this realism is *subverted* by a certain postmodern factor. If anything confirms the stability of the realist construct, however, it is the bewildering range of realism-displacing/negating/subverting postmodern factors that has been proffered⁴⁶. Gareth Cornwall (2002: 314) is not exceptional in his view that a 'symbolic or allegorical tendency' subverts the realist pretensions of the novel, observing

that although events portrayed in *Disgrace* may appear to be realistic, the verisimilitude of their representation—*l'effet de réel* that they contrive—is not the purpose of their portrayal, or not the whole purpose for the portrayal of all of them. Moreover, at certain critical junctures an underlying symbolic or allegorical tendency in the novel emerges to subvert, or at least to stretch the credibility of the book's mimetic pretensions.

(Cornwall 2002: 313-4)

The 'verisimilitude of [...] representation' that Cornwall (2002: 313-4) identifies might not be 'the whole purpose' behind the portrayal of events in the novel, but 'an effect of the real' is present as a field of signification, and is no doubt meant to be experienced as an important (and most immediately troubling) part of the reading experience. One might characterise this as the first impact of reading; it will also be the *only* field of signification visible to a great many readers (the hypothetical general reader). The massive intertextuality and subtle metafictional properties of *Disgrace*, the *mise-en-abyme* of the outraged reader staged by Lurie's persistent misreading of Lucy's choices (as Marais 2001: 33 suggests), do not *erase* the realist effects, nor the

⁴⁶ For example Marais (2001: 32ff), Wicomb (2002: 216), Barnard (2003: 207), Kauer (2003: 108), Gaylard (2005c: 316-335), Attridge (2005: 173-4) and Samuelson (2007b: 141).

overt political arguments about relationships of power staged within this first stratum, this first encounter, of reading. In short, there is an ethical disjuncture between the two modes of statement. One cannot speak race with such conviction and power, and simultaneously unspeak it by hermeneutic inscription: it remains audible. In this particular formal sense, *Disgrace* is a novel that speaks with a forked tongue (for want of a better expression), that utters divergent contents at different levels of form.

Given this formal duplicity, a unitary reading of the full text is problematic. If one were to say that the emperor has no clothes, but his nakedness is a commentary on the discourse of royal couture, the figure leading the procession remains nonetheless a naked emperor. A novel is a form of mass communication, particularly one written by a world literary figure. As such, the novel inserts itself into an historicised discourse of race. Such a discourse, particularly in the context of South African history and race relations, inevitably falls in the local and global public domain. It would be risible to suggest that Coetzee, writing the overt content of *Disgrace*, could be oblivious either to this possibility, or to mass participation in the generation and reception of discourse of any kind, and race discourse in particular. I will therefore assume that in writing a text that is skillfully disguised as a politically-focused, post-apartheid realist novel in which the race-defined protocols of apartheid are symmetrically reversed on racial lines, and in which patriarchy emerges in an even more overt and ruthless form, Coetzee intended to be misunderstood by a great many people.

The content of this skillfully crafted misunderstanding is its prognosis of failure for the new polity as a society released from the imprisoning binaries of race. It is a content that can only be securely read in the realist platform of the novel. As I have pointed out above, it cannot be argued that the hidden metafictional positionings erase this ambivalence, and its associated negative prognosis, in any manner. Both remain accessible, and both have been widely read in the terms made manifest in the

realist theatre that *Disgrace* does in fact stage. If politics is a matrix of perceptions as much as it is a matrix of power relations, the novel has reproduced a traditional political, racialised anxiety within the South African literary canon, one that can be inferred in the following image.

Coetzee allows Lucy a post-rape moment in which she reflects a measure of serenity, of apparent well-being:

Lucy with her back to [her father], has not yet noticed him. She is wearing a pale summer dress, boots, and a wide straw hat. As she bends over, clipping or pruning or tying, he can see the milky, blue-veined skin and broad, vulnerable tendons of the backs of her knees: the least beautiful part of a woman's body, the least expressive, and therefore perhaps the most endearing.

Lucy straightens up, stretches, bends down again. Field-labour; peasant tasks, immemorial.

(Coetzee 1999: 217)

This follows the disclosure that Lucy will have to survive '[w]ith nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity' (205). In sum, she will endure in the postcolonial landscape without status, power, dignity or property. She is thus painted as a timeless peasant woman, a startling image in that she is educated, middle-class and white, and so her inhabiting of this archetype becomes a somewhat apocalyptic oxymoron expressing the collapse of white power. While this does provide a resolution of sorts, it remains in my view as nihilistic a closure at the borderline of gender as the novel provides at the borderline of race: with Lucy left as a powerless stranger in a strange land, stripped of her farm and the agency to work it, virtually barefoot and literally pregnant. In this image, despite the sophistication and hermeneutic complexity of *Disgrace*, it rehearses the literary conditions governing interracial sexual encounter established in *Turbott Wolfe* and *Too Late the Phalarope*. It still speaks of union born out of violation and injustice, indicting the schism between races.

Chapter Seven

From Fractious Politics to Hybrid Form: Zöe Wicomb's *David's Story* and Achmat Dangor's *Bitter Fruit*.

[Coloureds] are a negative group. The definition of a coloured in the population register is someone that is not black, and is not white and is also not an Indian, on other words a no-person. They are the leftovers. They are the people that were left after the nations were sorted out. They are the rest.

(Marike de Klerk⁴⁷, quoted in Adhikari 2006a: 480-481)

Zöe Wicomb's *David's Story* (2000) and Achmat Dangor's *Bitter Fruit* (2001) both question issues of coloured⁴⁸ identity, siting these explorations in the turmoil of South Africa's transition to democracy. Both novels embed their political argument in hybrid narrative forms. *David's Story* responds to the crisis of identity, transition and marginalisation that it narrates by producing a hybrid postmodern/realist narrative. The novel generates this hybridity by oscillating between moments and dimensions of postmodern and realist representation, creating a structural ambiguity that resonates with the knot of unresolved tensions (of identity and marginalisation, of historic and present time, of gender) that is its content. *Bitter Fruit* deploys a different hybridising strategy, nesting a compound allegory within an otherwise realist narrative. Two political dialogues converge within this allegory, one related to the state of the rainbow nation trope that is so strongly associated with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), the other related to hybrid identity. In effect, both novels take issue with the transitional moment from apartheid to democracy, interrogating so deeply the ethical texture of the changing societies they represent that it reflects in

⁴⁷ Former wife of the last apartheid president, F.W. de Klerk.

⁴⁸ I have dispensed with the customary 'scare quotes' around 'coloured', in accordance with the contemporary practice of coloured writers and commentators such as Zöe Wicomb, Achmat Dangor, and Mahomed Adhikari.

their formal construction.

Wicomb articulates the relationship between narrative construction and constructs of identity in *David's Story* by embedding the self-alienations of shame within her narrative. At a structural level, these are principally the diverse intertexts the novel effects with the colonial literature of miscegenation⁴⁹, and her probing the very possibility of representation within such a fraught political context. In his essay 'He Stuttered', Gilles Deleuze (1997:107-9) distinguishes between the literal representation of a stutter within the speech of a character, and inscribing a more fundamental stutter into the creative language of the text itself, giving it resonance by virtue of linguistic strategies of estrangement. As I argue below, it is in the latter sense that *David's Story* refuses to speak authentically, stuttering into silence at the moment of its production, rejecting (albeit inconsistently) the devices of realism. The alienations of shame – and the associated shifts in mode of representation – also reflect as the self-aversive practices of characters, the consistent deferral of desire, and the mutilated and chimaeric body of the black freedom fighter, Dulcie.

Wicomb's exploration of the link between narrative construction and construct of identity is further elaborated through the theme of marginalisation. This too converges in the figure of Dulcie. Wicomb herself has commented on this link, and on the difficulty of representing Dulcie, stating (in an interview with Meyer and Olver 2002: 190-1) that she is 'the necessary silence in the text; she can't be fleshed out precisely because of her shameful treatment which those committed to the Movement would rather not talk about'. In other words, Wicomb avoids representing Dulcie at a realist level in order, partly, to enact the suppression, the silencing, within the apartheid struggle of people like her, i.e. 'powerful coloured women' (190).

⁴⁹ I initially surrounded 'miscegenation' with quotation marks in view of the racialised history of the term. However, the root of the word, as Blair (2003: 583) points out, is 'miscere', to mix, and 'genus', race; the negative connotations of the prefix 'mis-' do not obtain, at least etymologically.

Despite these postmodern devices, and despite Wicomb's explicit disavowal of realist representation⁵⁰, I argue below that the unrepresentivity claimed for Dulcie is in fact moderated by the presence of realist sequences that are also evident in the novel. Even in its non-realist sequences, the novel creates representational spaces and intensely realised metaphors of embodiment. These collectively result in a hybrid form that exercises a tension between postmodern and realist moments. However, none of the critical sources sampled in this chapter, including interviews with Wicomb, acknowledge the substantial realist aspects of the text. There is thus a second 'necessary silence' surrounding the text. I conclude that the unacknowledged realist phases of the novel reflect on its position in the textual history of anti-apartheid writing. In other words, a script of engaged realism remains visible, as in a palimpsest, within the postmodern form.

Bitter Fruit produces a different kind of formal hybridity, namely a fusion of realist form and allegory, in response to a different narrative politics. The realist facet is a tale of the early post-apartheid moment, in which a family close to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is challenged by the emergence of a figure from the past, a security policeman who tormented them during the apartheid years. Yet within the scrupulously preserved unities of a realist novel, the central transaction of *Bitter Fruit* is allegorical. The response of this family to the irruption from the past constitutes the allegorical facet, a Freudian allegory one might term the 'return of the [apartheid] repressed'. It is a compound allegory, as it nests within itself a both a political fable, and a more general human archetype, namely the Oedipal complex.

The political fable writes against the national allegory of confession and exculpation scripted by the TRC. Instead, Dangor writes a counter-allegory of retribution. This retribution is set in motion during the apartheid years, when Lieutenant Du Boise, then a security policeman, rapes Lydia Ali, a political wife of the

⁵⁰ See Wicomb in Meyer and Olver (2002: 185), Driver (1996: 4), Robolin (2006: 310-311).

activist Silas. Du Boise is the biological father of her son Mikey, who is brought up as a member of the Ali family. However, it is through this knot of relationship that the Freudian layer of the allegory manifests itself. While the premise of the novel is the return of Du Boise to the post-apartheid moment, its denouement is his murder. He is killed by his son Mikey, thus reiterating the Oedipal cycle.

The compoundedness of the central allegory is further evident in that the Oedipal and political elements are not merely supplemental to each other. In fact, they are fused in a single literary gesture – the act of murder – that simultaneously writes back to the discourse of hybridity. As coloured Mikey shoots his white father, Dangor suggests that it is the history of Mikey's blood that he symbolically erases. This murder is therefore not only the culmination of a counter-allegory to the TRC process, and of a contemporary reiteration of the Oedipal cycle. It also is the focal point for a dense stream of imagery running through the novel that further refutes the discourse of misgenation in that it celebrates and eroticises hybrid beauty.

1

The narrative of Zöe Wicomb's *David's Story* (2000) is subject to a master trope of constructedness, starting with the first sentence, 'This is and is not David's story' (1). There are numerous metaphors and images foregrounding the postmodernist position that narrative is a constructed artifice, that memory is unreliable, that narrators are untrustworthy, that histories are arbitrary. Accordingly, Wicomb plays numerous games with her intertextual archive, amongst others merging her character David Dirkse's family tree with that of the Rev. Andrew Flood in Sarah Gertrude Millin's *God's Stepchildren* (1924); transforming 'the historical figure of Madame le Fleuer' into Cuvier's housekeeper (Wicomb 2000: 35); citing Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1955 [1759]) as a source of inspiration for David's forefather (and putative father of

the Griqua nation), the historic figure of Andries Abraham Stockenström le Fleur (88); and otherwise inventing aspects of le Fleur's history, such as the telegonic⁵¹ impregnation of David's great-grandmother Antjie Cloete (156-8) by Le Fleur.

This emphasis on constructedness as artifice must be read against the fact that there are three distinct narrative voices in the novel, and three distinct modes through which the central figure of Dulcie is depicted. Part of the narrative is directly taken up by David's 'amanuensis', a nameless female first person narrator, the ghost writer of David's story. A second part of the narrative is only nominally the voice of the amanuensis: in some cases, this second voice follows immediately after the direct voice of the amanuensis and shows contextual links with it, but this is inconsistently applied. In other instances of this second voice, links to the persona of the amanuensis are hardly in evidence, and there is little to displace this stream of narration from conventional third person narration, which is a third stream of the narrative. For example, depiction of Sally's movements that David could not possibly know, and nor therefore could the amanuensis, could only be conventional third person narrative of this kind. On the whole, the latter two streams read as classic realist narrative, with consistent fleshing out of referential detail, unities of causality, time and place, and a core of determinate societal meanings that locate the novel within a particular history, and carry a documentary import. In sum, despite repeated metaphoric and overt assertions that the realist premise of narrative, history and signification is displaced, much of *David's Story* is a realist narrative on the ambiguous position of coloured freedom fighters within the external politics of transition, and within the internal politics of the Movement, in the early 1990s. In this limited and particular sense, therefore, *David's Story* recapitulates the mode of engaged realism

⁵¹ Wicomb misuses the term 'telegony' to denote a kind of immaculate conception by which Antjie Cloete is impregnated by Le Fleur through the power of his gaze. According to the *Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary* (1970: 1133), the term denotes 'the (imaginary) transmitted influence of a previous mate on the offspring of a female by a later mate'.

discussed in chapter one. It is important to note, however, that one cannot talk unproblematically of a classic realist *novel* (as distinct from *narrative*) if only parts of it are realist. Nor can one assert on principle that a postmodern novel entertains no realist sequences. What I do assert so far is that the realist phases of the novel are a significant part of the whole, despite being framed by shifting postmodern contexts.

The text oscillates therefore between realist and non-realist aspects. Even in the figure of Dulcie, where the text takes on its most non-realist aspect, inconsistencies are evident. This can be seen in the modes by which Dulcie is represented. The first narrative stream – the direct voice of the amanuensis – can only refer to Dulcie, but can never depict her, for the amanuensis never meets Dulcie, and indeed is sceptical that she exists. In the voice of the amanuensis, Dulcie is presented as a 'Protean subject that slithers hither and thither, out of reach, repeating, replacing, transforming itself' (Wicomb 2000: 35). In this context, Dulcie is an absence, a deception constructed by David, a signifier that lacks a signified. Her absence (for the amanuensis) is only relieved at the end of the novel, in which Dulcie appears in the amanuensis's garden. However, here she appears in unambiguously surreal form, thus only confirming her hallucinatory status. Dulcie also appears in Sally's thoughts and dreams (as a rival), and is discussed between David and Sally, or David and the amanuensis. As a represented figure, she thus becomes more or less solid depending on who refers to her. For the amanuensis, Dulcie is an abstraction, a device of displaced signification. For David or Sally, Dulcie is configured as real/ised.

Secondly, Dulcie appears, intermittently and mediately, through a nine-page sequence (Wicomb 2000: 125-133) in which David – the focaliser in this sequence – describes his meeting with her to his relative, Ant Mietjie. Although this sequence is filtered through David's narration to his aunt, which makes the depicted events less present and immediate, the mode of representation in this sequence is clearly realist. It is surely not coincidental that what this realist sequence most directly dramatises is

struggle politics on a local scale, in the context of late apartheid political history. The setting is a meeting called to debate the establishment of a United Democratic Front⁵² branch in a Griqua community, in which Dulcie plays an instrumental role. At a key moment in the meeting, she exploits a hymn to commandeer the attention of the meeting, and so to seize the political initiative. The hymn is '*Juig aarden juig*', the anthem of Andries Stockenstroom Le Fleuer, self-styled father of the Griqua people. Through this device, Wicomb connects the two timelines of *David's Story*, thus relating the politics of the narrative present to its historic precedent, and to the problematised history of coloured identity.

Thirdly, there is direct representation of Dulcie, in which she appears to the reader without mediation by other voices. She is only directly represented in this fashion in seven short sequences, ranging from a single paragraph to three pages, a total of thirteen in all. This representation takes on two forms. Several of these sequences are framed by the direct voice of the amanuensis, and so appear to belong to the indirect voice of the amanuensis I have described above. The remainder are framed by the authorial third person narrative, but there is little to distinguish these two latter modes of representing the figure of Dulcie. In most of these direct presentations of Dulcie, the reality effect is systematically undercut, and the postmodern aspect of the novel is foregrounded. I am of course aware that the mixture of modes is in itself a postmodern narrative strategy; however, my point is that the obviously postmodern voice is foregrounded in these moments.

This shifting of narrative modes is also evident in the deferral of desire that is typical of *David's Story*. The principle example is the relationship between David and Dulcie (with an equally inconclusive analogy in the relationship between David and the hotel receptionist who is attracted to him). David (116) refers to Dulcie as 'the

⁵² The United Democratic Front was an internal front established in the mid-1980s to serve as a proxy for the banned ANC. See chapter one for more detailed discussion of the influence exerted by the UDF on literary production.

beloved', while his wife Sally is convinced his trip to Kokstad to research his family tree is actually a cover for an affair with Dulcie. However, where the narrative depicts Dulcie in realist mode, it suggests that this love relationship is never consummated, always deferred, because of the exigencies of the struggle (116, 178). On the other hand, where the narrative (in the form of the amanuensis) questions the existence of Dulcie, deferral becomes a matter of *différance*, in that the meaning of the signifier 'Dulcie' eludes closure, as I will elaborate below.

Keeping this recognition of shifting narrative modes in mind as context for the ensuing argument, I return to Wicomb's deployment of Dulcie as a figure of post/colonial rhetoric. I will not attend comprehensively to the intertextuality of *David's Story*, which has been discussed elsewhere⁵³. Instead I will focus on how Dulcie recuperates the figure of Saartje Baartman⁵⁴, with particular regard not only to colonial scientific discourse, but also to the way in which Wicomb relates that recuperation ironically to what she has identified (in Meyer and Olver 2002: 190) as a more contemporary marginalisation, namely that of coloured women within the anti-apartheid struggle. Dulcie is central to this discussion also because, despite a certain consensus that her disembodied figure (more accurately, her figure in its disembodied mode) questions representation itself within the context of colonial discourse, I will argue that in her a particular form of embodiment is realised, and that through her, a continuing history of abuse of black women is in fact strongly represented.

Taken together, the structural paradoxes I have illustrated – this counterplay of realist and postmodern structure – draft a strange map of the 'geography of

⁵³ See Marais (2005: 23ff) for detailed analysis, but also Gagiano (2004: 186), Meyer and Olver (2002: 190), Robolin (2006: 306), and Willemse (2002: 147).

⁵⁴ The so-called "Hottentot Venus", a Khoi-San woman who was exhibited in London and Paris between 1810 and 1815 (Sewlall 2003: 341) as an exemplar of grotesque as much as exotic black female sexuality. This was followed after her death by the museum display of her private parts, buttocks, and brains (Gilman 1988: 232). This is a gendered as well as a race issue: Gilman (237) observes that similar displays of black male sexuality are absent from the literature.

memory' in this novel, to misappropriate Stéphanie Robolin's phrase⁵⁵. By contrast, what is consistently present, and so acts as a unifying device, is the topos of somatic markers of shame. This topos also has the effect of consistently evoking the body of miscegenation, presenting the body itself as a sign not only of shame, but of concupiscence as well⁵⁶. Both shame and concupiscence are evident in the marker of *steatopygia*, again memorialising Saartje Baartman, a trait that runs through all the key female characters other than the amanuensis⁵⁷. Both are also evident in the culturally inscribed attempt by young coloured girls to flatten their hair by using panty hose; the child Dulcie's 'kroeskop' (80) (head of tightly curled hair) that is rhymed by her bullying schoolmates with 'poeskop', i.e. rhyming 'her blackness with her cunt' (80). A speech by Le Fleuer – 'we, whose very faces are branded with their shame' (161) – invokes the discourse of shame that writers such as Sarah Gertrude Millin exemplified, while indeed that author is specifically mentioned immediately below Le Fleuer's speech (161). This topos, then, is reliably and consistently present, albeit ironically presented, consistently writing back to the discourse of miscegenation/shame.

It seems axiomatic that somatic markers of shame necessarily entail embodiment. Yet it is embodiment that is most strongly questioned in the person of Dulcie. David's amanuensis concludes that 'Dulcie is a decoy. She does not exist in the real world; David has invented her to cover up aspects of his own story' (124). I have asserted that the representation of Dulcie oscillates between realist and non-realist modes. However, she bears symbolic density even within the non-realist sequences, as a trope in her own right, rather than as a person. She is a site of abuse and disfigurement, and her body bears the scars of such experiences (for example 80-83,

⁵⁵ Robolin (2006: 299) actually referred to intertextual links between South African and African-American writers, principally Wicomb and Toni Morrison.

⁵⁶ See Marais (2004: 7) and Wicomb (1998: 91-2).

⁵⁷ The amanuensis is identified by David as a middle class liberal (Wicomb 2000: 197), which may or may not be code for white.

178ff), while being endlessly resistant to her persecution. She is divorced from personhood in that these experiences are marked as symbolic rather than mimetic; however, the physicality of her torments and her scars embody not the person, but the collective experience of the abused black female figure. She can therefore be seen as a visual allegory of black female suffering. As I will argue below, in this sense too, at least initially, she recuperates further the image of Saartje Baartman as a reflection of the colonial image of black women. As the novel progresses, and as I will show below, Wicomb reconfigures the textual dismemberment of Dulcie/Baartman into a more contemporary reflection of the marginalisation of coloured female guerillas at the hands of the 'Movement'.

Steatopygia and dismemberment converge in Saartje Baartman (see Figure 1 below). After her death in 1815, French scientists Henri de Blainville and Georges Cuvier subjected her to an autopsy, subsequently sketching and publishing images of her buttocks and her distended labia (Gilman 1985: 232).

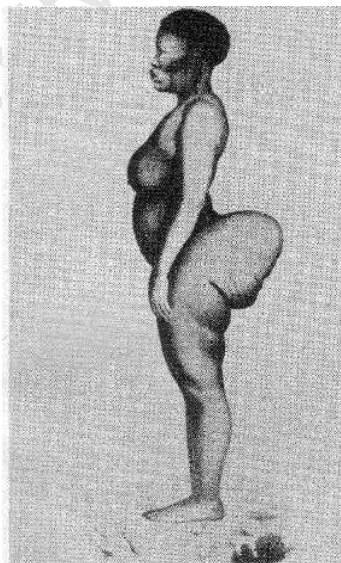


Figure 1. "The Hottentot Venus." Georges Cuvier, "Extraits d'observations faites sur le cadavre d'une femme connue à Paris et à Londres sous le nom de Vénus Hotentote," 1817 (reproduced in Gilman 1985: 233).

According to Gilman (232), the 'audience which had paid to see her buttocks and had fantasised about the uniqueness of her genitalia when she was alive could, after her death and dissection, examine both [...]'. The convergence of the scientific and imperial projects through the medium of dissection has resonated through late- and post-apartheid writing. Leon de Kock (2003: 85) cites 'a documentary turn in the literary and cultural base of the colonial encounter' which relied on the authority of positivism to project the 'colonising culture's ethical claims to superior symbolic power'⁵⁸. In *The Heart of Redness* (2000: 196), Zakes Mda invokes Baartman's 'femaleness [living] in a bottle in the land of the white man'. Earlier in Mda's novel (21) a group of British soldiers boil the head of a dead Xhosa warrior, to be used as 'a souvenir', or for 'scientific enquiry', casually yoking together the pursuits of exotic colonial trivia and high-mindedness. There is a similar head-boiling scene, related in graphic and nauseating detail, in Mike Nicol's *Horseman* (1984: 180), which is also thematically linked to scientific enquiry. Wicomb too imagines, through her character David, Cuvier dissecting and annotating the private parts of Saartje Baartman. However, the chief shame is not the fact of dissection itself, but the entry of this information into the cultural archive: 'It was the shame in print, in perpetuity, the thought of a reader turning to that page, that refreshed David's outrage' (Wicomb 2000: 33). The *textual* dismemberment and display of Saartje Baartman, then, becomes more significant for my argument than its historic counterpart.

It is no accident then that Wicomb subjects *Dulcie* to textual forms of dismemberment, recuperating the experience of Baartman and relocating its relevance to the present and continuing abuse of black female bodies. Meg Samuelson (2007a: 836) astutely observes this textual dismemberment in terms of disfiguration:

The very attempt to write Dulcie—to figure her—is shown to impose violence on her body, literally disfiguring her. David's first attempts to

⁵⁸ See also Sewlall (2003: 339).

write Dulcie produce no more than a "mess of . . . peculiar figures" (Wicomb 2000, 135); later he presents the narrator with a "page without words" that she glosses as follows: "There are the dismembered shapes of a body: an asexual torso, like a dressmaker's dummy; arms bent the wrong way at the elbows; legs; swollen feet; hands like claws. . . . I have no doubt that it is Dulcie who lies mutilated on the page" (Wicomb 2000, 205).

(Samuelson 2007a: 836)

Mike Marais takes the concept of textual dismemberment for Dulcie further, to the point of conceptualising her as unrepresentable. In his view (2004: 7 and 2005: 28-30), the problem Wicomb raises through the figure of Dulcie is how to represent coloured people 'without endorsing the aesthetic of blood which constructs colouredness' (2005: 21). Wicomb's response is then to enact a trope of unrepresentivity itself in the figure of Dulcie (Marais 2004: 7). In colonial discourse, Marais argues, the coloured (i.e. black) body has become a somatic sign of racial inferiority. The problem is that the black body is so constructed by the discourse of race that writing back to this discourse will inevitably duplicate its terms of engagement. The result, argues Marais (2004: 7) is that 'the body of Baartman, and by extension that of Dulcie, is presented as having been rendered unrepresentable by colonial discourse'. Wicomb thus attempts to solve the problem of representation, so Marais (7) asserts, by performing the unrepresentivity of Dulcie, so breaking up the structural ground of colonial discourse.

Marais's argument however, incisive as it is, overlooks two modes of representation for Dulcie. One is the oscillation towards the pole of realism that I have described above, vested in the structure of realist sequences, including the political/historic documentary tenor of realist narrative centred on Dulcie (e.g. in Wicomb 2000: 125-133); the other is the intense invocation of Dulcie's black and gendered *body* as a site of pain and mutilation. I am aware that embodiment and representation are separate issues, but I take embodiment as evidence of an achieved

representivity. Indeed in the passage cited below, the first of the sequences in which Dulcie is directly represented, there is little to suggest that the passage is not realist, or to disturb the innocence of reading. Further, one cannot read the following passage and absent the body; its woundedness renders it vividly present:

This square [of Dulcie's back] is marked with four cent-sized circles forming the corners of a smaller inner square, meticulously staked out with blue ballpoint pen before the insertion of a red-hot poker between the bones. The smell of that singed flesh and bone still, on occasion, invades, and then she cannot summon it away. Each circle is a liverish red crinkled surface of flesh, healed in the darkness under garments that would not let go of the blood.

(Wicomb 2000:19)

It is important to clarify that I am sympathetic to the positions of Marais and Samuelson, to the extent that there are invocations of Dulcie that suit their arguments well. In the following extract, for example, Dulcie's body is not only disfigured, it is permeable, and indeed penetrable: her boundaries are broken. Interestingly, this grotesque penetration is the only intimate moment David achieves with her, a *dans macabre* that can only signify deferral. Wicomb here enacts a body that is not solid, lending credence to critical tropes of unrepresentivity or disfiguration such as Marais and Samuelson employ:

Once, only once, did David come close enough to place his hands on her shoulders. His fingertips pressed precisely into the wounds under her shirt, plunged intimately into her flesh, caressed every cavity, every organ, her lungs, liver, kidneys, her broken heart, with a lick of fire. She would not have been surprised to see those hands withdraw dripping with blood.

(Wicomb 2000: 199)

I reiterate, however, that my argument rests on the oscillation between narrative modes.

Wicomb suggests, in agreement with Marais, that Dulcie 'cannot be fleshed out', that she is the 'necessary silence in the text' (134). Wicomb performs this

attribution of silence, to take a single example, through David's attempt to provide the amanuensis with his notes on Dulcie; instead, David chooses 'to displace her [Dulcie] by working on the historical figure of Saartje Baartman instead' (134). The problem with this device of unrepresentivity, however, is the narrative logic embedded in its elegance, which is tantamount to a character who delivers a soliloquy in which she loudly declares that she is unable to speak. Dulcie is indeed forcefully present/ed, precisely because of her elusive framing, as well as the intensity of her woundedness. Her 'silence' is belied by David as he observes to the amanuensis that Dulcie 'is a kind of scream somehow echoing through my story' (134). This latter perception is supported by Gagiano (2004: 818), who observes that 'Dulcie ends up crowding out the realistically portrayed female figures in the novel'.

It is true that Dulcie is set up as (signifies that she is) a Derridean sliding signifier⁵⁹, which performs its inability to settle on any signified. However, despite this particular narrative construction, it is exactly Dulcie's woundedness that is most intensely real/ised as image. While this woundedness is abstracted as narrative, divorced from the sequential/causative links and unities of realism, it becomes proportionately more powerful as a *visual* icon, reconfiguring rather than erasing presence. As Elaine Scarry notes in her exploration of torture, *The Body in Pain*, torture is used to convert the 'fiction of absolute power' (1985: 27) into a visible performance. In my view, the conceit of Dulcie's unrepresentivity (as Wicomb applies it and perhaps, more pertinently, talks about it) is an incomplete reflection of Dulcie's textual agency: she certainly represents a great deal, as I have indicated above, despite the numerous subtextual and overt representations that she cannot.

I have noted Wicomb's view (quoted in Meyer and Olver 2002: 190) that Dulcie is 'the necessary silence in the text', a 'silence' that enacts the suppression of

⁵⁹ The sliding signifier signified: 'Dulcie is a 'Protean subject that slithers hither and thither, out of reach, repeating, replacing, transforming itself' (Wicomb 2000: 35).

'powerful coloured women' (190) in the anti-apartheid struggle. There is, however, another silence around Dulcie's presence that deserves comment: none of the critical sources referred to in this chapter, including the interviews with Wicomb, recognise the warp of realism running through *David's Story* that I have articulated above. This 'necessary silence' around the unacknowledged realist aspect merits explanation. An obvious point of departure is that Wicomb regards postmodern narrative strategy as a more appropriate instrument than realism to reflect on a deeply fragmented society⁶⁰. She has commented on her struggle in *David's Story* with 'the ethics of representing the ambiguities of the situations [...] Hardly radical – it is after all a generic condition of prose fiction [...] to be multivoiced' (in Meyer and Olver 2002: 185). One might link this to an unease that Wicomb has expressed, in the context of bitter social struggle, with the condition of material and cultural privilege that gives rise to writing. In her essay 'Nation, Race, and Ethnicity: Beyond the Legacy of the Victims' (1992: 17), she raises the question of how it is possible to write against the background of the horror on the streets, and whether there should be a culturally privileged process of writing at all, given the shame of representation of the silenced and the subjugated. It is thus probably Wicomb's preference for the postmodern as a political *and* narrative choice of strategy, and her unease with the privileged condition of writing, that underlie this other 'necessary silence' about the realist warp of the novel.

In conclusion, I have argued through the above considerations that *David's Story* shows realist phases: in its narrative of a recent political history of struggle that carries documentary import; in its centred and motivated political argument against the marginalisation of coloured women within the freedom struggle; and in the graphic depictions of woundedness in Dulcie that generate an iconic level of embodiment, so registering *presence*. While this is clearly framed by a postmodernist structure that

⁶⁰ See Wicomb in Meyer and Olver (2002: 190), also (Driver 1996: 4), Samuelson (2007b: 125ff) and Robolin (2006: 310-11).

questions and subverts the codes of representation, I propose that its realist force is not erased by the postmodern interrogation to which it is subject. Instead, I propose that this realist form remains visible in the text as a palimpsest of an earlier textual history, namely engaged realism as constructed by the paradigm of anti-apartheid writing. In effect, the text acknowledges its diachronic relationship with the realist tradition of anti-apartheid letters.

2

In his earlier novella *Kafka's Curse* (1997), Dangor, like Wicomb above, relates postmodern form to the difficulty of representing a fractured society. In discussing *Kafka's Curse*, he states that

[a] single narrator, or a more direct and linear approach would have forced me to sacrifice the exploration of the many layers of reality that exists in what can only be described as schizophrenic societies [...] it would have been false to create 'representational' voices [...] This forced me as the writer to observe our history from what I hope is a compelling Babel's tower.

(Dangor, n.d. 1-2)

In *Bitter Fruit*, however, Dangor finds a different way to problematise form against the social and political content it contains. As I observed in my introduction to this chapter, there is a complex interpenetration of realist and allegorical elements, and the refutation of the discourse of shame which they frame. While this is not the 'compelling Babel's tower' of *Kafka's curse*, it is nevertheless anything but a unitary text.

Silas Ali, one of the central characters in the novel, is a former activist, currently a senior figure in the TRC secretariat. In the opening chapter, he encounters by chance Lieutenant Du Boise, a former security policeman (retired in the post-apartheid era), who raped Silas's wife Lydia in an act of psychological warfare against

Silas. It is pertinent that this was not a random crime; it was an act of state terror. The stage is thus set for a transfer of value, from the national allegory of forgiveness mounted by the TRC, to the family situation of Silas, Lydia, and their son Mikey, who is in fact the biological child of that rape. What actually happens, however, is that when Lydia asks Silas if he would kill Du Boise for her (Dangor 2001: 19), he is unwilling to engage with this possibility. In response, Lydia drops and breaks her beer glass, dances on the shards, and mutilates her feet. It is Mikey, the son of the rapist, who eventually carries out this quest of retribution. In the form of Du Boise and the rape he represents, therefore, the apartheid past returns with violent consequences.

As I noted above, the TRC process generated a national allegory of exculpation and reconciliation. Laura Moss describes Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull* (1998), for example, as a text which positions itself on the basis of its presentation of the TRC process as a national allegory of forgiveness (2006: 92-3), and as 'representative text of the "new South Africa"' (85)⁶¹. As Deborah L. Madsen reminds us,

[I]ndividual allegoric texts are able to present a self-conscious account of the way cultural discourses seek social validation and also the way in which these cultural discourses authorise certain configurations of cultural power.

(Madsen 1991: 3)

Where *Country of My Skull* validates the form of national re/construction staged by the TRC, Dangor in *Bitter Fruit* refutes this validation of rainbow nation mythology. In the collective drama of the TRC, the mechanism of forgiveness is placed in the foreground. Through Mikey's revenge/patricide, Dangor has created a counter-allegory of retribution that substitutes vengeance for forgiveness.

Dangor crafts a compound allegory. It reflects as a convergence of metonymic and metaphoric moments, for example the rape of Lydia as an image of political violation; Lydia's private experience of rape as a potential image of the national drama

⁶¹ See also Moss (2006: 92-93), Nkosi (2002: 255), Samuelson (2007a: 844).

of the TRC; and Mikey's murder of Du Boise as counter-allegory to the TRC. The allegory also presents an intersection of symbolic tropes, nesting disparate but related images in the same figure. The inverted allegory of reconciliation and nation-building intersects a second allegorical image, namely a reversion to the Oedipal archetype, in which Mikey is compelled to kill his father. Indeed, acknowledging both the Freudian and Sophoclean versions, there are suggestive moments of near-incest that occur between Mikey and Lydia (Dangor 2001: 143, 146) to supplement this observation. There is also a third allegoric layer in *Bitter Fruit*, which becomes an inverted drama of the 'aesthetics of blood', in which the blood of the white father is symbolically expunged by means of the murder. One might contrast this to the despair of the Rev. Barry Lindsell in Sarah Gertrude Millin's *God's Stepchildren* (1924), who renounces marriage so that the 'taint' of his black blood should not be perpetuated. Dangor thus inverts this prototypical conclusion to the tale of tainted blood in his own allegory of blood, reversing the terms of Abdul JanMahomed's 'Manichean allegory' of race difference that so reliably debases the colonised Other (JanMahomed 1985: 65). Madsen's (1999: 6) comment that 'marginalized groups have also found in allegory a potent force for the expression of their position within [majority] culture' is thus apposite.

As the allegorical heart of *Bitter Fruit* illustrates, and as I have argued in preceding chapters, the episteme of apartheid continues to structure post-apartheid writing⁶². This recognition is central to *Bitter Fruit*. In this novel, memory is a particularly loaded construct in view of the task of the TRC to exhume silenced memories, and to bring individual histories to collective awareness. Ato Quayson (2004: 768-9) has criticised *Bitter Fruit* for its creation of 'too much unresolved background to the life of each character to be able to establish proper relations of reciprocity in the present'. This might be true of some of the minor characters, but in

⁶² See related comments in Bell (2001: 71), Kruger (2002: 36), and Wicomb (1998: 94).

the triangular history of Lieutenant Du Boise, Silas and Lydia, the relationship between past and present is incisively developed.

The link between personal and collective memory is made explicit when Lydia is offered a victim's session at the TRC. Lydia turns down the gesture, and the opportunity to collectivise the most traumatic experience of her life, implying that the TRC process is impotent and worthless, and asserting that '[n]othing would have changed' (Dangor 2001: 140).

The construct of memory in the novel is actualised further in the bitter fruit of the title, namely Mikey, the child fathered on Lydia by Du Boise. Lydia's horror on discovering she is pregnant, that Du Boise 'had violated her womb with the horror of his seed' (108), her crisis about keeping the child (116), must surely be revisited at some level in each encounter with her son. Dangor thus *embodies* memory in the person of Mikey, so adding a key element of the compound allegory described above. Here the myth-charged genetics, the 'poetics of blood'⁶³ native to the discourse of miscegenation is drawn to its logical conclusion into the product of that blood, namely the child of rape/miscegenation. In characterising the discourse of miscegenation, J.M. Coetzee (1988a: 150) identifies blood as a pool of unconscious and ineradicable memory which records the shame of blackness for all generations to come:

All acts of shame are recorded in the blood. The blood is thus a pool of unconscious memory, passed down through the generations.

(Coetzee 1988a: 150, my emphasis)

In Mikey, the memory and metaphor of blood are embodied and concretised in the child of mixed race, replicating the traditional discourse of miscegenation. In the science, literature and popular discourse of miscegenation, it is black blood that is

⁶³ See also Coetzee (1988a: 145), Marais (2004: 6), and Marais (2005: 21).

tainted⁶⁴, whereas in *Bitter Fruit* it is white blood that becomes the source of shame, and that must finally be excised from the body politic. Indeed, as Mikey shoots Du Boise, Dangor inverts the convention in that the stain – with its associated imagery of repulsion and inferiority – now expunged is the stigma of *white* blood:

Michael sees the bits of flaking skin, those tired, red-rimmed eyes, the bitter half-smile, sees himself mirrored in the sweat breaking through the powdery brow. That could be my face one day, my thin body (how pot-bellied and red-faced he might have been were it not for the cancer!).

My heritage, he says in a whisper, unwanted, imposed, my history, my beginnings.

Michael fires – twice – directly into Du Boise's face [...] He wants to obliterate Du Boise's face, wipe away that triumphant, almost kindly expression, leave behind nothing but splintered bone and shattered skin.

(Dangor 2001: 246, my emphasis)

The memory thus embodied in Mikey, like Lydia's memory of being raped, also translates from personal to collective dimensions. Indeed, Dangor (182) makes the political metaphor of rape explicit: 'You conquer a nation by bastardising its children'. It is with remarkable dramatic economy that Dangor uses Mikey to transform the past into the future, and in doing so, to translate an individual character into an allegory of collective life, although in this case countering the script of truth and reconciliation.

In discussing *David's Story*, I argued that Wicomb's response to the discourse of shame is to disrupt form and representation. Dangor, however, refutes the language of shame through a veritable surfeit of embodiedness, by his celebration of hybrid eroticism, and by an elaboration of transgressions across many more boundaries than colour.

One of the realist conventions deployed by Dangor is a sustained and detailed level of embodiment. Where Wicomb problematises embodiment in Dulcie, and otherwise approaches the body through irony, Dangor almost gleefully plunges the

⁶⁴ See Adhikari (2006a and 2006b), Blair (2003), Coetzee (1988a), Gilman (1985), Wicomb (1988).

reader into the physicality of his readers. For example, Silas is an intensely olfactory character, apprehending the world through his nose, while his digestive discomforts and releases are documented with obsessive thoroughness. Lydia remembers

smelling Du Boise's scent on the baby, a faint stench, the premature decaying of a man who harboured some dreaded disease [...] And she continued to sniff at Mikey until he was old enough to say no with his eyes [...]

(Dangor 2001: 109)

Further, Mikey experiences his mother in reciprocal gustatory and olfactory images:

He knows that Mama cannot offer him refuge in her motherly smells, gentle, milky, a blur of undefined generosity. There is a sharpness to her now, a sweetness of oranges, tangerines, he searches for the word – citrus! – that was not there when he snuggled into her as an infant, feeding on her breasts, or as a little boy, simply seeking love.

(Dangor 2001: 126)

The same can be said of Mikey's later experience of comparing Lydia's 'strong [sexual] reek with Kate's, and with Mireille's, long ago, when she lay naked alongside him [...]' (130).

Dangor also refutes the language of shame through a virtual hyperplasia of transgressive sexual encounters in the novel, not only across the colour line, but across boundaries of age, gender and incest as well. Further, the somatic markers of mixed race in *Bitter Fruit* do not signify shame. They become instead signifiers of physical beauty and desire (for example 147, 185, 198, 233, 244). Indeed, Frenkel (2008: 162) suggests that Dangor exoticises hybrid beauty. For example, Silas Ali observes in Vinu, Mikey's Afrikaans/Indian friend, the 'colour of dirty honey [...] a bushie goddess. Beauty honed on the same bastard whetstone as I' (198); further, 'a down of bastard gold [...] the gift of indelible beauty that we bushies carry about like a second skin' (244). The green eyes of Lydia's young black lover João are foregrounded (233) as the prelude of their later encounter on a billiard table. For Dangor, the

markers of miscegenation are signifiers of beauty and desire to the point of sexual exoticism: 'There was something so ineluctably beautiful about Lydia pulling the young man to her, embracing his black body in her lovely olive-skinned arms' (238). This is in sharp contrast, for example, with Sarah Gertrude Millin's (1924: 293) 'degenerate brown peoples, rotten with sickness, an affront against nature', or Zöe Wicomb's David in the eponymous *Story* (2000: 12), who, internalising the discourse of miscegenation, finds his own green eyes 'distasteful, if not horrible'.

If the original sin of miscegenation is the moment of sexual contact between black and white, Dangor elaborates this into a wide manifesto of transgressions across many boundaries⁶⁵. For example, Mikey's suggestive Oedipal encounter with his mother noted above (Dangor 2001: 146, 149) is not an isolated device. Mikey also has a sexually charged, albeit technically celibate, relationship with his aunt Mireille, and sexual liaisons with middle-aged white women Kate Jessup and Heather Graham. Kate Jessup betrays her lesbian partner with Mikey. Mikey's friend Vinu reveals her long-term incestuous relationship with her father, which she describes as 'beautiful' (187), thus telescoping themes of abuse, rape and consensual desire. She chooses to confess this relationship to her mother only when her father betrays her, as she sees it, by sleeping with another woman. Finally, Lydia has a passionate encounter with a young black man she has just met, João, on a billiard table at Silas's fiftieth birthday party.

In this encounter, Silas's humiliation is compounded by the fact that their initial flirtation is a very public event, and the act itself is witnessed by both Silas and Mikey. Through this choice, Lydia frees herself from the sexual exile imposed on her by rape. The victim here is Silas – exemplifying pathos rather than tragedy – whose marriage

⁶⁵ Ato Quayson (2004: 768) reacts to this somewhat adversely: 'The novel determinedly serializes a circuit of apparently interdicted topics almost as if in the form of a checklist of the sexually forbidden: rape, hermaphroditism, incest, adultery, relations between an older woman and a younger man'.

is destroyed as the price of Lydia's healing.

Silas's plight, in conclusion, reflects a different symbolic permutation of Dangor's counter-allegory to the TRC process. Silas is a spokesperson of the TRC. Lydia rejects the principle of reconciliation in ejecting Silas from her life as forcefully as she does, and in breaking the mould of the family that has contained her life and silent suffering for so long. The truth that returns in her case, the memory that is retrieved, does not lead to reconciliation and closure. It leads instead to an open-ended and unknown destiny in which her own narrative diverges from the narrative of nation-building endorsed by the TRC. This symbolic process of dispersion can be seen in Mikey's trajectory too: he achieves his objective of retribution by aligning himself with a radical, international Muslim network, subscribing to an agenda that once again defies the script of nation-building. This is foregrounded by his first individual assumption of identity. Born and named Michael Ali, the biological son of Lieutenant Du Boise, he chooses the name Noor. The future he thus creates is a new invention, again unconfined by the devices and the ideal of nation-building, which bear no fruit in the person of Mikey.

Chapter Eight

Unitary or Fractured Form? The State of the Rainbow Nation

Interracial rape and miscegenation have long been an informing trope in the literature of apartheid, and it is interesting how this continues to be a feature in post-election writing.

(Flockemann 2004: 202)

These fictions culminate in the swelling figures of raped bodies: raped women are transformed into mothers, who, through the 'mixed race' issue of rape, procreate the 'rainbow' nation.

(Samuelson 2007b: 122)

In four of the nine post-apartheid novels explored in this thesis so far, rape is given a pivotal role. These novels are *Disgrace* (1999a) by J.M. Coetzee, *David's Story* (2000) by Zöe Wicomb, *Bitter Fruit* (2001) by Achmat Dangor, and Zakes Mda's *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002). In chapter seven I showed that *Bitter Fruit* uses rape as a mechanism by which the apartheid past is related to the post-apartheid present; that Mikey Ali, the child of rape, disrupts the rainbow nation mythos and associated nation-building discourse; and that the novel demonstrates a dual form, nesting a compound allegorical structure within the framework of a realist novel. In this chapter I extend related considerations to other novels of the transition, on the premise that *Bitter Fruit* is not an isolated case, but in fact instantiates a broader textual pattern. I argue that all these texts exhibit, in various ways and to differing degree, some kind of formal duplicity, splitting, or duality in their representation of rape and its social consequence. Moreover, these representations of a schismatised social body are reflected – in particular through depictions of rape – at the infrastructural or formal level of narrative. In other words, writers of the transition are driven to inscribe the social disjunctures and transformations expressed through rape into the language of

form itself. My chapter title therefore includes the term 'fractured form' to suggest disjuncture, schism, in both form and societal representation. In most of the texts under discussion, rape plays an intermediary role in bringing the apartheid past into relationship with a political future. I therefore relate this account of fractured form to an implication raised in chapter one, namely the view that politically committed realism – struggle writing – was promoted as the originary narrative mode by which the new republic could be envisioned and perhaps one day realised. I then question what such form implies for rainbow nation teleology, and how these texts position themselves with regard to this ideal. I find, in answer to this question, that there is a material relationship between fractured form and the disruption of the rainbow nation trope. Conversely, in the single text in this group that endorses the rainbow nation (*The Madonna of Excelsior*), unitary form is evidenced.

At a more particular level the following linked devices typify the texts under discussion. Firstly, interracial rape is the originating event of the tale, the point about which overt and subtextual meanings cohere, and from which plot is extruded. Secondly, rape is represented as the point at which black and white political histories intersect. Further, rape is the central mechanism by which the ethic of apartheid is translated into the present, or addressed to the future, of the new polity. This diagnosis of the present, and contemplation of the future, is to a greater or lesser extent worked through the child/ren of rape. Finally, most of these narratives disrupt the rainbow nation ideal.

The chapter closes with a reflection on my own novel, *What Kind of Child* (2006), because interracial rape is likewise central to this text, and because it also is marked by fractured form. My intention is to reflect on the position of my own fiction with regard to considerations raised in this chapter, and indeed to the thesis as a whole. While the presence of my own work in this study makes my vested interest in the matter self-evident, the declaration of such interest provides an appropriate

background and context for the critical scrutiny and assessment, by the reader, of my argument.

Finally, I am sensitive to the deeply fraught position of literary rape as a gendered political construct. It is unsurprising that this trope has provoked the extensive scholarly attention it has received⁶⁶. However, my concern in this chapter is not the gender politics of literary rape; my attention here is restricted to what rape as a post-apartheid literary device implies for the politics of form.

1

In chapter six I argued that *Disgrace* by J.M. Coetzee is marked by a duplicitous form in which its mask of realism is not effaced by its postmodern reflexivity. More to the point, I argued that the racialised discourse legible in the realist facet of the novel is not rendered unspoken by the hermeneutic, reflexive text equally legible in *Disgrace*. In other words, I took issue with the prevalent view that the racialised discourse evident in the apparently realist form of the novel is subverted or somehow erased by a range of postmodern narrative strategies which have been posited to perform this subversion. In this chapter, I focus on a particular relationship of imbalance between the Cape Town and Grahamstown sequences of the novel which reinforces my position, albeit from a different perspective. This imbalance can be seen in that the rapes of Melanie and Lucy, and their consequences, are represented on different scales of intensity: as Zöe Wicomb (2002: 22) has observed, the Grahamstown

⁶⁶ See Attridge (2005: 173-4), Barnard (2003: 202ff), Bethlehem (2002: 22ff), Cornwall (2002), Flockemann (2004: 252ff), Graham (2003: 437-9), Horrell (2002:27ff), Marais (2001: 34 and 2003: 280ff), Marks (2000: 103-105), Reef (2005: 245ff), Robolin (2006: 308), Samuelson (2007b: 122ff and 2007a: 834ff), Wicomb (2002: 217ff) for a very limited sample of this literature.

sequences are consistently magnified in their effects⁶⁷. I will show that this principle of magnification is a means, again, by which Coetzee stages a duplicitous form, apparently subverting racialised discourse in realist guise, only to perform a double subversion that reinstates it. This double subversion will further be related to the rainbow nation trope.

In the Grahamstown sequences, the pattern of violation/victimisation is systematically exacerbated in comparison with the Cape Town sequences. For example, Melanie Isaacs's rape is ambivalently presented (albeit by David Lurie) as '[n]ot rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless' (Coetzee 1999: 25), while Lucy is gang-raped. Even if we cannot trust Lurie's equivocation, the individual rape of Melanie is still exceeded in scale by the gang-rape of Lucy. Further, Lurie uses an unwilling Melanie for his own gratification, while it appears that Lucy's rape is part of a cold-blooded economic strategy of expropriation orchestrated by Petrus: the narrative suggests that she is raped as part of a strategy to gain control of her land. Melanie Isaacs informs the authorities, which leads to a disciplinary hearing, thus confirming the judicial processes of society; Lucy refuses to inform the authorities, which leads to further victimisation, thus depicting a society bereft of law. Lurie approaches the Isaacs family for forgiveness (however bizarrely), while Petrus seeks to marry Lucy, thus using violation to broker an economic negotiation in which the currency is Lucy's body. Moreover, the exploitation/rape of Melanie is placed in an historic context – thus historicising her individual experience – in an understated manner. This context emerges in Lurie's disciplinary hearing through the voice of Farodia Rassool, a disciplinary committee member, who refers to 'the long history of exploitation of which this is part' (Coetzee 1999: 53). Further, Lurie is sexually aroused by Melanie's stage performance as a maid with a wiggling bottom (25), which metaphorically encodes

⁶⁷ In her subtle and incisive reading they signify a 'failure of translation' from the old order to the new.

that nested history of economic, political and sexual subjugation. These are relatively subtle forms of historic contextualisation. By contrast, Petrus's proposal of marriage, with its outrageous offer of protection, the climactic exposure of its Machiavellian nakedness, is not merely a reversal of that history: its representation of outrage becomes hyperbolic.

Abdul JanMahomed's essay, 'The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature', provides a useful lens by which to read this imbalance of representation. He describes the Manichean allegory as

a field of diverse yet interchangeable oppositions between white and black, good and evil, superiority and inferiority, civilization and savagery, intelligence and emotion, rationality and sensuality, self and Other.

(JanMahomed 1985: 63).

JanMahomed criticises Coetzee's earlier novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) on the ground that it demonstrates 'the function of manichean polarity within the empire; it shows without any hesitation that the empire projects its own barbarism onto the Other beyond its borders' (1985: 73). His critique is not that Coetzee reiterates the terms of the Manichean allegory in this novel, but that the representation of imperial barbarism is dehistoricised, without any reference to the particularity of apartheid. Coetzee thus represents 'the relation between self and Other in metaphysical terms' (73) – a relation(ship) that predictably inscribes the compounded inferiority of the Other – that are by implication unchanging and absolute.

I will relate this criticism, somewhat cautiously, to *Disgrace*. An obvious difference between *Disgrace* and *Waiting for the Barbarians* is that the former does engage, intimately, with (post-apartheid) historical particulars. It is precisely this engagement that has caused such perplexity in its apparent evocation of racialised discourse. It is here, however, that Coetzee can be seen to perform a postmodern subversion of this racialised discourse. Apart from resisting JanMahomed's criticism

that his writing is dehistoricised, he further subverts the terms of the Manichean allegory itself by exposing the internal barbarism of "civilization" in Lurie's commodification and abuse of Melanie and Soraya. Thus the mechanism of projection (whereby 'empire projects its own barbarism onto the Other') stands exposed, and reflexivity is said to reverse the inscription of racialised discourse. Critics who defend Coetzee's representation of rape on grounds of its metanarrative properties, such as Cornwall (2002: 313-4), Attridge (2005: 173-4) and Samuelson (2007b: 141), are thus shown to be justified. However, this conclusion is misleading in the particular sense I will now elaborate.

To return to the systematic disproportion of scale between the parallel plots of *Disgrace*: its effect will inevitably be to diminish the impact of (white) David Lurie's transgressions, and enlarge the impact of the African transgressors. In other words, this rhetoric manipulates the perceived scale of victimisation. If Coetzee's reflexivity is said to subvert the inscription of an historicised and racialised discourse, what is the counter-effect of this asymmetry of scale? My point is that Coetzee hereby performs a double subversion by means of which the Manichean allegory is restored, despite the counterscript of reflexivity. As I have suggested in chapter six with regard to the whole form of the novel, he does so as part of a calculated discursive performance, one that simultaneously provokes, perpetuates and subverts outrage by using the discourse of race even as he undercuts it. It is troubling that he thus knowingly speaks such discourse, which is possibly worse than passively or unwittingly allowing it to speak through him, as a lesser author might.

What I have described as duplicitous form is puzzlingly reflected in a more personal ambiguity in the writer. In his review of Breyten Breytenbach's *Dog Heart* (1998), Coetzee criticised Breytenbach for transmitting sensational images of criminal violence, which inevitably drive post-apartheid paranoia:

These stories make disturbing reading not only because of the psychopathic violence of the attacks themselves, but because the stories are repeated at all. For in a country plagued with violent crime which the national police force—undermanned, underfunded, demoralized—is utterly unable to control, horror stories have become a staple, particularly among whites in the countryside, where farmers have died in murders that are commonly read in the most sinister light: as politically directed, as aimed at driving whites off the land and ultimately out of the country.

(Coetzee, cited in Cornwall 2002: 314)

It would be understandable if a certain amount of time separated this review and the publication of *Disgrace*, which might account for a change in perspective. However, the review ('Against the South African Grain') appeared in the *New York Review of Books*, 23 September 1999, the year that *Disgrace* was released. It is therefore probable that Coetzee was reading *Dog Heart*, and formulating his response to it, not long after completing *Disgrace* and preparing the text for publication. The preoccupations of his own novel, in other words, must have still been internally vivid. The content of the review is therefore probably symptomatic of some ambiguity in Coetzee about the political future of post-apartheid South Africa, issues on which the subject matter of *Disgrace* is premised.

More particularly, it is on the trope of interracial rape that this narrative is constructed. Bearing this in mind – and conceding that the representation of violence in *Disgrace* is less gruesome than in *Dog Heart* – one must ask nevertheless why Coetzee chooses to reiterate this kind of material. It is even more pertinent to ask why he places rape at the centre of a suggestive conspiracy to expropriate white-owned land, and why he chooses to construct the duplicitous form he has by which to do it.

Regardless of the various metafictional readings that are possible of *Disgrace*, the novel posits failure for the new South Africa as a just and humane society. Lucy's rape, consequent self-immolation, and the rhetoric of asymmetrical victimisation I have shown above, reflect a reversal of apartheid power relations, rather than their

transcendence. In his Jerusalem Prize acceptance speech, Coetzee (1992 [1987]: 98) described South African literature during the apartheid years in these harsh terms:

It is a less than fully human literature, unnaturally preoccupied with power and the torsions of power, unable to move from elementary relations of contestation, domination, and subjugation to the vast and complex human world that lies beyond them. It is exactly the kind of literature you would expect people to write from a prison.

(Coetzee 1992 [1987]: 98)

This surely projects the concerns of *Disgrace*, which – although it is a post-apartheid text, published over a full decade later – is certainly ‘preoccupied with power and the torsions of power’, giving shape to its narrative argument through ‘relations of contestation, domination, and subjugation’. It is therefore not the rainbow nation that is given birth by the swelling figure of Lucy, but a new age of iron.

I conclude that the elements I have observed – the failed transition of the old order into the new that so disrupts the rainbow nation trope, rape as the racialised hinge of this failure, and Coetzee’s political ambiguities – have resulted in a variant of fractured form. In other words, the overdetermined contestations and resistances of this narrative territory – in which one might include the surrounding political ambivalences that inform the writing and reading of such a text – generate a form that cannot be unitary in its construction, that cannot demonstrate the organicity of a classic realist novel. The result is the duplicitous text of *Disgrace*, in which value and meaning oscillate between the racialised discourse embedded in its realist facet, and the postmodern, metanarrative subversions of such discourse.

In the following sections I will show that other post-apartheid narratives of rape – narratives which like *Disgrace* relate rape to political histories and outcomes – also generate different kinds of fractured form.

Several commentators, including Zöe Wicomb herself, have attended to the problematised, postmodernist representation of the figure of Dulcie in *David's Story*⁶⁸, in particular the relationship of this mode of representation with Dulcie's mutilation and torture. Wicomb has commented that

[I]anguage is not an Adamic naming of things; it's about discourse in all the senses of the word. The realist novel, like an Adamic language, does indeed claim to reflect things in the world, disguising the fact that it too is in the domain of the literary.

(Wicomb, in Meyer and Olver 2002: 196-7)

She objects that 'the real world school [...] is patronising. It assumes that people have limited reading skills, that they cannot infer or interpret' (197). Wicomb's aversion to realist narrative can further be related to aspects of her feminist background. As Dorothy Driver notes (2006: 2), 'Wicomb herself has said that writing was made possible for her by the two historical shifts in consciousness which she experienced during her twenties: Black Consciousness and feminism.' Stéphanie Robolin (2006: 311) has claimed that Wicomb's writing celebrates women's 'elusion [sic] of patriarchal control' over narrative by means of 'withholding or disabling an anchor to which discourses or ideologies may moor themselves and normalise their functions'. In Robolin's view then, Wicomb deploys destabilising narrative conventions that challenge 'the reign of reified history' that is informed by 'foundationalist' (read patriarchal and nationalist) discourse (311). Meg Samuelson, moreover, relates the 'textual violence' by which Wicomb represents Dulcie to the unspeakableness of physical violation of women:

⁶⁸ For example, Marais (2004: 6-7 and 2005: 28-30), Samuelson (2007a: 836 and 2007b: 113ff), Wicomb (in Meyer and Olver 2002: 191), all cited in chapter six above.

Unspeakable violence may be represented through forms of textual violence, that is, violence performed on the formal unities of the text. The materiality of the text itself, when rent with the unspeakable, expresses precisely what it cannot utter.

(Samuelson 2007b: 123)

While the 'textual violence' through which Dulcie is represented has been foregrounded by this authorial and critical attention, far less attention has been paid to the fact that Sally Dirkse – wife to the eponymous David – is represented in sequences that are best described as realist. I argued in chapter seven that *David's Story* shows what I called a palimpsest, in other words a significant tracing, of engaged realism. I will now relate this observation to the rape of Sally Dirkse.

Sally's world is stable, unitary in its construction of time, space and causality. The ambiguities and doubts that beset her are also subject to the narrative code of realism: she is troubled by the suspicion that David might be having an affair with Dulcie, but not by any suspicion that Dulcie does not exist. Sally's own fictive existence, in its totality, is unquestioned at the level of form. Of particular interest to this argument is how Wicomb represents a situation in which Sally is raped by her instructor during her military training. Although she consents, it is rape nevertheless; she consents only because she considers it inevitable, and because of depersonalising struggle ideology:

He said, as they made their way gingerly across the burning sand, A fuck, that's what you need, and she saw his bulging shorts and knew that her time had come, as she had known it would come sooner or later, this unspoken part of a girl's training. And because she would not let him force her, lord it over her, she forced herself and said, Okay, if you want. It did not take long, and she had no trouble pushing him off as soon as he had done, and since she had long forgotten the fantasy of the virginal white veil, it did not matter, she told herself, no point in being fastidious, there were more important things to think of, there was freedom on which to fix her thoughts.

(Wicomb 2000: 123)

While this might be an 'unspoken part of a girl's training', there is nothing unspoken or

disfigured about its textual representation. It is significant that this *realist* instrument depicts precisely an ethical ambiguity of the anti-apartheid struggle, namely the abuse and marginalisation of coloured women, that Wicomb (in Meyer and Olver 2002: 190-191) regards as having been silenced. This observation of her own writing, in turn, leads to her defining Dulcie as 'the necessary silence in the text' (190), in other words, as an unspoken enactment of the unspeakable, which she characteristically has elected to represent through postmodern form. Her realist account of Sally's rape must then be questioned against Wicomb's own considered position on realism: 'But what's the point of reflecting the world; it simply leads to the tautologies of struggle-writing in which the writer rehearsed the already-known evils of apartheid' (197). While her aversion to the 'tautologies of struggle-writing' is thus clear, her resorting to realism in Sally's case requires explanation. I infer that the realist form of Sally's rape reflects a voice in Wicomb's writing that she does not acknowledge, even though it plays a significant role in *David's Story*.

This interplay of Wicomb's owned and unacknowledged voices demonstrates a different kind of dualism to that of *Disgrace*. In the latter novel, realism appears (in the duplicitous sense I have articulated above), to be its dominant mode; its postmodern qualities are only legible as subtext. In other words, its metafictional interrogations are seamlessly filtered through the aspect of realist form. In *David's Story*, the realist mode of Sally's rape is openly contrasted with the textually fragmented representations of Dulcie's torture, despite Wicomb's extratextual unwillingness to acknowledge the former. Further, it is clear that the two modalities (realist and postmodern) share unmediated space on the page, in distinct overt sequences of their own. *David's Story* thus refuses to integrate the two formal modes through which it moves, leaving them open and distinct, and their relationship unresolved.

A second difference between *David's Story* and *Disgrace* (and in fact the other narratives under discussion) is that rape in Wicomb's novel is not explicitly presented as an interracial construct. As Wicomb presents no markers of race in the instructor who rapes Sally, it may or may not be an interracial act; however, it proceeds from the same side of the apartheid divide, in that rapist and victim are colleagues in the struggle. It therefore addresses violation of women as a betrayal constructed within the anti-apartheid struggle, rather than as a racial construct on which the emergence of the new democracy is hinged.

There is also a third, strongly related, difference: there are no children of rape in *David's Story*. What the children of rape do in novels like *Disgrace*, *Bitter Fruit*, and *The Madonna of Excelsior* – reflecting the symbolic language of the rapes – is host the future in their bodies, persons, and sometimes their actions. In fact, they become personal transmitters of historic time, drawing on the social consequences of the past to generate (and to influence the quality of) the future. In Lucy Lurie's unborn child, for example, the racial hostility of the past converges; and although *Disgrace* ends with her pregnancy, it implies a bleak future society through the mere fact of the child and the narrative of its provenance. In similar vein, in Achmat Dangor's *Bitter Fruit*, the child of rape arises from an act of apartheid state terror, and proceeds to disrupt the conciliatory state carried in the rainbow nation ideal of the South African future. Analogous reflections are also visible in Zakes Mda's *The Madonna of Excelsior*, and my own novel *What Kind of Child*, as I will show below.

I have argued that the realist tradition of anti-apartheid writing is acknowledged as a palimpsest in *David's Story*, by means of its own considerable trace of realist form. In other words, the narrative language of the past is allowed to speak into the text at the formal level. It therefore seems relevant that *David's Story* is more orientated to the past than the future. That its gaze is altogether more comfortably directed to the past is demonstrated by its incorporation/reconstruction of

the Griqua history centred around Abraham Adam Stockenström le Fleuer, and its richly detailed and comprehensively elaborated writing back to a number of historic intertexts⁶⁹. Its movement into the future, vested in the transitional struggle work of David Dirkse and Dulcie, is a struggle of a different kind, marked as it is by (literal and literary) betrayals, self-doubt, duplicitous interpretations and narrators, consciously doubt-filled constructs, and the problematised representation of Dulcie. What the novel finally projects is a foundational degree of uncertainty, rather than a clear social future. I conclude that the chief allegiance of this narrative is to the past, which it reflects at the manifold levels of form, intertext and content that I have noted. It is also clear that the text does not trust the future, as indicated by its halting and compromised narrative movement towards it. In fact, the novel refuses to reach any closure about the future. I do not suggest by any means that it is only through the children of rape that a particular future can be projected. However, in the generic context of rape/transition narratives under discussion, and in the light of this hesitancy of Wicomb's novel with regard to the future, it seems appropriate that there are no children of rape in *David's Story* to configure or disfigure the rainbow nation. In other words, Wicomb is unusual in avoiding rape as a trope of the transition from apartheid to democracy. Further, as I have shown, this refusal is inscribed at the levels of narrative form and literary device, as well as content.

3

Zakes Mda's *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002) shows a number of differences with *David's Story*, and in fact the other novels discussed in this chapter. However, as I will show, its exceptional status paradoxically affirms my hypothesis that there is a relationship between form and rainbow nation teleology in these novels of the

⁶⁹ See chapter seven for a more detailed account of this intertextuality.

transition. I have argued that where the rainbow nation is disrupted, form is in some way fractured, exhibiting duality or duplicity. *The Madonna of Excelsior* in fact provides a substantiating counter-example for this hypothesis: the novel (albeit not without qualification) endorses the rainbow nation mythos, and demonstrates a unitary form.

Another significant exception is that *The Madonna of Excelsior* produces many children of rape. As noted, it is the only novel in this study that affirms the rainbow nation ideal. Moreover, it explores and gives life to the nation-in-becoming itself, not only directly through the children of rape, but through their black mothers and white fathers. It thus gradually moves the subaltern from submission to agency. A further distinguishing feature of the novel is that the victims of rape, the rapists, and their children remain within a nexus of community, albeit one that changes its interrelationships with the ending of apartheid. It is through these changing interrelationships that the rainbow nation trope is given meaning and substance.

One might compare this to the texture of the hypothetical social configuration that might be imagined of *Disgrace*: Lucy, Petrus and his family living together, a grouping characterised by the background (and thus the continued underlying presence) of violation and terror, and by the terrible necessities behind Lucy's choice to accept Petrus's 'protection'. It would be an unbearably grim place to live, had Coetzee actually written it. *The Madonna of Excelsior*, by contrast, works towards creating a tolerable sense of community, though not without acknowledging the steep difficulties and costs of the degree of social integration that it does represent. It must also be noted that Mda's rainbow nation does not coincide with a nationalist utopia, where a formal political process becomes the centre of value. In this text, "rainbow nation" and "nation-building" are discrete concepts.

In *The Madonna of Excelsior* a number of black women are raped, in some cases seduced, by white men of the eponymous town. The novel traces the life of Popi, one of the children of this rape, into adulthood. More particularly, it narrates her

role in negotiating, as a town counsellor and at local level, the shape of the rainbow nation. The novel tries to give meaning to this ideal through a comprehensive exploration of what it might entail. In effect, the narrative invents the rainbow nation through patterns of hard-won reconciliation, the slow changing of attitudes, and the restructuring of identity in rural Afrikaner life, as well as in the black township of Mahlatetswa. The citizens of both move beyond apartheid and grapple with their newly-liberated social conditions, and with how these affect their political and personal interrelationships, particularly with regard to integration, hierarchy and the assumption of power.

A further exploration of the rainbow trope lies in Mda's questioning of identity in the context of biological and cultural hybridity. This is expressed through the attitudes of Mahlatetswa to the coloured child Popi, and her compromised self-image; through Popi's gradual coming to terms with her identity; and through ways in which political forms of the old and new societies are merged, often creatively, sometimes bizarrely. At the end of the novel, anger is put aside, the bitterest of enemies are reconciled, and Niki, central victim of the narrative's initiating rape, achieves serenity. Indeed, Mda makes rainbow imagery explicit (even fortifying it with the somewhat ironic promise of divine blessing) in one of the descriptions of paintings by Frans Claerhout that thread the novel as a motif. In this depiction, Mda has five nuns carrying a baby that he hints are children of the rapes of Excelsior:

Five nuns that only live in the continuing present. Their world has nothing to do with the outside world of miscegenation. Yet each one of them is carrying a baby. Babies without slanting eyes. Babies that look grey at first glance, but have the colours of the rainbow if you look hard enough. (God promises us through the rainbow that He will never destroy the world again.)

(Mda 2002: 94-5)

Rainbow nation teleology is most evident, however, in the discursive movement of the novel: from its savage discursive dismantling of the patriarchal

master narrative of apartheid in the beginning, to a final discourse of nation-building, with all the implications of hard-won reconciliation this movement implies. In analysing the topos of the Afrikaner grotesque in chapter three, I discussed Mda's dissection of rape in *The Madonna of Excelsior*. I observed that Mda uses rape to subvert the image of male Afrikaner power through images of disgust and related satiric metaphors. This observation is equally valid for the present discussion. One might add that where Niki is strip-searched by the wife of his employer, a butcher, their son Tjaart 'saw Niki only as body parts, not as one whole person. He saw her as breasts, pubes, lips and buttocks' (42), an anatomical dissection that ironically mirrors the butcher shop in which it takes place. Niki takes her revenge by sleeping with the butcher himself, Cornelius Cronje:

And she had him entirely in her power. Chewing him to pieces. She felt him inside her, pumping in and out. Raising a sweat. Squealing like a pig being slaughtered. Heaving like a dying pig. [...]
It was all over. His body had vomited inside hers.

(Mda 2002: 50)

In Mda's everted Saturnalia, the bestial body is cut open: what lies exposed are innards, 'slimy seed' (16), parts alienated from the whole, metaphoric vomit⁷⁰. This visualisation turns the focus from the representation of women to that of men. These male figures of power are depicted as vulnerable and ludicrous, offensive in both the moral and visceral sense, aesthetically diminished. Satirically painted as they are,

⁷⁰ A representation of male sexuality that epitomises Bakhtinian 'grotesque realism', defined by Stallybrass and White in the following terms:

Grotesque realism images the human body as multiple, bulging, over- or under-sized, protuberant and incomplete. The openings and orifices of this carnival body are emphasised, not its closure and finish. It is an image of impure corporeal bulk with its orifices (mouth, flared nostrils, anus) yawning wide and its lower regions (belly, legs, feet, buttocks and genitals) given priority over its upper regions (head, 'spirit', reason).

(Stallybrass and White 1986: 9)

their power is thus evacuated. From this satiric deconstruction, Mda moves his characters through a range of changing subject positions, showing differentiated adjustments and resistances to the new republic, thus growing in his 'minute particulars', to borrow Blake's phrase, the rainbow nation itself.

It is instructive to compare the form of *The Madonna of Excelsior* with that of Mda's preceding novel, *The Heart of Redness* (2000). While both are constructed on a strong documentary base, they differ fundamentally with regard to the interwoven magic realist element that, deceptively, they appear to have in common. *The Madonna of Excelsior* is based on an historic incident, namely an orgy of interracial rapes and seductions that took place in the Orange Free State town of Excelsior in 1971, and the consequent unsuccessful attempt to prosecute the women under the Immorality Act. Mda foregrounds this documentary origin by copiously reproducing contemporary news reports from *The Friend*, a local newspaper, and referring to historic agents such as Percy Yutar, the Attorney-General at the time who decided to abandon this prosecution. *The Heart of Redness* relies to an even greater extent on its primary source, namely *The Dead Will Arise* (1989) by J.B. Pieres, so much so that Mda was recently accused by Andrew Offenburger (2008: 164-168) of crossing the line between intertextuality and plagiarism.

Whatever the validity of Offenburger's contention, and despite this documentary base, the magical realist component of *The Heart of Redness* is fundamental to its construction. If one were to censor the mythical particularity of the novel, it would be gutted, its substance so disrupted that whatever emerged would have little relationship with the original. This cannot be said of *The Madonna of Excelsior*. If one were to excise the fantastical chapter introductions based on Frans Claerhout's paintings, the imaginative and metaphoric texture of the novel would no doubt be impoverished. However, most of the narrated substance would remain intact. One might object that the novel closes on a magic realist note, with Niki drawing on

the mystic energies of her bees:

And then the bees began to swarm. They buzzed away from one of the hives in a black ball around the queen. And then they formed a big black cloud. We saw Niki and Popi walking under the cloud, following the bees. Or were the bees following them? We did not know. We just saw the women and the bees all moving in the same direction.

(Mda 2002: 267-8)

However, I can best explain Niki's and (more to the point, her politician-daughter) Popi's concluding immersion in the mystic energies of bees, and its implications for form, by drawing on the help of Fredric Jameson. Jameson claims (2006: 112-3) that because the form of the 'ontological realist novel' is by definition committed to 'the density and solidity of what is', it exerts a conservative pressure. In his words, 'the very choice of the form itself is a professional endorsement of the status quo' (113). This translates in political novels to cynicism in the representation of political figures, by which Jameson means figures who stand for social change: '[...] since politics does exist in the real world, it must be dealt with, and satiric hostility is the time-honoured mode of dealing novelistically with political troublemakers' (113). The consequence for a novelist of abandoning this jaundiced security would inevitably be to loosen

the lines that hold his work firmly to the ground of being, however much the narrative balloon surges and eddies in the winds of history. Were such lines cut, however, we would no doubt be confronted with truly Utopian forms [...] which would slowly drift out of the province of realism altogether.

(Jameson 2006: 113)

The Madonna of Excelsior – which by and large ends happily, although it is certainly by no means utopian – would comply with Jameson's axiom by relieving the gravity of realism just enough to lift a few centimetres off the ground, without actually taking flight. Yet this does not mean that the novel is fundamentally something other than realist. Excision of the limited magic realist elements would not disrupt the plot,

indeed the fundamental conception of the novel, to any significant degree. The magic realist element in *The Madonna of Excelsior* is therefore a matter of texture rather than substance. I conclude that the novel demonstrates a substantive (and fundamentally realist) unity of form, despite its magic realist pretensions.

It is not insignificant that *The Madonna of Excelsior* is the only narrative under discussion to affirm the rainbow nation ideal; further, that it is the only one in which the representation of rape is not configured through a variant of fractured form. I introduced this chapter with the proposal that representations of a schismatised social body through the language of rape have driven narrative into form that is fractious/fractured in a variety of ways. It is therefore interesting that *Disgrace*, which frames a dystopic prediction of the South African future, shows a profoundly duplicitous form in its representation of rape. *David's Story*, refusing any closure that might engage with the imagination of a social future, relies on a splitting of formal modes that rejects closure. Finally, *The Madonna of Excelsior*, which projects an optimistic future through the rainbow nation trope, does so within a unitary framework. In the following section, I will focus on a related splitting of form in my own novel, *What Kind of Child* (Barris 2006).

4

In this final section of the chapter, I reflect on my own positioning as a writer within the patterns of literary discourse I have analysed above, with regard to the formal modes of my novel *What Kind of Child*, and to the political argument of the novel. In reflecting on my own work, I depart from the metanarrative that is the norm of literary studies, in favour of a more immediate and more personal account. However, I believe it is justified to do so, speaking as a writer whose career has spanned much of the period and milieu on which this thesis reflects, and because this account will

engage with certain of the formal structures discussed in this chapter. I discuss further how certain of the tropes in *What Kind of Child* express not only its key intertextual relationship and provenance, but also constitute a deliberate statement on this provenance.

The narrative entertains two social worlds that are schismatised along racial lines: a world of privilege and material choice, as against a world of extreme material deprivation and iron necessity. The novel deploys two distinct formal modes that reflect this opposition. The world of material privilege is allowed the narrative luxury of irony and textual disruption, entertaining a degree of magic realist ornamentation, while a bleak realist text is used to represent the dehumanised social conditions of township society. The latter is dystopian in the sense that it presents a totality of suffering, albeit without fantastical elements. The former is anti-utopian, the fatal flaw in its perfection being the unacknowledged presence of what the realist counterpart relates. As in *David's Story*, realist and experimental texts are interwoven in otherwise separated sequences. However, as in *Bitter Fruit* and *Disgrace*, *What Kind of Child* uses the children of rape to disrupt the rainbow nation trope.

I have referred in chapter six to the response of various commentators to the irresolution of Lucy's pregnancy in *Disgrace*, including the feminist position that rejects a collective guilt-price extracted for apartheid upon a female body⁷¹. My personal response, visceral and intellectual, embraced both Fugard's and the feminist positions. The latter arose not from a considered or informed feminism, but from an intuitive conviction that gender violation – rape – is proffered in *Disgrace* as the morally justified price of racial oppression. I am not clear exactly how or why, but I responded eventually to my own outrage at the choices made by Lucy Lurie through the medium of short fiction.

⁷¹ See Horrell (2002: 30), Bethlehem (2002: 23), and Athol Fugard's heated response that it is 'a load of bloody bullshit' (2000, n.p.).

'What kind of child can seed like that give life to, seed driven into the woman not in love but in hatred, mixed chaotically, meant to soil her, to mark her, like a dog's urine?' asks David Lurie of the child of rape his daughter Lucy carries (Coetzee 1999: 199). I wrote a short story entitled 'Clubfoot' (2003) in which I sought to imagine what kind of child this might be. I portrayed the mother of the child, Caitlin, as a dead fish, incapable of communicating with the child, a woman who fills her space with hostile and inexplicable silences. In doing so, I intended to satirise Lucy Lurie's existential post-rape silence. The child, Luke Turner, is introspective and imaginative. He was given a clubfoot, curly hair and great physical beauty in honour of Byron. He thus becomes a surrogate of the Byronian opera that Lurie is unable to realise in *Disgrace*. Luke Turner's grandfather is introduced as a disgraced, alcoholic former professor of aerial perspective, a (not particularly accurate) caricature of Lurie.

The short story was shortlisted for the 2003 Caine Prize for Writing in Africa, and anthologised twice (Barris 2002 and 2004c). Spurred on by this reception, I eventually expanded it into a novel, namely *What Kind of Child*. I elaborated the intertextual devices I have mentioned, growing Luke Turner up into a serial womaniser, one who attempts to swim to Robben Island, rather than across the Hellespont, as Byron did. He has the habit of collecting the pubic hair of his sexual conquests, as Byron was reputed to do (it is not relevant whether this is legend or fact – as a writer rather than researcher, its factuality did not concern me). I also wrote a second child of rape, named Malibongwe Joyini, whose African mother is raped by a white policeman. Although this did not exhaust my motives, my intention in writing this second rape was explicitly to avoid the association of rape and "black peril" dynamics that I believed *Disgrace* consciously exploited. I pointedly made the rapist not a white Afrikaner, to avoid a related linking of ethnic essence to political encounter.

I introduced a further element into the narrative, which is that Luke Turner

suffers a compulsion to have himself comprehensively tattooed. The tattoo artist is Bernal Díaz del Castillo, the historic author of *The Conquest of New Spain* (1963 [1632]), which relates Cortes's conquest of what was later misnamed the Aztec empire. In my text Díaz is five hundred years old, and works as a tattooist out of a little shop in Long Street, Cape Town. Their project is to tattoo as much as possible of Turner's skin. Turner's poorly defined motive is to occlude his skin as completely as possible, thus negating his "colour" as a racial construct. The content of the tattoos is a fragmentary representation of an alien colonial history, namely Cortes's campaigns in Mexico, perhaps an intrusive device of estrangement.

I could not refrain in this novel from writing my own version of the rainbow nation. It is prefigured (complete with rainbow) in a painting reproduced as the frontispiece, namely 'Holiday Time in Cape Town in the Twentieth Century' by James Ford. It was painted between 1891 and 1899 and now hangs in the Iziko South African National Gallery in Cape Town (see Figure 2 below). This millennial picture projects a remarkable colonial optimism for Cape Town, a sense of which can be gleaned from my verbal pastiche of the painting:

This paddle steamer has come in close to show tourists the Rhodesian Pavilion, a Palladian structure given to the city on the occasion of Rhodes's wedding. The paddle-wheels thrash the water, counter-rotating as the steamer swings about in its own length. The cumbersome craft heads for Robben Island, no doubt for the Mandela tour.

A skiff, poled by a young woman in a long yellow dress and a straw sunhat, rocks in the steamer's wake. The monkey in the prow is alarmed and clutches at the gunwale, screeching hysterically.

I turn about as well and resume my Sunday morning promenade, heading past the station. Idly, I take note of the signs: RAILWAY TO RHODESIA, ZAMBESI & EGYPT; further on: FAST TRAINS DEPART DAILY FOR EGYPT, FRANCE & ENGLAND. Another column advertises STEAMERS HOURLY TO BLAAUWBERG & THROUGH THE CANAL TO MUIZENBERG. It is an idyllic morning, with dogs everywhere, and women gliding along on their bicycles and tricycles. Two women parade down the pier bearing theatre placards. They both smoke cigars, gaily brandishing them in sportive abandon. I carry on, strolling under the frontage of the Rhodesian Pavilion, cooled by the spray of its fountain, passing round the statue of Rhodes on its majestic plinth.

(Barris 2006: 131)



Figure 2: 'Holiday Time in Cape Town in the Twentieth Century' by James Ford (reproduced in Barris (2006, fronticepiece) with permission of the Iziko National Gallery).

Reflecting the opposition between Malibongwe and Luke – one born to a white mother into a world of relative privilege, and other born to a black mother into a world of extreme poverty – this society is expressed through two distinct narrative forms, one anti-utopian, the other dystopian. It is on the crux of postcolonial disillusionment, further, that the narrative of *What Kind of Child* splits in form. The ironic world of postcolonial disillusionment that is offset by the Ford painting belongs to the dissolute Byron-*manqué*, Luke Turner. He inhabits a postcolonial text marked by disruption of time, space and history, by the irruption of magic realist devices. This is a world that can afford the luxuries of irony and textual disruption, a reflection at structural level of the choices and the disengagement of its characters. Malibongwe's world (a sharp

contrast with the Ford painting) is represented in a bleak realist text, written in accessible prose, depicting dehumanised material conditions. It is dystopian in the limited sense that it presents a totality, although it has no fantastical elements: a closed and static world of suffering. This text allows no deviation from necessity, hence its observance of a strict realist code, in accord with the anti-apartheid principle of engaged realism reviewed in chapter one.

As I visualised it at the time of writing, the two texts moved in a formal relationship with each other, performing a single composite political argument expressed at the level of form, the content of which is a schismatic society. At the level of overt content, however, Luke's world is literally distinct from Malibongwe's: they hardly intersect at all. Indeed, the novel has been criticised for this narrative schism, and read as two distinct storylines that have little to do with each other (my own perception of their contrast and interaction at the level of form notwithstanding). I intended the hermetic insulation of these two narratives as a deliberate enactment of the schism in a country that has been described by the then-president of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, as consisting, economically, socially and politically, of two nations. While I do not agree with everything Mbeki says, there is considerable justification in the following: 'A major component part of the issue of reconciliation and nation building is defined by and derives from the material conditions in our society which have divided our country into two nations, the one black and the other white' (Mbeki, 29 May 1998, n.p.). However, by dividing the country between the life of two coloured children of rape – albeit children brought up in white and black homes respectively – I sought to dissociate my narrative argument from the inevitable question of race, locating it in material conditions, culture and opportunity.

Conclusion

How can a body of texts generated within, and in terms of dissemination and reception still held within, the episteme of *anti-apartheid* [...] be meaningfully related to one beyond apartheid? [...] Above all, perhaps, how do we register in the shift towards a more relevant discourse that this shift is all the more painful and difficult for its material conditions not yet being firmly in place?

(Green 1997: 7, original emphasis)

1

The novels investigated in preceding chapters show, at the levels of form and topos on which I have concentrated, an array of responses to the literary crossroads articulated in Green's question above. In order to identify what common factors and changes run across the various texts studied, it would be appropriate to recover key elements in the 'episteme of anti-apartheid' that were discussed in chapter one. First among these was the demand for, and pressure towards, a politically engaged realism. This called for a documentary element that would cry witness to the evils of apartheid, to borrow the liberal phrase; for a teleological commitment to the struggle that would end apartheid, hence raising the factor of mobilisation; for a form and content accessible to the 'masses'; and for alignment with the political agenda of various political formations from which this demand proceeded. However, as Green's question recognises, the anti-apartheid struggle has been formally and nominally won, even though the 'material conditions' (Green 1997: 7) of the economic kingdom remain elusive, and sometimes appear unachievable. An evaluation of how post-apartheid writers have responded to this ending seems, therefore, to require some rephrasing of the epistemic question itself. How, one might ask, have writers *generated or invented* a more relevant discourse? I choose to phrase it this way because this investigation has shown that a rich and subtle field of formal experiment has elaborated the

apartheid-era innovations of writers such as J.M. Coetzee, and later on Ivan Vladislavić and Mike Nicol, writers who had resisted from the outset the proscriptions of struggle literature.

A second key element of the 'episteme of anti-apartheid' is an implication that does not seem to have been articulated, but occupies a shadow-space projected by the teleology of struggle: what kind of social domain/s *should* emerge in the literature of victorious struggle? I raise this question not in the belief that such outcomes should be dictated or even assumed, but heuristically: in order to explore what literary influences have been cast across the ending of apartheid by the ideologies that arose in opposition to it. I ask, in other words, what new Eden has been broadcast in South African writing after apartheid. Further, has that post-apartheid invention, the rainbow nation mythos, pre-empted ways of structuring representation of a post-apartheid society, crowding out other possibilities from the writerly imagination?

In a paper that explores possible post-apartheid literary trends, Jabulani Mkhize (2001:) predicts a split between black and white writing based on form. His point of departure is that, during apartheid, postmodern experimentation has largely been the province of white writers, while black writing has restricted itself to realism. The question he raises is this:

[n]ow that the politics of oppositionality have been displaced by 'the rainbow nation' how are writers who have seen themselves (and have indeed been regarded) as representatives of the 'masses' likely to deal with the predicament of the role which has been constructed for them?

(Mkhize 2001: 171)

After considering why black writers have preferred the mode of realism, reiterating the arguments of mobilisation and mass access that I have noted above, he expresses the view that black audiences remain educationally ill-prepared 'to engage with the challenges that (post) modern texts provide' (180). Mkhize concludes, somewhat

tentatively, that realism is likely to retain its value in black writing for some time to come (180-181). However, pointing to the example of Mda's *Ways of Dying*, he believes that the most likely extension of black writing into postmodern form will be through the avenue of magic realism (182-3).

A review of the contemporary outcomes of the fourfold demand noted above will show that in most respects authors of the transition have worked out their form and content from the premise of creative freedom. However, an awareness of social commitment is never far from the surface. It is clear not only in the predominance of relevant content, but in a number of novels that have written back *at the level of form* to the tradition of engaged realism. What has changed is the nature of this social commitment: not a single text studied above shows any allegiance to any externally sourced political agenda of nation-building. A further sign of independence is that the requirement of accessible form and content is by no means mandatory, as the work of Vladislavić, Zöe Wicomb and Phaswane Mpe attests. Indeed, they clearly address their work to educated readerships; further, there is no ground for assuming that this educated readership equates to a predominantly white one. While one cannot draw definitive conclusions from a limited sample of writing, it does suggest that demanding experimental form is not restricted to white writers. This same limited sample also suggests that magic realism might be the postmodern avenue of choice for black writing, although not the only one. However, the relationship of post-apartheid writing with the rainbow nation trope appears to be more problematic than Mkhize suggests.

Frederic Jameson reflects on the problematic of literary futures in the following terms:

But when we have to do with the future, with what does not yet and may never exist, it is a different story, and we are confronted with politics itself. Here we face the knotty problem of the political novel and political literature in general, and their very possibility of existence. Is it conceivable within the world of immanence, for this or that existent, this or that already existing element, to breathe "the air of other planets," to give off even the slightest hint of a

radically different future?

(Jameson, 2006: 111)

Indeed, Jameson's 'radically different future' (2006: 111) has become a double-edged blade in the post-apartheid imaginary, as he so ironically suggests (albeit at a more general level) it might. The social future imagined in post-apartheid writing has become radically different from what a teleologically committed struggle literature might project – perhaps a triumphalist nationalist body of works – and from what the TRC-endorsed nation-building mythos of the rainbow nation has inscribed in public discourse. Yet it is striking that the futures projected in these novels do not differ radically from the familiar apartheid past, in many respects. This does not suggest that, within the scope of these projections, nothing has changed or will change. The consensus of the narratives seems to be that either things have changed for the worse, or that hitherto unpredictable distortions have replaced the dysfunctions of apartheid. This observation is the textual correlative of material conditions. As Shaun Irlam observes (2004: 697), 'Whatever transformations have taken place at the level of political institutions and national iconography, the inescapable fact is that little has changed in the material conditions defining South African society since the end of apartheid'.

In the following section I will briefly trace these formal and teleological relationships through the post-apartheid novels considered in this thesis.

Damon Galgut's *The Good Doctor* (2003) situates itself as a post-apartheid novel. It is set in a bleak and depopulated rural town, centred on a near dysfunctional hospital, which serve as a compounded trope of post-apartheid South Africa. The society so

represented finds itself in a condition of universal dysfunction. On the teleological question, the novel thus predicts failure for the democratic South African dispensation. The kind of failure reflected in *The Good Doctor* is principally economic and governmental, with the metaphoric hospital at its centre grinding to a halt through corruption, incompetence and criminality. The novel, in its address to a social problematic, its attention to realist unities, and its depiction of an ontologically stable world, takes on hallmark attributes of engaged realism (albeit in a negative sense, in that its engagement is a pessimistic indictment of the post-liberation future). However, as I showed in chapter two, it relies with unadaptive consistency on the conventions of anti-apartheid writing, displacing these without sufficient contextualising translation into its own post-apartheid setting. The result is an embedded anachronism to which accrues a consequence probably unanticipated by the author: the novel unwittingly reproduces a social topography that is stratified in racial terms. I concluded that these formal tensions register a failed attempt to shift from an anti-apartheid paradigm to its replacement, whatever this might be. One might say that Galgut was unable to imagine – as a precondition of writing the novel – this replacement paradigm with sufficient energy or clarity to contribute to its invention.

The Restless Supermarket (2001) by Ivan Vladislavić creates an 'Alibia', an 'elsewhere' that is as much lexicography as it is material and social space. This is a domain inhabited by a narrative persona, in Aubrey Tearle, who is monumentally resistant to change, whose very speech is resistance, and who cannot distinguish between social change and dissolution itself. As I suggested in chapter four, the novel is as much a lexical meditation – and a mapping of transforming urban spaces – as it is a narrative of events. As this description indicates, the form itself is innovative to the core. It also points to the quality and nature of Vladislavić's political engagement, which is embedded not primarily in some

trajectory of consequential events, as in a realist text, but in the speech acts of his narrator Tearle. What these speech acts mount is a consistent, satirical mis/reading of (and resistance to) transitional and post-apartheid social change. More significantly, it is a misreading of the shifting and migrant population which drives this change. Tearle, moreover, is not merely an object of satire which the implicit reader might apprehend. His reactionary persona also figures as a satirical *mise-en-abyme* of the conservative subject within the implicit reader (and possibly the writer), reacting with aversion to the same social flux. What then of struggle teleology? Quite obviously, the novel makes nothing of it, and stands entirely outside the domain of its prosecution. In reading the formal invention of *The Restless Supermarket*, its imaginative form, my personal evaluation is that it comes closer than any other perhaps to 'breathing the air of other planets' (Jameson 2006: 111), although it is grounded (apart from the surreal Alibia sequence) in a familiar and increasingly squalid version of Hillbrow, and despite its distance from a post-liberation teleology.

Ways of Dying (1995) by Zakes Mda addresses itself to the transition, rather than to the post-apartheid future. In doing so, it diverges from struggle teleology – and from the political agenda of liberation agencies – in that it reflects a multifoliate rather than binary struggle for hegemony, with various forces contending for power. Further, it is this struggle itself that victimises the oppressed masses, rather than exclusively the operations of apartheid. A further departure from the imperative of engaged realism can be found in form, in that *Ways of Dying* is a magic realist novel. Its consistency with the genre is visible in its engagement with political and social material, while rendering the borders of realist possibility porous. Magical events thus irrupt in a world that is otherwise documentary in its political import. However, this formal choice bears implications for societal teleology, in that it offers limited operative or material solutions. In fact, the novel posits a transcendental resolution to its crisis of political oppression and extreme poverty: the love, imagination and

humour shared by Noria and Toloki. As I noted in chapter five, this has been criticised as a betrayal of the struggle legacy, and praised as a welcome literary innovation. The point I make is that in this novel of the transition, Mda has asserted his independence, in form and content, from the demands of struggle literature.

Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001) disrupts the rainbow nation ideal with extreme thoroughness. The text desires but cannot find a humane and just society within the post-apartheid dispensation, this failure arising through an atmosphere of rampant criminality, disease and lawlessness. Community solidarity is disrupted by a malicious community voice that spreads rumours of witchcraft, fuels xenophobia, and casts its victims as sexually profligate and even diseased, identifications which sometimes lead to murder, necklacing and suicide. This social disintegration arises from compounded impacts of urbanisation, AIDS, immigration from other parts of Africa, and the collision of village and city epistemologies. These are unintended, globalising social conditions that arise from postcolonial change; they are not engineered social effects such as the deprivations of apartheid. As there is no centre of evil, no master text against which to write, a sense of helplessness permeates the text.

The social instability the novel represents is reflected (as thoroughly) in its destabilising form. In chapter five, I discussed the complexities of internalising Mpe's second person address which dominates the text, and the spiral narrative method which continually circles back to a chronological sequence that is thereby advanced slowly and repetitiously. Further, while the magic realist tenor of the novel opens the world of 'our Heaven' (Mpe 2001: 124) to the material gaze, it is a heaven in subjunctive mode. The knowledge and hindsight gained in this world of the ancestors is impotent to resolve any of the crises of the novel, except wishfully, expressed as a permutation of the heavenly possible, rather than as a material transaction couched in the predicative. This "ways of dying" novel therefore also offers only transcendent

solutions for the material problematic. Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying* sites a related transcendent possibility in *living* township dwellers. Mpe's transcendence is twice removed, because of its mordancy – it is sited in the dead – and because it is conditioned by the subjunctive suspension I have noted. *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* thus engages with material and social conditions, but does so in the absence of political agenda, and of nation-building intent. If, as Richard Samin observes, 'post-apartheid fiction has correlatively sought the *proper language* to encode the hopes, contradictions and ambiguities of the period' (2000b: 26, my emphasis), the formal language created by Mpe disrupts the context of reconciliation, scripting instead an alienated *personal* vision of society.

I now introduce a further consideration, namely that novelistic form in post-apartheid writing demonstrates two linked properties. Firstly, it has become a versatile tool that writers use in different ways, and to different ends. I have grouped the novels named in the conclusion as I have for good reason. Those considered above are consistent and single forms that have (with the exception of *The Good Doctor*) ignored the statutory privilege of committed realism; however, the remaining texts to be discussed show versatility, fusion, or duality in their deployment of form. This versatility of form not only ignores, it further denaturalises, such privilege.

In chapters five through eight, I discussed the inventive variants of fractious form: J.M. Coetzee's duplicitous text in *Disgrace* (1999), allegory nested in the realist text of *Bitter Fruit* (Dangor 2001), Zöe Wicomb's palimpsest of engaged realism within the postmodern *David's Story* (2000), and the related splitting of realist/postmodern narratives in *What Kind of Child* (Barris 2006). While the form of Mda's *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002) is largely realist, the contrast it shows with his other works (magic realist texts such as *The Heart of Redness* (2002) and *The Whale Caller* (2005)) likewise points to his formal versatility, and his willingness to depart from the practice of engaged realism.

I further related the formal dynamics of this second group to their disruption of the rainbow nation trope. More particularly, I argued that the racialised discourse embedded in the realist facet of Coetzee's *Disgrace* is not erased or negated by the reflexive, metafictional counter-discourse that is also legible in the text. The result is a deeply pessimistic, utterly despairing, vision of the South African future. The post-apartheid allegory in Dangor's *Bitter Fruit* writes against the national allegory of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, scripting in its place the return of the (apartheid) repressed, and thus of retribution. *David's Story* writes back, through its richly and satirically developed intertextuality, to the colonial past. The novel relates its version of the past to a transitional present in the anti-apartheid struggle that itself is compromised by its colonial (racialised and patriarchal) legacy. It does not address itself to the rainbow nation. However, if *David's Story* does imply anything at all about the future, it is that racial and patriarchal tensions remain embedded and unresolved, and so will continue to influence political life. My novel *What Kind of Child* enacts, through its split form, a duality in the material condition of society that seems irrecoverable, despite the ending of apartheid. Its prognostication for the rainbow nation is thus self-evidently negative. Finally, while *The Madonna of Excelsior* alone of this sample allows possibility for the rainbow nation and explores its meaning, Mda reproduces no nationalist iconography. His protagonists, Viliki and Popi, are indeed cast out of the official political process that they spearheaded, and from the 'Movement' they represented. The future they enter is thus divorced from political life in the iconic party of the struggle. In other words, despite the adherence of this text to a form of engaged realism, it remains disengaged from the party line.

Andrew Foley has remarked that

[...] among the most significant texts produced in this period are those, firstly, which refuse to suppress inconvenient truths about the new South Africa in the name of euphemistic assurance or political solidarity, and, secondly, which are willing to interrogate what is in fact the highly complex notion of reconciliation,

through a candid examination of some of the very real impediments to its achievement in the country.

(Foley 2004: 1)

If this were sufficient criterion, the novels explored above would qualify as significant. However, significance resides too in the manifold ways in which they have contributed to the reinvention of form within the South African literary tradition, and in which they have encoded subtle and diverse political arguments within the level of structure. The consequence for my broader argument is that such structural invention and articulation is in itself a partial answer to Michael Green's question quoted above. The 'elaborate *rhetoric of urgency*' – the privileged status of realism that safeguarded 'the ethical claims of South African literary culture' (Bethlehem 2006: 3, original emphasis) – continues to cast a productive shadow, particularly through its vital legacy of social critique. It has nevertheless given way, through the considerations I have explored, to new formal languages. In these, a process of translation becomes legible, from 'the episteme of anti-apartheid' (Green 1997: 7) to a paradigm that is more reflective of post-apartheid conditions.

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