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GUY BUTLER FROM A POST-APARTHEID PERSPECTIVE:
REASSESSING A SOUTH AFRICAN LITERARY LIFE

by

CHRISTOPHER JAMES THURMAN

Thesis presented for the degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
in the Department of English Language and Literature

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ADDENDUM A:
INDICATION OF CHANGES MADE
TO DOCTORAL THESIS

Christopher James Thurman

**GUY BUTLER FROM A POST-APARTHEID PERSPECTIVE:
REASSESSING A SOUTH AFRICAN LITERARY LIFE**

Thesis to be re-examined by Professor Andrew Foley

Introductory note

The thesis is being resubmitted to an examiner whose report concludes, 'I do not recommend that the thesis be returned for resubmission'; the decision to have the candidate revise and resubmit is based on the recommendation of a dissenting examiner. Nevertheless, following consultation with the Doctoral Degrees Board and Committee of Assessors, the majority of the changes that have been implemented are based on the specifications of Professor Foley's report, as listed below. Where further changes have been made following the suggestions of other examiners or reviewers, these are also recorded.

Title

This has been reworded to remove any ambiguity.

Abstract

The penultimate sentence (about Butler being 'the kind of liberal who redeems liberalism from its perceived state of derision') has been removed. Its presence in the abstract was an error resulting from a previous arrangement of the thesis, in which the section on liberalism was incorporated into the conclusion as one means of bringing together the various strands discussed in the main chapters. This structure was changed prior to the first submission of the thesis for examination, as it made the conclusion too long and, moreover, placed an excessive emphasis on the liberalism question. Such an emphasis is unfortunate, as I believe that liberalism is not, ultimately, the most useful point of access to an understanding of Butler's life and work – even though, because the word 'liberal' has been used so often to describe him (as indeed he described himself), it is a necessary one. I argue the point at greater length in a substantially revised section on liberalism (see below).

Contents page (and relevant section heading)

Part Three, Chapter Six: III A different kind of liberal *now reads*

Part Three, Chapter Six: III "Old Cape" liberal

This also reflects the change in the content of the liberalism section.

Introduction

p.10 'millennia' corrected (here and throughout)

p.11 paragraph on 'The Underdogs' (deleted from submission copy) has been restored, situating the poem as one of Butler's early attempts at political 'protest' through poetry

Part One (Preamble: Stocktaking)

pp.23-4 paragraphs on Butler's function as writer-critic/poet-academic (deleted from submission copy) restored, introducing the problematic overlap between these roles as discussed at greater length in Chapter Six:
II

Chapter One: II "Grand old man" of South African letters

p.38 'It was also the year that David Philip published his *Essays and Lectures*.' (added)

pp.38-9 Yeats reference noted

pp.43-55 In these pages, sub-section (ii) '*He wishes he were very different from what he is*' has been appreciably expanded. 'Poetry '74' and 'English-speaking South Africa: An Assessment' are compared in order to show how 1974 was both '*annus mirabilis*' and '*annus horribilis*' for Butler – in one sense a high point in his "ESSA campaign", but also a low point insofar as Kirkwood's attack represented a growing frustration on the part of younger academics and writers with what they perceived as the reactionary, apolitical or even "colonial" elements of that campaign. I discuss Butler's role as anthologist in this light, comparing his and Chris Mann's 1979 *New Book of South African Verse in English* with contemporaneous anthologies (while cross-referencing Butler's 1959 *Book of South African Verse*); I also refer to some of the poetry Butler wrote and published during this period in the context of, for instance, the work of the Soweto poets and WESSAPs producing "poetry of dread".

Note: 'A Prayer for All My Countrymen' appeared in *South of the Zambesi* (1966) and not *Songs and Ballads* (1978), so I have not discussed it directly as an example of Butler's poetry in the late 1970s.

Chapter Two: I The hobo and the nun

p.75 'émigré' corrected

p.76 'there's' corrected

p.78 'those who[m] I love' (here and p.78)

Chapter Two: II Family man

p.83 'humorous' corrected

Part Two (Preamble: Relocating the rational)

p.95 'The Republic and the Arts' is better situated within the context of events in 1960-61.

p.99 footnote [3] extended with reference to an extract from 'The Republic and the Arts' not included in the version reprinted in *Essays and Lectures*.

Chapter Three: I Christian, Romantic, soldier

p.104 footnote [16] added

- p.109 'prelapsarian' corrected
- p.114 Discussion of wartime anecdote is phrased in terms of Bakhtin and the carnivalesque
- p.117 'passé' corrected

Chapter Four: I African and European

- p.135 'firsthand' corrected
- p.147 'crude tools' changed to 'stone tools'
- p.155 'pharaohs' [sic] – misspelled in Butler's typescript
- p.145 [and footnote 33] Butler's paper on 'Poetry, Drama and Public Taste' linked to the conference of writers, publishers, editors and university teachers of English held at Wits University in 1956 (along with the published conference proceedings)

Chapter Four: II Educator and academic

- p.171 footnote [13] – letter correctly attributed
- p.171 footnote [14] – Tony Voss' review of *Songs and Ballads* is quoted to support the critique of Butler's tendency, in his later poetry, to "sermonise"
- p.173 footnote [18] – refers to the debate over subsidies for university students studying either the sciences or the arts, both in terms of Butler's comments (1962) and in light of new policies recently announced by the Department of Education (2007)
- p.174 'disapproved' corrected
- pp.175-6 Final paragraph of (ii) *Positivism* changed to elaborate on Butler's difficulty with concentrating solely on "academic research"
- p.176 'approach' deleted
- p.182 'prejudice-as-the-past' – hyphen added

Part Three (Preamble: history)

- p.188 'Mohammedan' [sic]
- p.191 'MacBride' corrected

Chapter Five: I Artist/activist

- p.198 Sepamla, not Sephamla (here and throughout)
- p.204 [footnote 34] 'Ode to Dead Friends' corrected
- p.207 'cafés' corrected

Chapter Five: II Historian-mythologist

- p.219 'lê', 'sê' and 'reën' corrected
- p.225 footnote [32] updated to include recent adaptations of Euripides' *Medea* in South Africa
- p.227 comparison between *Cry, the Beloved Country* and *Demea* is rephrased so that Paton's novel is not made to seem an 'apartheid-era' text

Chapter Six: I Ecologist

- p.249 'tribes' changed to 'peoples'
- p.256 'impersonal and kenotic' replaced with 'malevolent and benign'
- p.260 revised text:

‘A rather simplistic opposition is laid out between these “stone-age hunter-gatherer[s]” (25) and the relative “newcomers” – “pastoralists and agriculturalists”, both black and white, who “depended on domesticated animals and on crops” and whose “flocks and herds drove the game away”. The “African” (in this case, as opposed to ‘European’) pastoralists are described as having, or having had, less sympathy with wild animals than the San, but as possessing nonetheless a tradition of oral narratives, poetry and proverbs in which non-domesticated animals are ubiquitous and have a consistent symbolic function.’

Chapter Six: II Cultural politician

p.267ff

This section has been substantially revised. In *(i) (W)ESSAs then and now* and *(iii) Redeeming ‘the settlers who came by sea’*, the work of Banning and Foley (in the 1980s and 1990s) as well as Schlemmer, Gardner, Welsh and others (particularly from the 1976 volume *English-speaking South Africa Today: Proceedings of the National Conference, July 1974*) has been incorporated into debates about ESSA history, identity and politics. I have referred to the formation of the English Academy and other “English institutions”, but have not attempted to repeat the work of Akal in contextualising this process and detailing Butler’s involvement in it (apart from the problem of space constraints, my justification for this is based on the argument I put forward in my introduction about how best to “dovetail” Akal’s thesis with my own). I have also attempted to set Butler’s public pronouncements from the 1960s and 1970s against other forms of ESSA opposition as well as the broader historico-political background of the period. Finally, I have amended the conclusion to this section in order to elucidate my position on the origins of Butler’s interest in the ESSA group as a cultural phenomenon and the ways in which his attitudes to the ESSA group changed over time or remained consistent.

Other changes:

p.267 [and footnote 1]: *‘(i) ESSAs, then and now’* changed to *‘(i) (W)ESSAs, then and now’* to accommodate both the term ‘English-speaking South African’ and ‘white English-speaking South African’, and to indicate the problem of conflating these two acronyms (in light of the race-language complex in the South African situation)

p.270 footnote [12] – the debate about ESSAs being “in the middle” of South Africa’s political rivalries now makes reference to Foley’s (1991) defence of this claim

p.290 footnote [67] added to distinguish Butler’s use of the word “bastard” from Andrew Foley’s later (1991) invocation of the term for different purposes

p.295 incorrect dating of *The Blood Knot* is footnoted [82]

p.296 footnote [86] added – linking Butler’s portrayal of certain “attributes” resulting from the predicament of coloured people in South Africa (alcoholism, fatalism) to M.G. Whisson’s paper on ‘The Coloured People’ (in *South Africa’s Minorities*, Spro-Cas publication number 2, 1971)

p.298 ‘Strijdom’ added

p.302 footnote [103] added – placing Butler’s poem ‘The Last Trekker’ in the context of the Thirstland Trek of the 1870s (as opposed to the Great Trek of 1836) based on W.A. De Klerk’s discussion of the two in ‘The Afrikaner: Contemporary Attitudes’ (*South Africa’s Minorities*)

p.305 ‘to accept Afrikaans as a compulsory language of instruction’ (not *the*)

p.307 comments on globalisation slightly modified

p.308 [and footnotes 115-117] – reworked to compare current concerns over the need to “intellectualise” African languages with Chris Mann’s expressed anxiety (1979) about the effect of poems translated from African languages into English contributing to the hegemony of English

p.309 ‘*some* ESSAs’

p.309 [footnote 120] – reference is made to the author’s work, in a different context, on perceptions of “Englishness” in South Africa

pp.310-11 [and footnote 125] – L.W. Lanham’s (1976) discussion of English as a second language in South Africa is quoted to counter-balance Butler’s concerns about ‘standards’ of English language usage in a multilingual country

p.311 [footnote 127] – reference is made to the debate about the (conscious) use of a “black” or “second-language” idiom by current South African writers

Chapter Six: III “Old Cape” liberal

This section has also been substantially revised, taking account of both critiques and defences of South African liberalism in the work of Rich, Foley, Jeffrey Butler, Elphick, Welsh, Davenport, Visser, Wentzel, Legassick, Hofmeyr and others, as well as the assessments of modern liberalism from an international perspective by Gray and Gaus.

Sub-headings have been changed to:

- (i) *ESSA = liberal = conservative?*
- (ii) *Christianity vs “the commercial spirit”*
- (iii) *Patriotism and pluralism*

p.334 [footnote 66]: reference to Dhlomo’s ‘Not for Me’ added

p.337 ‘libertarian’ changed to ‘liberal’

Conclusion: Flowers of synthesis

p.349 – ‘countless’ deleted

pp.349-352 [and footnotes 28-34] – the 1956 and 1969 conferences are discussed in some detail so as to make it clear that they are not being conflated, but to state nevertheless that the campaign for South African literature instigated by Butler and others in the 1950s still faced opposition towards the end of the 1960s and even into the 1970s

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p.c. ‘André Brink’ corrected (twice)

p.d Ben Maclennan – redundant reference deleted

p.i ‘Selected’ deleted and brief explanation inserted instead

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ABSTRACT

Guy Butler was a substantial public figure in South Africa over the second half of the twentieth century: performer of chameleon literary roles (professor, poet, playwright, autobiographer and historian), as well as cultural politician and opponent of apartheid legislation. Nevertheless, his is not a familiar name to the majority of South Africans, and where he is known, Butler remains a problematic figure. On the one hand, he has been criticised for expressing dated or even “colonial” ideas, or for lacking radical political conviction; on the other hand, he is often seen as a “grand old man” in South African literature rather than as a writer for a new generation of readers. These views do not take into account those elements in Butler’s writing that were (and still are) subversive, intellectually compelling and of enduring literary value; nor do they consider the complex private man behind the public persona. Butler’s response to the South African situation presents us with a challenge – to acknowledge frankly those elements in his life and work that distance him from us, without losing sight of the significance they hold. The current study makes use of Butler’s private correspondence and unpublished material from the National English Literary Museum archives in Grahamstown, and combines the biographical insight gained from this documentation with criticism of his published work in every genre to offer a more balanced explication of Butler’s life and work than has yet been achieved. It consists of three parts, each addressing a key aspect of both his literary output and his place in the South African literary-cultural establishment. The first considers the various “personae” of Guy Butler; the second, his sustained (and in some ways controversial) attempt to balance the conflicting demands of the rational and the irrational; and the third, his preoccupation with the relationship of the individual to history. In conclusion, Butler’s lifelong quest for “synthesis” is shown to enhance our understanding of literature and cultural politics, both under apartheid and in post-liberation South Africa.

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the above thesis is my own work, both in concept and execution, and has not been submitted for a degree at the University of Cape Town or at any other university.

Signed



C.J. THURMAN

Date

9 SEPTEMBER 2007

A NOTE ON FORMAT

I have used the *Chicago Manual of Style* (CMS) referencing convention. Single 'quotation' marks are used for direct quotes; double "inverted commas" to hedge certain words or phrases. Publication details of works cited are provided at their first mention in the footnotes; thereafter, works are referred to by the author's surname and the title (in the first footnote in which they occur in relevant sections), and then by title only (in subsequent footnotes in the same section). Unless otherwise indicated, all poems quoted in this study are from Guy Butler's *Collected Poems* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1999). Unpublished manuscript material and correspondence taken from the archives of the South African National English Literary Museum (NELM) in Grahamstown is acknowledged accordingly. John Read's *Guy Butler: A Bibliography* (Grahamstown: NELM, 1992) also lists individual articles from newspapers and journals in the NELM collection.

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INTRODUCTION

(i) Motivation and structure

Why write about Guy Butler? The answers to this question will go some way towards elucidating the nature and purpose of my study. It is to be hoped that the question, which is a valid and necessary one, will spark the interest of readers from across South Africa's social spectrum – or, at least, across the rather narrower “literary” spectrum.

Indeed, for the great majority of South Africans, a more pertinent question is: Who is Guy Butler? It is easy enough to respond to this truism by pointing to our country's high illiteracy rate and the crises of health, poverty and unemployment as sufficient reason for the relative anonymity of any figure whose name does not have overt political – publicly influential – overtones. Such a response, however, is facile on two counts. Firstly, putting aside the dubious assumption that so-called intellectual or artistic pursuits (such as an interest in literature) are by and large a luxury of the privileged, Butler is to an unfortunate extent unknown even amongst educated, middle-class South Africans and, notably, the white English-speaking population which he challenged and championed for so many years. Secondly, it could be argued that Butler's name has, in the past, had just such “political” overtones, and he certainly was publicly influential.

Here we encounter a further problem. For those South Africans to whom Butler's name has some resonance, or is even vaguely familiar, the question arises: What is Guy Butler? For the man whose life encompassed so many roles – university professor, poet, playwright, autobiographer, churchman, historian, cultural politician – is inevitably known only in part. Those who have heard “Butlerism” used as a derogatory term may have no inclination to read his autobiographies; avid Grahamstown/National Arts Festival-goers may celebrate his founding vision but will almost certainly not have seen one of his plays performed; and those literature students who may recognise him as a “grand old man” of South African English letters are unlikely to have read much of his poetry.

The attitudes of many intellectuals and critics in the South African literary academy itself (I hesitate to say the English academy) are not, unfortunately, conducive to stimulating debate over Butler's place in post-apartheid South Africa.¹ On the one hand, there are those who, as much as they would celebrate Butler's literary and other achievements, do not sufficiently acknowledge the factors deleterious to his reception and thus risk the further diminution of his status as a writer and academic. On the other hand, there are those who do not consider Butler's work to be as relevant as that of his South African (or international) contemporaries and, more captiously, would see his writing and cultural campaigning as informed by ideas and ideologies objectionable to South Africans in the twenty-first century. For many years now, and even since Butler's death in 2001, the labelling of his "white liberal" political and literary attitudes as Eurocentric, perhaps patriarchal, even embarrassingly colonial, has detracted from his sophisticated awareness of – and sensitive insight into – the racial, linguistic and cultural politics of twentieth century South Africa.

Another important question remains: How do you write about Guy Butler? Life and work (and historical context) are typically inextricable, but Butler's case particularly demands a balance of biographical study and literary criticism (and cultural-political critique). Although my study makes new use of biographical material, however, it is not mapped onto the classical biographer's axes of time and space – I have not followed the advice of RF Foster, biographer of Yeats, who suggests in *The Apprentice Mage* (1997) that, when telling the story of someone's life, 'a strict chronological ordering must form the basic grid; integrating themes then grow across the lattice.'² Butler's childhood and young adulthood up to the age of 30 is recorded chronologically in two and a half of his three volumes of autobiography, but the period during which his status as a public figure was attained and sustained – 1951 to 1990 – is treated thematically rather than chronologically in the latter half of *A Local Habitation* (the final

¹ Considering the gradual replacement of the traditional "English Department" by departments or schools of "Language(s)" and/or "Literature" at many universities, 'the English academy' has become something of a misnomer if applied to those engaged in the practice of literary scholarship (both research and teaching). This does not, of course, undermine the value of organisations such as the English Academy of Southern Africa.

² RF Foster, *WB Yeats – A Life. 1: The Apprentice Mage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. xxx.

volume, published in 1991). One might thus choose to provide a chronological account of Butler's most "productive" years. There is a danger, however, that correctly ordering and adding to this narrative would amount to little more than a cataloguing of endeavours. Remarkable as many of Butler's achievements are, and much as a recounting of his various interests and projects would impress the reader, the significance and impact of the underlying ideas – and their specific means of expression – might be lost. Accurately researched records are already available: Jeanette Eve's *Guy Butler: Fifty Years of Press Clippings, 1944-1994* and John Read's *Guy Butler: A Bibliography* are two excellent resources, published in 1994 and 1992 respectively. More recently, Anthony Akal's unpublished thesis *Forms of Community Service: Guy Butler's Literary Contributions* (2003) contains a chapter documenting the accomplishments of institutions and projects that bear Butler's mark.³

I have chosen not to arrange my material chronologically because, in this particular study, such an arrangement would incur one of two risks. The first is the tedium of repetition, given Butler's extensive (although not exhaustive) and largely chronological autobiographical accounts. The second is reciprocal to the first and, perhaps, an inevitable response to it: the desire to "avoid repetition" might result in a sustained attempt to undermine or challenge the validity of Butler's self-proclaimed life story. My concern is with neither defence nor attack. Vindication where this is instructive; disapprobation where appropriate; mitigation where required; but neither obsequiousness nor its opposite number, mere gainsaying.

If a purely chronological account is not appropriate for my particular purposes, alternative structures present themselves – based on generic distinctions, perhaps, or on the different roles that composed Butler's public and private profiles. The hurdle to avoid, once again, is

³ Doctoral thesis, UKZN/Natal, 2003. The third chapter of Akal's study, 'Cultural Projects', constitutes a strong defence against Elaine Williams' critique (in her own unpublished thesis, *Guy Butler and South African Culture*, 1989) of the "institutionalisation" of English in South Africa under Butler's leadership. Akal provides evidence of the value of the Institute for the Study of English in Africa (ISEA's) Molteno Project, South African English Dictionary Unit and journals such as *English in Africa* or *New Coin* (pp.271-277); NELM (pp.279-281); the Settler Monument, the Grahamstown Foundation and the National Arts Festival (pp.288-292); and the English Academy itself (pp.292-294). For further discussion of Williams' study, see Chapter Six (II) below.

repetition; similar themes are manifest in different forms at nearly every age and stage of his career, in every place, in every genre. I am thus convinced that a thematic arrangement best suits the material at hand. Nevertheless, I have provided subheadings that suggest roles, or “labels”, appropriate to ‘the many Guy Butlers’ of this study. These are not intended to be comprehensive. I have not used Butler’s authorial identities (such as poet, dramatist, scholar or autobiographer) as subheadings: rather, his literary works and capacities permeate this study. The re-surfacing of ideas and concerns in a wide scope of contexts, genres and projects necessitates a certain amount of cross-referencing; I have pointed out these overlaps in footnotes where appropriate, although practical considerations have prevented me from mentioning every instance.

A major premise of this thesis, as indicated above, is that many of Butler’s detractors, like many of his admirers (and, outnumbering both of these groups, the majority of those who are either indifferent to or ignorant of his place in South African history), have a misinformed understanding of the person and life’s work of FG Butler. I have identified what I consider to be the three areas in which this disparity is greatest, and my study is divided accordingly into three parts.

Part One (Chapters One and Two) carries the theme of “taking stock” and is primarily biographical. It sets out to consider certain aspects of Butler’s personal life, research and writing (a) that are only hinted at or glossed over in his autobiographies, and (b) that even the most astute reader will not find in those books because they postdate them – the anxieties and interests expressed in the last decade of Butler’s life, after the publication of *A Local Habitation*. There are numerous Butler manuscripts extant that have not yet found their way to publication, including at least two of book-length. One of these is an academic work on *King Lear*, intended as the *magnum opus* of Butler the Shakespearean scholar. (The present study does not engage with Butler’s research into and writing on Shakespeare in the depth that these indubitably merit. Indeed, an entire volume could and ought to be dedicated to the subject, but much of it is beyond the scope of this thesis.) The second manuscript is *Thirst*, a work centred on the life of an alcoholic painter that could be

described as both a fictional-historical biography and a semi-autobiographical novel. Along with the new pieces in his *Collected Poems* (1999) and *The Prophetic Nun* (2000), this reveals much about the preoccupations of Butler's later years.

Part One also records and discusses what can be gleaned from letters, speeches and the memories of friends, explaining and adding to certain aspects of Butler's life only implicitly referred to in his autobiographical writing. This is not intended as retrospective voyeurism, but rather follows my assertion – a subtle but consistent profession by Butler himself, albeit at a subtextual level in the autobiographies – that his life, his relationships, his passions, his fears, his yearnings and his regrets formed a man far more complex than many of his admirers and his critics have allowed him to be in the public view (or, now, the public memory). Understanding these private complexities allows us to appreciate the intellectual complexity of his ideas, as well as the expression of those ideas. This consideration of Butler in his (to use Tim Couzens' words) 'infinitely varied' individuality, for better or for worse – precisely the consideration that Butler claimed for every individual – is carried over into the following chapters.⁴

The reader may surmise the broader themes of Parts Two and Three from the titles of their respective Preambles; they address two of Butler's lifetime preoccupations, key concerns through which his oeuvre can be better understood and through which the chief objections raised by his opponents can be addressed. Part Two (Chapters Three and Four) addresses the contentious but central question of how Butler perceived the "rational" and the "irrational" – philosophical, psychological and historico-political terrain extending far beyond the much-rehearsed debates about Butler's invocation of the Apollo-Dionysus myth as a paradigm for understanding the Europe-Africa encounter. This in turn establishes a topography for Part Three (Chapters Five and Six), which examines the ramifications of "history" in Butler's life and work: the tension between participating in and escaping from history; the complexities of political history, both ancient and contemporary; natural history; cultural history.

⁴ Tim Couzens, letter to Guy Butler, 4th July 1993. NELM.

If these chapters offer a wider thematic assessment, they also consider the more specific implications of those themes – ranging from apartheid racial politics to current issues in education, from Christianity to consumerism, from the European Renaissance to recent South African literature and even the African Renaissance.

I am investigating Butler's life and work not only for the inherent value and interest they hold, but insofar as they represent a certain kind of response to life in South Africa preceding, during and at the end of the apartheid era. The symbol of Guy Butler, which has often been inaccurately interpreted or invoked, needs to be "deconstructed" (in the non-theoretical sense of that word). As Butler was a key figure in South African letters and cultural life over the second half of the last century, a reassessment of his writing – and context of writing – should stimulate further reflection on the place of English-language literature in particular, and literature in general, in our country: both *then* (during the struggles of the twentieth century) and *now* (in post-apartheid South Africa). This is a study about his words and his deeds, his South Africa and his world; but it also appertains to our words and our deeds, our South Africa and our world.

(ii) The problem of context

There is already a well-established dispute between pro- and anti-Butler camps: first of the 1950s (when he came under fire for too vigorous a promotion of "indigenous" literature), and then of the 1970s (when "Butlerism" was coined as a generic term for a colonial mindset masquerading as liberal humanism). These debates formed part of wider discussions that were taking place in the daily press as much as in purely academic or scholarly publications. Although the broader issues were and – to a lesser extent – still are familiar to many South Africans, a new perspective from our position in the twenty-first century is required.

A Local Habitation, for instance, was published during a time of great transition in South Africa and abroad. Butler added an Epilogue in which he acknowledged this change and expressed an awareness that the book, 'written almost entirely under the apartheid regime', might soon

seem dated because it was completed before the change in ‘the direction of European history’ and ‘the nature and style of African politics’: ‘It is far too early to see clearly the shape of the new South Africa, but I welcome with joy the movement towards a democratic society ... We are at an end, and also at a beginning.’⁵ After this, Butler produced numerous articles and shorter publications, had his *Collected Poems* brought out in 1999 and *The Prophetic Nun* in 2000. Apart from reviews of these works and Jonathan Hyslop’s chapter on Butler in the recent volume *South Africa’s 1940s: Worlds of Possibilities* (2005), however, there has been little published critical writing about him since Stephen Watson’s 1994 edition *Guy Butler: Essays and Lectures, 1949-1991*.⁶

Watson’s Introduction to the volume has a celebratory tone:

...these essays continue to speak to us. Largely written during four decades and more of unequalled oppression in South Africa’s history, they will now be received in a period of unusual change. They will be read today in a time in which the ideas central to the cultural tradition to which they belong, the tradition of South African liberalism, are enjoying a kind of resurgence. The present moment is one in which the customary glib dismissals of South African liberalism, as if it had never amounted to more than a form of well-heeled hypocrisy, have never seemed more glib, the long habit (of both Right and Left) of deriding all that liberals have stood for never more unconvincing.⁷

In a review of *Essays and Lectures*, Tony Morphet suggests that, although the collection allows the reader to look ‘at the career as a whole’ and thus provides ‘some distance from man and project’ (the split “Butlerist” and “anti-Butlerist” camps become a thing of the past, and one is ‘no longer drawn into the choice of faith or apostasy but rather into the contemplation of a particular way of making meaning in difficult times’), the essays are limited in their relevance, not so much by the apartheid context of their production, to which they speak boldly and convincingly,

⁵ Butler, *A Local Habitation: An Autobiography 1945-90* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1991), p.310.

⁶ By specifying ‘published critical writing’, I exclude Akal’s thesis, which I will discuss separately in this Introduction. Numerous obituaries following Butler’s death also undertook to survey his life and work. These were not critical assessments as such, although Laurence Wright’s Obituary in *Current Writing* 13:1 (2001) stands out: it achieves a rare balance of academic appraisal and personal affirmation. Indeed, Wright manages to compress into a few pages (1-6) a discussion of many of the issues that are elaborated upon in this thesis. The eulogy given at Butler’s funeral by Malvern van Wyk Smith also combines evaluation with celebratory tribute; see *English in Africa* 28 (2, October 2001): 5-10.

⁷ Stephen Watson, Introduction to *Guy Butler: Essays and Lectures, 1949-1991* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1994), p.19.

but by the context of their reception in collected form: the years of transition to a democratic state under ‘the principal universalising condition of modernity – the freedom of all citizens under a single constitution’.⁸ This vindication of “modernity” in South Africa, Morphet argues, undermines the emphasis in Watson’s Introduction on Butler’s ambivalence to the modern.

The review is astute, but falls short in some respects. Firstly, as I will show in this thesis, Butler’s life and work should not be reduced to ‘the total English project’ Morphet describes. Secondly, Butler’s dilemma with regard to modernity – one might say to rationality – was a multifarious one, and he was not an ‘anti-modernist’ *per se*.⁹ Thirdly, because over a decade has passed since the publication of the *Essays and Lectures*, one needs to take into account not only the political changes in South Africa in the intervening period but also the texts that Butler produced in the final years of his life. It is, in fact, only now that a ‘distance from man and project’ sufficient to make a balanced appraisal is possible; insofar as poles of ‘faith’ and ‘apostasy’ remain, even if they are less vehemently maintained, I hope to validate the middle ground between these extremes.

The ‘present moment’ of Watson’s Introduction was the halcyon period (in retrospect at least) of South Africa’s early momentum towards democracy: “Madiba magic”, multi-party negotiations at CODESA, the exultation of the first free election.¹⁰ More than ten years on, the Mandela era having given way to the Mbeki era, the buzzword is no longer “deliverance” but “delivery”.¹¹ There are new voices, frustrated by the pervasive social and economic legacies of apartheid, the imbalance that still exists between rich and poor – and, to a large extent, between black

⁸ Tony Morphet, ‘Promoting the English’, *Southern African Review of Books* 34 (November/December 1994): 17-18.

⁹ As Morphet notes, Butler made recourse to Enlightenment concepts such as universality in his opposition to segregation. In Part Two, I explore this complexity further.

¹⁰ Watson’s sentiments were echoed by Lionel Abrahams in 1995: the peacefully negotiated transfer of political power was, for Abrahams, an affirmation of Butler’s ‘visionary patriotism ... based on an invigorating fusion between the western heritage and the potent secrets and energies of Africa’ and thus more appropriate to the ‘prevailing mood’ than the late-apartheid-era call for ‘South Africa rejection, punishment, correction or medicine’ of writers such as Gordimer, Fugard, Brink, Coetzee, Ndebele and Breytenbach, who were ‘dominated by an idea of South Africa in a state of political and moral sickness’ (“The Democratic Chorus and Individual Choice”, Hoernlé Memorial Lecture, SA Institute of Race Relations, 1995, p.4). Manuscript, NELM.

and white. These voices insist on new priorities and policies.¹² If Butler is boxed as simply another “white liberal”, his story and his ideas may be lost; but, as Watson submits, it ‘remains true’ that ‘many South Africans, English-speaking and otherwise, are presently no more at home in their various South African worlds than they were in the past’ and that ‘Guy Butler has remained our contemporary.’¹³

White English-speaking South Africans continue to occupy a curious, problematic place in this country – a combination of privilege and neurosis, of great influence and apparent political impotence. Butler speaks to that. He also speaks to problems of widespread poverty, disease and violence. He is able to challenge the attitudes that equate affluence with liberalism. He also has plenty to say about the prospects for an African Renaissance. Significantly, as Jonathan Hyslop has written, Butler’s ‘interesting engagement with the issue of what it means to be South African’, an engagement that would ‘recognise cultural difference without worshipping it’, suggests that his work ‘may, in the post-apartheid context, have a renewed relevance to the question of what it means to be a South African.’¹⁴ Reassessing a life such as Butler’s allows us to examine our history and our current circumstances in terms outside of the reductive and inadequate equation: oppression + struggle = freedom.

My account focuses on the development of Butler’s pivotal ideas and his changing attitudes to prevailing political, cultural and social issues. These are vital to the debate on his place in South African literary and social history – indeed, his claim on future generations of readers. It is, perhaps, one of many “case studies” of significant literary figures that ought to be undertaken: studies acknowledging frankly those elements which may alienate them from readers in post-apartheid South Africa, but

¹¹ The matter of Mbeki’s successor has, of course, greatly influenced more recent political power struggles.

¹² Compare Abrahams’ poem, ‘A Dead Tree Full of Live Birds’ – also from 1995 – acknowledging, reluctantly, that ‘The impulse to celebrate/is paralysed’ by other imperatives: ‘another youth,/his bunched up fist aloft’ who declaims ‘I am Azania ... I have no time for liberals’, or ‘responsible thinkers’ who ‘announce/demands of History, revolution, sociological times’ (*A Dead Tree Full of Live Birds*, Cape Town: Snailpress/Hippogriff, p.7).

¹³ Introduction to *Essays and Lectures*, p.21.

¹⁴ Jonathan Hyslop, ‘An Anglo-South African Intellectual, the Second World War, and the Coming of apartheid: Guy Butler in the 1940s’, *South Africa’s 1940s: Worlds of Possibilities*, ed. Saul Dubow and Alan Jeeves (Cape Town: Double Storey, 2005), p.213 and p.225.

also considering the ways in which their achievement can be unequivocally embraced.

A study configured around both Butler's concerns and those of South Africa in the twenty-first century must take cognisance of his historical context and therefore his historical limitations. However much he envisioned a time different to the one in which he lived, he was inevitably a product of that time. Butler recognised this himself. As an old man, tongue perhaps in cheek, he wrote to his son Christopher: 'How old-fashioned I am'.¹⁵ In a more serious tone, he declined an invitation to be interviewed about settler history for a 1991 documentary on 'The History of African Art' because he felt that the 'present fluid state of historical debate about our past cannot be dealt with by someone no longer properly informed.'¹⁶ The invitation was extended on the basis of Butler's historical expertise. He was asked to discuss 'early SA history until 1910' – by which the would-be interviewers meant 1820 settler history, one of Butler's special areas of research. The manner of Butler's reply suggests that he picked up on the awkward phrasing employed in describing the colonial enterprise; his interests in natural history and archeology made him well aware (as the makers of a documentary on 'The History of African Art' ought to have been) that the phrase 'early SA history' refers to a period pre-dating 1820, pre-dating 1652, pre-dating even the last two millennia.

These confused terms of reference draw attention to an acute difficulty in the study of people and events from eras that are different to our own: language. We have lived through nearly two decades of change at an exponential rate, and the use of language has changed accordingly. The vocabulary and linguistic idiom employed in the past – more importantly, the connotations of certain usages, many of them once common but now taboo – increases our separation from it. This is most keenly felt with words that classify race. Apartheid-era categorisations such as "Bantu" or "Native" or even "African" recoil upon those who used them. As a man who perceived the power of words to shape attitudes, Butler eschewed diction that might cause offence and was careful with race classifications – asserting as he always did that these merely described 'the biological

¹⁵ Guy Butler, letter to Chris Butler, 21st August 1999. NELM.

accident of skin colour.¹⁷ Nevertheless, there are inconsistencies, and the reader must bear in mind that interchanging “blacks” with “the Blacks” with “Africans” did not prevent Butler from defining himself, ultimately, as an African: such were the vagaries and fluctuations of these terms of reference in the last century. With regard to his critical writing, a glance at the early and later pieces in his collected *Essays and Lectures* shows not only a change in nomenclature but also a more sensitive and sophisticated awareness of the implications of words such as “European” and “African”.

Other restrictions were imposed on Butler that might all too readily be forgotten. As a playwright, for instance, he was frustrated by laws that dictated mono-racial casting; as a poet, he had to be aware that overt anti-government rhetoric might result in banning. Of course, it is too easy to excuse all his limitations in light of these restrictions – staging and censorship notwithstanding, there are still depictions of race in his plays, poems and autobiographies that some readers will find awkward. Moreover, Butler was known to court controversy, and it would be a disservice to his often subversive position under apartheid to conclude that the “gospel” he preached was diluted so as not to alienate potential “converts”, thus seeming to endorse the *status quo*.

The example of ‘The Underdogs’ can be mentioned here. Butler considered it his ‘first protest poem.’¹⁸ Written in 1950, it describes ‘four loafers’, urban criminals who ‘have found/a danger-deep integrity’ in their ‘refusal to be menials’. The poem presents an acrimonious challenge to white South Africans. Despite its sharp criticism of racism and exploitation, however, it makes an unfortunate association between, on the one hand, political opposition to oppression, and on the other, felony that marries ‘violence with hope’. The ‘rebels’ in the poem are not heroic, but ‘repulsive, degraded and coldly self-assured.’ Irrespective of the poem’s pertinence in a South Africa afflicted by crime, it does not sit easily alongside subsequent and more celebrated struggle poems. ‘The Underdogs’ is nevertheless a protest against the hypocrisy of apartheid; it is a ‘protest poem’, albeit of a different kind.

¹⁶ Butler, draft of letter to SABC, undated (1991). NELM.

¹⁷ Butler, *A Local Habitation*, p.310.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.100.

Malvern van Wyk Smith has argued convincingly that we need to re-read the work of (white) South African writers – many of whom are now considered “conservative” – not simply through the lens of our current attitudes and experience, but with an appreciation of the conditions attending their writing. These authors, he suggests,

should be situated back into the discursive tensions, conflicts and transgressions which caused them to emerge in the first place and which will reveal them once again for the often radically oppositional and subversive voices they were taken to be at the time.¹⁹

Van Wyk Smith’s concern here is primarily for ‘Dissent and Dialectic in Early South African Colonial Writing’, but it should be noted that he lists Butler along with a number of twentieth century writers who, like nineteenth century literary figures such as Thomas Pringle and Olive Schreiner, need to be salvaged from ‘a hermeneutics of suspicion and a discourse of dismantlement.’ Although this discourse was and is largely ‘a quite understandable backward deflection of our revulsion from racism, apartheid, and their colonial origins’, it is dangerously ‘binarist thinking’ to categorise this tradition of writers into ‘a single, coherent ideology of conquest’ that voices ‘imperial propaganda’ or ‘settler apologetics’. To do so is to replace the ‘univocal narrative of Eurocentric imperial self-justification’ (which postcolonial theory has so effectively shown to be fallacious) with ‘another master narrative, no less reductionist and no less binarist’:

This is the narrative of the passive exploitation or heroic resistance of the colonized, of the blanket perfidy of all settlers and colonial agents ... The underlying epistemological assumptions of such views are, of course, radically at odds with the agnostic, constructivist insights of postmodernism, since they assume an a priori “reality” or “truth”.

We can better understand the nature of Butler’s protest if we judge him not only with the accelerated hindsight of ten post-apartheid years, but also by taking into account the context in which his dissenting voice was

¹⁹ Malvern van Wyk Smith, ‘Origins revisited: Dissent and Dialectic in Early South African Colonial Writing’, in Reckwitz *et al* (eds.), *Constructing SA Literary History* (Essen: Die Blaue Eule, 2000), pp.12-13.

raised. This may make him more (and not, as Morphet contends, less) relatable to present racial and cultural affairs.

Political attitudes, philosophical convictions and modes of literary expression are constantly shifting. Butler was aware that, in South Africa, both English second-language and mother-tongue speakers ‘may become critical of the values embodied in once highly esteemed works to the point of dropping them’.²⁰ As an ageing academic he had to confront the reality that, with regard to certain books and certain writers – even such as Sol Plaatje – ‘popularity is on the wane precisely because of the changing ethos of popular readership.’ Equally subject to a ‘changing ethos’ are ‘popular’ opinions about any given political outlook. In *Bursting World* (1983) Butler remembers his ‘dreams’, as one of two self-proclaimed ‘democratic moderates’, at the age of 22 (the year was 1940):

The Cape native franchise must be restored and extended to the other provinces. There must be a massive expansion in native education (in which we ourselves might in due course take part). The industrial colour bar must be abolished. English and Afrikaans children must all go to parallel- or dual-medium schools. While accepting differences of language, culture and race, and the need to provide separate facilities to accommodate them, we were opposed to compulsory segregation. Instead of harping on points of difference between one group and another, South Africans should be encouraged to look for common interests and sentiments. School history textbooks should be written by panels of historians comprising all races.²¹

At the time, these were radical suggestions; nowadays, some of them would be viewed as retrograde and barely “politically correct”.²²

Jonathan Hyslop’s work on Butler emphasises the latter’s historicist leanings – ‘the importance of place and historical specificity against universalist claims and abstraction’ – including his opposition to the Cambridge school of Practical Criticism.²³ Hyslop refers to a passage in *A Local Habitation* in which Butler explains the motivations underlying his stance against those ‘zealots’ who argued that ‘the literary text was

²⁰ Butler, letter to the Wits African Studies Institute, 23rd June 1993. NELM.

²¹ Butler, *Bursting World: An Autobiography 1936-45* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1983), pg.131.

²² In similar vein, Akal points out that while the ‘poetic project [Butler] outlined in 1950’ – his lecture on ‘South African Literature’ – does not appear to be ‘startling’ from our perspective, ‘when it is contextualised it becomes apparent just how radical a programme he was advocating’ (*Forms of Community Service*, p.153).

²³ Hyslop, ‘An Anglo-South African Intellectual’, p.217.

autonomous’, that biographical and historical background ‘were frequently a beguiling and time-wasting distraction’:

... for scholars to turn their backs on the genesis and origins of literary works struck me as simply unscholarly. For one thing the uniquely arranged words on the page were not fixed in their connotations and unless one used a dictionary based on historical principles one could make serious mistakes in reading ... If words, the very materials out of which poems are made, are products of dynamic social changes, works of art made up of words must be seen as such, and some attempt be made to read them in the knowledge, as far as possible, of the differences between our age and the age that produced them.²⁴

The courtesy thus accorded by Butler to other writers will be extended to him in this study.

As Anthony Akal’s work on Butler was completed shortly before the present one began, and given certain superficial similarities in scope, it seems necessary to point out that, while the two studies are roughly coeval, they are not coterminous. Although I endorse Akal’s approach of comparing ‘past significance’ to ‘present practice’ (he invokes Robert Weimann’s distinction between *entstehungsgeschichte* and *wirkungsschichte*), I offer a different account of the ‘genesis’ of Butler’s ideas and their expression in writing or in action, and I do not fully concur with Akal on their ‘present meaning’.²⁵ This is only partly due to the biographical slant in my analysis. It is also because we focus on diverse texts, take differing exegetical approaches, and attend to sundry themes and properties within and across the texts.

Akal’s thesis is structured along generic lines. He eschews the autobiographies-as-literature (they ‘reveal little conscious commitment to an art genre; rather, they are honest testimony’) and does not explore texts such as *Tales from the Old Karoo*, *The Prophetic Nun* or the anthologies Butler edited.²⁶ In Chapter One of his study, Akal assesses Butler’s dramatic output in a chronological sequence. Readers looking for full synopses of the plays; information on specific historical events (typically, apartheid legislation and the forms of opposition to this) contemporaneous

²⁴ Butler, *A Local Habitation*, pp.96-97.

²⁵ Akal, *Forms of Community Service*, p.i and p.123.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.4.

with their conception and production; or descriptions of Butler's unpublished and radio plays (*Judith, Remembrance Day, Two Timers, A Scattering of Seed* and *The Silver Spoon*), will find it most useful. Akal discusses the poetry separately in Chapter Two on the grounds that it tends to 'mitigate against a more passionate involvement in temporality', while the plays 'show definite sociological preoccupations'.²⁷ Although there are grounds for such a distinction – it is useful to stress 'Butler's willingness to become socially engaged in his [play]writing' – Akal points to exceptions to this generalization, and I am reluctant to accept the implications of his assertion for Butler's oeuvre as a whole.²⁸ Moreover, as I have indicated, despite the changes in Butler's political and literary stance over the years there remain too many instances of reversion and resonance to trace a neat development from 1950 to 2000.²⁹

I also hope to develop more substantial grounds on which to assess the 'present meaning' of Butler's life and work. Akal emphasises Butler's 'promotion of the idea of a "common humanity" [which] is ... not very far removed from the current political vision of harmonious diversity within the inclusivity of a "rainbow nation"', but I do not consider this sufficient.³⁰ I will draw the reader's attention to correspondence and disparity between Akal's study and my own at various points.

(iii) Authority and autobiography

Although he maintained that he was in some ways a reluctant autobiographer, Butler was also aware that there was more public interest in his autobiographical writing than in any of his other work. He had an interest in the genre for its own sake: collecting quotes on the topic of autobiography; comparing 1820 settler diary-keepers with writers of formal reminiscences; scribbling notes with titles like 'Autobiography: Fact or Fiction?'. In the latter document, he discusses the responses to his first

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.124.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.14. Akal refers to 'Dream of a Buffer Strip', 'The Underdogs', 'Sundowners', 'In Memoriam, JAR, Drowned, East London', 'Profligate Parson', 'A Prayer for All My Countrymen' and 'Ten Minutes' Silence 1970' (p.139); there are numerous others.

²⁹ Akal's chronological overviews of critical responses to Butler's work (pp.8-12 and pp.131-141) are, nevertheless, accurate and well-constructed.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.126. A more focused consideration of issues in post-apartheid South Africa is required than Akal's reference to the 'somewhat "freer"' conditions following the transition to democracy (p.3).

volume, *Karoo Morning* (1977) – amongst which, he was surprised to discover, ‘very few touched on the question I have raised: How true was the story?’.³¹

Fascination with the form was accompanied by an acknowledgement of its pitfalls. In a talk ‘On Being a Writer’, he referred to the problem ‘posed by one’s readers’:

I remember my disappointment, when reading Roy Campbell’s autobiographies, that he said so little about his own poetry, his own thoughts as a writer, his feelings about the role of letters in SA, his reactions to his critics. But, I ask myself now, wasn’t he wise to omit his struggles as a writer, with language, with technique, with the problems of criticism? The portion of the public who will find my views on free verse interesting is probably not very large. Yet the literary struggle was, and is, central to my life. Maybe – maybe – it should be dealt with separately. But would that not be a major falsification?³²

The issue of truth in autobiography is crucial. The length of Butler’s memoirs might suggest that in at least one sense his life has already been comprehensively chronicled. At the same time, however, we must recognise that autobiography is a selective, myth-making process – which, it could be argued, in Butler’s case forms part of a broad self-projection into public opinion and memory. Although his autobiographical writing has been described as ‘easy, natural, honest ... frank even in its more personal material’, it may nevertheless conceal as much as it exposes.³³

A critical study of Butler that, like the present one, has a biographical element might thus aim to “fill in the gaps”, or to delineate and separate autobiographical fact and fiction where necessary, or indeed to authenticate and corroborate the accuracy of Butler’s narrative where

³¹ Guy Butler, ‘Autobiography: Fact or Fiction?’, undated manuscript, NELM.

³² Butler, ‘On Being a Writer’, undated manuscript, NELM.

³³ Alan Lennox-Short, review of *Bursting World* (‘Talking of Books’, SABC radio), quoted on the cover of *A Local Habitation*. Butler phrased the dilemma thus: ‘[If] I exclude certain people and places and dates to make room for other matters, am I falsifying the truth? Is not selection the beginning of falsification?’ (‘On Being a Writer’). Czeslaw Milosz acknowledges the same problem: if authors, ‘for fear of sounding false, stress their acts of madness and error, we can be sure that they exercise some sort of self-censorship’; yet, he insists in a more sanguine tone, ‘there is nothing degrading in our fundamental incapacity to lay bare all the particulars of our fate. If it were any different ... probably the art of writing would disappear’ (*Native Realm* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1981), p.5). See also JM Coetzee’s analysis of Rousseau’s *Confessions*, in which he argues that the risk of true confession is ‘not to the self but to the life of the medium ... getting to the truth carries a threat, namely the threat of ending the enterprise.’ Butler kept a copy of this text, which was delivered as Coetzee’s inaugural lecture at the University of Cape Town, 3rd October 1984 (‘Truth in Autobiography’) and subsequently appeared in *Doubling the Point* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp.264-274.

appropriate. As Butler died just a few years ago, and is survived by family members, friends and academic or literary contemporaries – and as his copious private and professional correspondence is now held at the National English Literary Museum (NELM) in Grahamstown – this is a tempting route to follow. Doubtless, certain previously hidden details of Butler’s personal life, once revealed, might temper his public image; but iconoclasm for its own sake is boring, and sensationalism often undermines literary criticism. More importantly, as Janet Malcolm has pointed out, biographers or biographical writers can do no more than provide their own version of the truth, a version inevitably mixed with an equal part of fiction.³⁴ Pointing to inconsistencies between history and autobiography is especially problematic, she notes, when it involves retelling or even creating a narrative in which some of the “characters” are “real” – that is to say, still alive.³⁵ Butler’s figure looms so large in the memory of friends and acquaintances, ex-students, university colleagues, fellow writers, members of the arts community and residents of Grahamstown that everyone who knew him, or knew of him, has their own version of Guy Butler: a fond recollection of the man or an anecdote to share. It was his particular talent to fuse these together into a coherent picture, both in the life he lived and in his writing about that life.³⁶

Nevertheless, as life and letters are so intricately intertwined, an examination of those sources in which Butler’s private feelings and experiences are laid bare might provide new insight into his plays, poetry and prose. Butler suggested that these concerns can be complementary: ‘Autobiography is closer to those forms of writing which are concerned with individual consciousness – closer to poetry and fiction.’³⁷ There are also various ways in which Butler’s poetry and prose fiction express what

³⁴ See Janet Malcolm, *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (London: Picador, 1994).

³⁵ Butler himself was at pains to be discreet in order to avoid offence in his autobiographical writing – some have found *A Local Habitation* wanting because it merely alludes to, or in certain instances does not even mention, people, encounters, and episodes in the recent history of the Rhodes University and Grahamstown communities that had controversial overtones.

³⁶ Dirk Klopper, discussing Butler’s autobiographical writing, comments on ‘the writer’s fictionalisation of himself, his writing of his own narrative’ as follows: narrative ‘requires selection of detail in accordance with an overall literary design. Its ultimate aim is the creation of a unified effect. Thus to write one’s own narrative is to attempt to make sense of oneself, to establish one’s identity by applying standards of literary unity to one’s life.’ (*The Poetry of Pringle, Scully, Slater and Butler: A Materialist Perspective*. Unpublished thesis. Unisa, 1991, p.232.)

³⁷ ‘On Being a Writer’.

autobiography, in itself, often cannot (“fiction” is perhaps the wrong word, given that Butler claimed he ‘never had to invent a story’).³⁸ His writing in various genres can provide greater depth to individuals, relationships and events that are merely sketched in the autobiographies.³⁹ In a letter to his friend Ron Ayling, Butler stated that his collected poems embody his autobiography in its most forceful and intense form. In reply, Ayling echoed Butler’s sentiments, suggesting that his poetry and prose are a single entity, ‘fragments from a greater artistic whole’.⁴⁰

There is one final point to be made regarding the biographical portion of the current project. Tim Couzens (in a letter about his work on *Trader Horn*) wrote to Butler, ‘I love writing biography, but the responsibility of someone else’s life is quite heavy.’⁴¹ The writer must face ‘the humbling thought’ that, no matter how thorough, ‘he or she can never get it right – that another human being is infinitely varied, infinitely mysterious, an “ungraspable phantom of life”. Thank heaven!’ The quote from *Moby Dick* is also applicable to my study: as I have suggested, the “symbol” of Guy Butler has in the past been the victim of those who, Ahab-like, in their vehemence mistakenly project a significance onto that which refuses to be neatly defined or categorised.

Even those offering a balanced critical appraisal have been inclined to see Butler as representing a particular strain of South African literature, or a certain position maintained within a given socio-political era – to grant him, as it were, a metonymic status that facilitates comparison across the shifting temporal and spatial landscapes of South Africa’s literary history, making Guy Butler principally a useful reference point on a survey map. André Brink’s early *Three South African English Poets: A Critical Study*, which deplores the dearth of critical material ‘in the way of evaluating indigenous English poetry’ – he was writing in 1958 – focuses on Thomas Pringle, Francis Carey Slater and Butler to redress

³⁸ Butler, letter to Patrick Cullinan, 23rd May 1985. NELM.

³⁹ In *Bursting World* (1983), for instance, when the experienced narrator refers to his young, experiencing self leaving the family home to go and fight in the Second World War, he does not actually describe the difficult moment of parting with his pacifist father, Ernest. The bittersweet mood of this experience is, however, captured in the poem ‘The Parting’. I will not venture any further examples to illustrate the point at this preliminary stage.

⁴⁰ Ron Ayling, letter to Guy Butler, 13th December 1999. NELM.

⁴¹ Tim Couzens, letter to Guy Butler, 23rd January 1987. NELM.

that paucity, providing ‘an evaluation of three South African English poets representative of three more or less distinct phases in the development of our poetry’ (Butler thus stands for the crop of poets prominent since the 1940s).⁴² Dirk Klopper’s *The Poetry of Pringle, Scully, Slater and Butler: A Materialist Perspective* (1991) promotes the view of Butler as a “regional” poet: the four figures are seen to ‘represent successive generations of poets’ in the Eastern Cape settler tradition, and thus to demonstrate both the ‘synchronic’ and ‘diachronic’ dimensions of the colonial literary perspective (Klopper’s focus is on ‘the symbolic value of frontier poetry’ from an ‘historical perspective’; accordingly, Butler is merely ‘a recent exponent of a point of view that has existed since the earliest attempts by English writers to articulate their South African experience’).⁴³ Butler has also been described as a poet with ‘the mark of naturalism’ whose ‘feelings and attitudes towards the cosmos’ are ‘characteristic’ of his time.⁴⁴ The merits of such categorisations notwithstanding, it is salutary to emphasise the ‘infinitely varied’ tag, which is, if somewhat dramatic, particularly

⁴² André Brink, *Three South African English Poets: A Critical Study* (Unpublished thesis, University of Potchefstroom/UNW, 1958), p.iv. That Butler should be placed in such a triumvirate is interesting – he only had one volume of poetry to his name at that stage – but Brink argues that a ‘comparatively small oeuvre’ allows for close attention to selected poems in the New Critical style. Butler’s selection is also justified by the assertion that ‘he is the first true poet fully to accept South Africa as his fatherland’ – compared with, for instance, Roy Campbell, ‘who consistently regarded South Africa as colonial’ (p.136). Likewise, Dawid Malan, in *Guy Butler: Poet and Dramatist* (1986), introduces his subject as ‘the leading proponent of the war generation of poets who came into prominence in the fifties’ (Unpublished thesis, University of the Free State), p.i.

⁴³ *The Poetry of Pringle, Scully, Slater and Butler*, p.5 and p.239.

⁴⁴ This is from Gessler Moses Nkondo’s thesis *Nature, God, Man* (Yale University, 1979), which places Butler in an eclectic quartet of writers – the other three are Slater, Campbell and Dennis Brutus – who ‘are generally acknowledged as the best and most influential poets of their time in South Africa’. Nkondo’s work has, however, been discredited on grounds of plagiarism (of Sydney Clouts’ unpublished Masters thesis, *The*

applicable in Butler's case – as we shall see in the following pages – and which encourages attention to the individual rather than to generic qualities.

Violent Arcadia: An Examination of the Response to Nature in the Poetry of Pringle, Slater and Campbell – which Butler in fact supervised at Rhodes in 1971) and will not be referred to again in this study.

PART ONE

Preamble: Stocktaking

There are three handwritten documents amongst the Guy Butler holdings at NELM that give some insight into the thoughts and feelings accompanying Butler's continued activity towards the end of his life. Two are personal reports, entitled 'Stocktaking', for the years 1994 and 1995; the third is a 'Summary of work in progress, Early 2000', written the year before he died.

What is interesting about these papers is not the listing of events and accomplishments, or of future plans. Rather, their value lies in the expression they give to the frustrations and anxieties, hinted at elsewhere, that occupied an old man after a long and successful but not always gratifying literary career. In the Preface to *Karoo Morning*, Butler wrote:

I was given a good life in a lovable world among remarkable people ... There must be a grateful record. Much of the literature by white South Africans is guilt-laden and self-condemnatory, and there are good reasons why it should be so; but where praise is possible it should be uttered. The man who has known joy and keeps it to himself is a miser.¹

This 'grateful record' was followed by two more volumes, expanding into an account not only of childhood but of a full life well lived. *Bursting World* and *A Local Habitation* describe moments and periods of gloom, despair, loneliness, anger, disillusionment; but readers tend to distance the narrator, whom they know to be the elderly, assured, public figure of Guy Butler, from the apparently weaker or more vulnerable young "Guysie" or "Sapper Butler". Indeed, it seems that – even as a younger man – Butler's private worries did not prevent others from looking to him as a dynamic leader. Sapper Butler soon became a Captain, and Professor Butler took up his Chair at the age of 34.

Amongst the Rhodes University and Grahamstown communities in particular, there is no small amount of hagiography surrounding Butler. As Derek Henderson (former Vice-Chancellor) remarked, 'To imagine

¹ Butler, Preface to *Karoo Morning: An Autobiography 1918-35* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1977), p.ix.

Rhodes University without Guy Butler is rather like trying to imagine Britain without Winston Churchill or the United States of America without Abraham Lincoln.² He was and is idealised as teacher, writer, tireless man of action: cultural crusader, campaigner for social concerns, generous friend and benevolent presider. I will not suggest that this image is exaggerated or inaccurate, but it is worthwhile considering what Butler made of it all. After years of newspaper headlines (both kind and unkind) and academic articles (both praising and critical), as well as the respect, gratitude and affection poured out by fellow writers, colleagues, students, political acquaintances and township protégés, how did he perceive himself? The evidence suggests, at least in part, that an element of pride or self-importance crept in. He was, after all, sufficiently convinced of a legacy to ensure that all his surviving correspondence and documentation – much of it, in the form of doodle-covered committee minutes or mundane letters about sabbatical accommodation, having little apparent significance – was kept and archived at NELM. It is true that he was an inveterate hoarder, but the motivation behind this self-archiving was not simply a matter of vanity.

Butler's friend and colleague for many years, Ron Hall, describes him as an essentially humble man who came to realise fairly early on in his career that he had become a major figure in South African English literature.³ It could be argued that this was due more to his (ultimately successful) efforts at persuading academics, teachers and the English-speaking public at large that indigenous literature was worth reading and studying, than to his own literary output. Yet the two endeavours subsisted in one another. Don Maclennan, who knew Butler for half a century after first being taught by him at the University of the

² Derek Henderson, notes for speech honouring Guy Butler, AUETSA conference, 1996. NELM.

³ In conversation with the author, June 2004. It is worth emphasising the overwhelming sense one gains, when reading correspondence addressed to Butler from friends and acquaintances, of this humility. Letter upon letter echoes the sentiments expressed by his sister Joan (Collett) that 'in the midst of such a full and busy life, you have always had the time and the goodwill to be interested in everyone – the "common touch"' (22nd March 1994). For instance, Sheila Burnett, widow of Butler's long-standing friend Reverend Bill Burnett, wrote: 'Bill used to say that one of the vocational hazards for a clergyman was jealousy and that for academics it was pride and arrogance. I believe that you have withstood this temptation with great success' (21st January 1998). Calvin Cook described Butler's 'approaches and work' as being 'hidden in humility ... No wonder you were sensitive to real greatness in others, and honest enough to be aware of how it so often comports with strange twists and turns' (7th February 1998).

Witwatersrand (Wits) in 1950, has suggested a useful analogy: the farmer who wants to plant, cultivate and reap, yet finds the field in which he wishes to work in poor condition, and the tools he wishes to use missing or in disrepair; so he must provide the tools and prepare the ground himself, even as he sows.⁴ A more specific parallel is John Gross' description of the relationship between TS Eliot's early critical essays and his poetry: 'he was working out his position, seizing on those qualities in other poets which he could make use of himself, creating the taste by which he was to be enjoyed.'⁵

Performing the – not uncommon – dual role of writer and authoritative critic occasionally placed Butler in an incongruous position. Invited by Alan Lennox-Short to contribute a poetry survey to a 1972 volume, *English in South Africa*, Butler found it necessary to discuss himself as one of the significant post-war South African English poets. Whether or not he actually penned the words, it is curious that a review under his name should include the following criticism:

Butler's first poems (*Stranger to Europe*, 1952) and some of his best came out of his war experiences in the Middle East and Italy. He is perhaps overconcerned with the European-African tension, and until recently showed an unfashionable preference for regular verse forms. A traditionalist, most of his poetry shows an attempt to communicate his 'romantic' intuitions.⁶

However much Butler may have endeavoured to remain objective, this instance of pre-emptive criticism betrays a conflict of interests. In his Introduction to the same volume, Butler states at the outset that South African English literature has not developed very far in the hundred and fifty years since Thomas Pringle; yet he concludes that 'Much depends on the unpredictable nature of genius. The entire literary scene would be

⁴ In conversation with the author, June 2004.

⁵ John Gross, *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters: Aspects of English Literary Life since 1800* (London: Penguin, reissued 1991), p.255.

⁶ Butler, 'Survey: Poetry', *English and South Africa* ed. Alan Lennox-Short (Cape Town: Nasou, 1972), p.15. This is, in fact, not altogether accurate; some of Butler's published poems can be dated to the late 1930s. Dawid Malan, in *Guy Butler: Poet and Dramatist*, even goes so far as to suggest that 'in terms of literary production, Butler was almost midway in his career as a poet when the Second World War ended' (p.140). Malan's assertion is itself partly undermined by the content of Butler's subsequently published *Collected Poems* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1999).

transformed by the emergence of a single great talent.⁷ The critic writing such an assessment could not, one suspects, entirely separate himself from the poet yearning to *be* that ‘single great talent’. He had already used the phrase in a 1956 address on ‘Poetry, Drama and Public Taste’; many of the early essays and lectures show Butler as a relatively young academic discussing himself and his contemporaries with a convincing but perhaps superficial objectivity.

Any honest writer will admit to a substantial ego. Why else presume that it is important for others to read what one has written? For Butler, however, the project was wider than simply creating an audience or a legacy for himself. Saving and annotating letters and other documentation with a view to passing it on to NELM was another contribution to the field of work that he had made his own, and made for others. As I will discuss later (Chapter Six: II), Butler’s participation in the “institutionalisation” of English literature and English studies in South Africa was not unproblematic. Happily, however, the documentation preserved by Butler provides the researcher with an opportunity to look beyond the character – or caricature – of the “grand old man” of South African literature; one is also able to see the (often very creative) conflict between self-esteem and humility, between public confidence and private guilt.

⁷ Butler, Introduction to *English and South Africa*, p.8.

CHAPTER ONE

I The doubting leader

(i) Many Guy Butlers

As a young adult, Butler described himself to his family as ‘six people’ (only some of these different figures would be familiar to those who subsequently knew him, heard his name or read his work): he considered these to be the painter, the poet, the playwright, the teacher-academic, the family man, and the product of “The Poplars”, his childhood home in Cradock.¹ To these six could be added another six, or another ten; and to ‘the happiness and fundamental security which the Poplars provided’ should be added fifty years of life at “High Corner”, the Butlers’ residence in Grahamstown.² The six, or sixteen, or more, Guy Butlers – their homes; their private conflicts; their beliefs and convictions; their doubts and uncertainties; their loves and their quarrels; above all, the expression they gave to their thoughts and experiences – these need to be explored in such a way that the three-dimensional man is recovered from the painted public personage.³

The “civic” roles that Butler played required of him those qualities that had been identified by one of his Rhodes professors while he was still an undergraduate: not only ‘initiation’ and ‘drive’, but also ‘a certain tough pertinacity ...to get the best out of himself and others, and to bring whatever undertaking he may be engaged in to a successful conclusion.’⁴ Yet, as we shall see, the assurance and confidence he needed to show as a public figure and leader were often in conflict with his private uncertainties and apprehensions. Anne Stevenson provides some insight into this tension:

I disagree with [those who] contend that the pursuit of the absolute has anything to do with the pursuit of truth. Truth is, in its nature, multiple

¹ Joan Butler, letter to Guy Butler, 14th March 1981. NELM.

² Jeff Butler, quoted by Guy Butler in letter to Joan Butler, 8th July 1997. NELM.

³ Denis Davison’s playful parody is, in that sense, an important reminder: ‘“Who’s who in Grahamstown, 4th Ed.”: BUTLER ... As a boxer he is a great painter. As a painter he is a great house restorer. As a house restorer he is a lousy driver.’ (Letter to Guy and Jean Butler, December 1978. NELM.)

⁴ Michael Roberts, testimonial for Guy Butler, 18th November 1938. NELM.

and contradictory, part of the flux of history, untrappable in language. The only real road to truth is through doubt and tolerance. Unfortunately, philosophical scepticism can also become a mannerism; and the doubting leader is usually a bad one.⁵

Butler would have accepted Stevenson's premise that 'the pursuit of the absolute' is a direct threat to 'the pursuit of truth' – that, indeed, truth is 'multiple and contradictory'. His 'doubt' stemmed partly from personal troubles, but was also a consequence of what could be called his 'philosophical scepticism': a reluctance to commit wholeheartedly to a single ideology, version of history or expression of faith. Many of those forms and interpretations of experience that he experimented with were directly antagonistic, and he structured his ideas around the need to acknowledge oppositions and to create dialogue between them.

In 1994, Stanley Ridge wrote to Butler:

You know my open support of "the struggle." Yet struggle rhetoric tends to perpetuate the binary mode of apartheid. It is either/or. So one has the spectacle of Marxists ignoring historical process, and Christians eliding the incarnation. You stand out for me as someone who writes and thinks from the midst of life.

New patterns emerge.
In anger, duty, need,
we give ourselves to the weaving
and are woven into the web.
There is no escaping this.

No one else has said that, or anything like it, for us, now.⁶

The image of weaving (Ridge is quoting from Section XIII of Butler's long narrative poem *Pilgrimage to Dias Cross*) is a significant one, suggesting unity and reconciliation. Butler was committed *in grosso* to synthesis, implicit in which are those ancient philosophical companions and combatants, thesis and antithesis. He was fascinated by forces in conflict, apparent binary opposites, moving towards resolution.

The primary (and most controversial) manifestation of this concern was his depiction, echoing Nietzsche and others, of Europe and Africa as Apollo and Dionysus – a crucial analogy that will be discussed further in Part Two. Butler's reformulation of the Apollo-Dionysus polarisation and

⁵ Anne Stevenson (also a Plath-Hughes biographer), in correspondence with Janet Malcolm, *The Silent Woman*, p.80.

⁶ Stanley Ridge, letter to Guy Butler, 31st July 1994. NELM.

fusion must, however, be placed alongside or within a lifelong effort to attain synthesis in various spheres. It is therefore perhaps unfortunate that the very essay titled 'A Search for Synthesis' in his *Essays and Lectures* (published in that collection, as when it first appeared in 1984, in an abridged version; the draft notes for the article run to over twenty typescript pages) centres on the Europe-Africa synthesis and refers to the Apollo-Dionysus model. After all, it was not just Nietzsche who influenced Butler on this score. His Romantic predecessors, in their reaction against the neo-classical rigidity of the Enlightenment and its emphasis on reason and empiricism at the cost of emotion or imagination, also celebrated the creative power of synthesis. 'Without contraries is no progression,' wrote Blake: 'Attraction and repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence.'⁷ The fiery content of the poem from which these lines are quoted, 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell', is an amalgamation of apparently hostile elements. Shelley declared in his *Defence* that poetry 'subdues to union, under its light yoke, all irreconcilable things.'⁸ Similarly, Coleridge identified the poet as one who

diffuses a tone and spirit of unity, that blends, and (as it were) *fuses*, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power, to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination. This power ...reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities.⁹

If it was inevitable that Butler should become, like so many others who observed South Africa's racial and cultural conflict, a writer of opposites, an important distinction may nonetheless be drawn. The harmony or discord of oppositions informed Butler's fundamental perception of himself; it was a notion applied on a personal or spiritual level before it was used as a prism through which to view the "outside" world of politics or the "abstract" world of ideas.

⁷ William Blake, 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell', *The Complete Writings of William Blake* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p.149.

⁸ PB Shelley, in HFB Brett-Smith (ed.), *Peacock's "Four Ages of Poetry", Shelley's "Defence of Poetry"* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1922), p.55.

⁹ ST Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), p.12.

He described ‘the individual soul’ as being ‘made in an endless series of I-Thou dialogues.’¹⁰ This is a familiar literary conceit – one thinks of a tradition running through Tennyson’s ‘The Two Voices’ or Yeats’ ‘A Dialogue of Self and Soul’. (It also hints at the ‘dilettante flirtation with Freud’ to which Butler admitted, recalling how his “id” was disturbed by the African Dionysus while his “superego” tried to control the response.¹¹) Butler affirmed, however, that these dialogues have their roots in the moment of conception itself: ‘We are born as the result of the union of two people.’¹² In the case of Ernest and Alice Butler, his parents, this union brought together two very different religious and cultural backgrounds. Alice was of Anglican stock and had spent her early years in England; Ernest was a Quaker and a second-generation South African who called the Eastern Cape home. Butler felt a continual need to ‘resolve’ his ‘Anglican/Quaker ambiguity’.¹³

These thoughts on spiritual unity are taken from a 1974 talk, ‘Why I am a Christian’ (Butler was one of several members of the Grahamstown Cathedral congregation who were asked to speak on this topic at evensong services). Taking a tone of ironic self-deprecation, Butler mocks his own ‘existential need to try to be something different’; yet in doing so he also gently chastises those who would deny the ongoing ‘I-Thou dialogues’:

I am particularly hesitant at making up my mind, which means that my religious life must appear as very fuzzy and indecisive. While friends in the same opalescent discussion group will sooner or later settle for a consistent pink or green, I remain a hesitant mottled chameleon.¹⁴

¹⁰ Butler, ‘High Corner (13)’ (typescript title), ‘Vol III from “Pilgrimage” 26th June 1989’ (handwritten heading), p.42. NELM. This is very likely an allusion to Martin Buber’s *I and Thou* (1937); one can see how Buber’s emphasis on ‘the world of relation’ – the I-Thou (or I-You) of openness to and engagement with the other, as opposed to the I-It, which is the mode of experiencing or observing the other from a distance – appealed to Butler (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1970, p.56). Buber’s assertion that ‘our I-You relation [is] not only to other men but also to beings and things that confront us in nature’ (p.172) is also useful in our understanding of Butler-as-ecologist – see Chapter Six (I).

¹¹ ‘High Corner (13)’, p.39. See also Butler’s, ‘The Republic and the Arts’, *Essays and Lectures*, p.105. In light of this association, it is worth noting that Kaufmann highlights the publication of Buber’s *Ich und Du* (later *I and Thou*) and Freud’s *Das Ich und das Es* (*The Ego and the Id*) in the same year; he also comments enigmatically on the relationship between ego/id/superego and I-Thou/I-It, bemoaning the fact that, although not interchangeable, these terms have suffered similar fates in their descent into jargon (Prologue to *I and Thou*, pp.15-16).

¹² ‘High Corner (13)’, p.42.

¹³ Michael and Adrienne Whisson, letter to Guy Butler, 9th November 1993. NELM.

¹⁴ ‘High Corner (13)’, p.30.

For Butler, the mystery of forgiveness and salvation in the Christian faith reconciled life's paradoxical oppositions; nevertheless, his faith was by no means rock-firm. His religious convictions reached a nadir amidst the bloodshed and slaughter of the Second World War. The mighty cathedrals of Europe and England that he visited while he was enrolled at Oxford after the war impressed him with their architectural magnificence, but could not resuscitate his faith. It was only when he and his wife Jean returned to South Africa in 1947 – to Johannesburg, where he had taken up a post at Wits University – that, despite the enormous disappointment of the National Party's victory in the 1948 elections, Butler's spiritual courage was restored. This was thanks largely to the inspirational worship at Sophiatown's Church of Christ the King, a building he later described as 'one of the holy places of my life.'¹⁵ The church was the symbolic and functional centre of Trevor Huddleston's multiracial Christian mission, and the Masses held there were 'unforgettable communal religious experiences'.¹⁶

The services and activities of the church in Sophiatown helped Butler to identify Christianity as an indispensable 'super-racial reference point', one that would facilitate the achievement of a synthesis between South Africa's many cultures.¹⁷ The idea is expressed in an essay entitled 'South African Literature' (first published in 1950). In his conclusion, almost reluctantly claiming 'as an article of faith ... that there is only one Moses and one Sinai', appropriating Augustine's *City of God* as a symbol of 'common citizenship' and ambiguously declaring that 'God alone knows' how the writer can 'get above or out' of the social morass, Butler implies that faith in God is the best way of harmonising differences.¹⁸

'South African Literature' voices the concern of a writer who feels that 'I cannot clarify either [Europe or Africa] or begin to control or synthesise them until at least part of me is above and outside both.' It is an often contested idea, discussed in a number of his early essays: the

¹⁵ Butler, *The Prophetic Nun* (Johannesburg: Random House, 2000), p.15.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.93.

¹⁷ Butler, 'South African Literature', *Essays and Lectures*, p.43.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.44. Akal considers the invocation of St Augustine to be 'neither fortuitous nor accidental' and discusses the importance of this great north African 'visionary' to Butler; see *Forms of Community Service*, pp.154-156.

writer should be detached, objective, not overly committed to any particular cause. Yet at other times, Butler called for action and involvement, for greater displays of loyalty or pride. The writer, like an ideal citizen, needs to demonstrate both an awareness of the universal (the international, the timeless) and an appreciation for the specific (the local, the time-bound). He or she must show sensitivity to current trends and events without losing perspective on history, both recent and distant.

This is an arduous task, but one that matches the notion Butler had of his own predicament: the need to incorporate conflicting and contradictory impulses into a unitary sense of self. He endeavoured to assess these “binaries” of experience with a view towards mutual inclusivity rather than exclusivity – although, inevitably, this open-endedness could not always be maintained.

(ii) *‘A deep-seated dread of certainty’*

‘Why I am Christian’ emphasises the conflict between head and heart, concluding that ‘life derives its meaning more from the heart than the head ... the great sense-maker of life is not intellect but the heart – love, affection, loyalty, faith, hope’.¹⁹ Butler did not avoid these all-embracing terms. In *A Local Habitation*, describing one of his favourite Oxford tutors, JB Leishman, he might have been describing himself. Although after the war Leishman felt a ‘growing pessimism about the future’, he nevertheless held ‘the great Renaissance vision of man. Tragic, noble and beautiful were epithets he could still use without irony ... For all his learning and sensibility, Leishman was an elemental man.’²⁰ Elsewhere, Butler vindicated Thomas Pringle as someone who ‘was not afraid to use certain words of which our consciences have become shamefully shy: “justice” and “liberty”.’²¹ With the stark Karoo landscape (‘the rigours and spacial simplicities of an epic world’) imprinted on his mind from childhood, with Shakespeare and Dante and Homer and Virgil always at hand, it is perhaps not surprising that – although the great epic poem he spent so much time composing remained incomplete, or in fragments – he viewed

¹⁹ ‘High Corner (13)’, p.42.

²⁰ Butler, *A Local Habitation*, pp.56-58.

²¹ Butler, ‘The Language of the Land’, *Essays and Lectures*, p.85.

himself and the world around him in epic terms.²² He was, in the words of Stephen Watson, a poet of ‘the great primary emotions: of love, praise, compassion, fidelity, friendship; of hope tried and triumphant’.²³

Equally, however, he criticised ‘the assumption that poetry is good according to the intensity of feeling in it.’²⁴ In 1950 he expressed the opinion that ‘nearly all South African verse’ was written in the fallacious belief that it ‘must be passionate, adoring, melancholy’, that ‘the art is essentially romantic and moody.’²⁵ Ten years later, he maintained that ‘When feeling takes precedence over form, the work of art is a failure.’²⁶ This statement is found in an essay on ‘The Development of a South African National Character’ (1961); it is part of a broad warning to white South Africans against ‘elevating our prejudices into sacred principles.’ Butler concludes: ‘When emotion takes precedence over conscience and reason, the individual or the society goes mad.’²⁷

In this context, ‘emotion’ is neither of the heart nor of the head; it is a conviction or belief born out of human frailty that has the potential to become a powerful and destructive dogma. Watson claims in his Introduction to Butler’s *Essays and Lectures* that they are immune to ‘the temptations of grand theories and great abstractions.’²⁸ Nevertheless, suggests Watson, Butler does not believe ‘all abstractions to be necessarily evil in their consequences, all ultimate principles to be suspect’, because ‘a cosy, communal spirit, untempered by respect for abstract principles, might have consequences quite as inhumane as any grand theory which proceeds in ignorance of concrete men and women.’ Abstract principles such as those declared above – love, hope, friendship, liberty – that unite and affirm a common human vision, are to be celebrated. Conversely, abstract principles that lead to polemicism or to extreme ideologies are divisive and not to be trusted. Butler attested to

²² *Ibid.*, p.153.

²³ Watson, quoted on the cover of Butler, *Collected Poems*.

²⁴ Butler, ‘The Difficulties of Teaching a Non-Indigenous Literature’, *Essays and Lectures*, p.31.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.31-32. Butler would perhaps even have levelled this criticism at his own early attempts at poetry while a school pupil and undergraduate student. Michael Roberts, in his testimonial for this young man with literary aspirations, noted that (despite a ‘felicity of phrase’) his writing was spoiled by ‘the occasional airiness of his phraseology’.

²⁶ Butler, ‘The Development of a South African National Character’, *Essays and Lectures*, p.92.

²⁷ Butler was never quite able to resolve this battle between emotion and reason – see Chapter Three.

²⁸ Watson, Introduction to *Essays and Lectures*, p.18.

a deep-seated dread of certainty: although guilty myself of speaking as though I know this or that for certain, I am put off by, and sometimes fly from, people who are too sure. This may be because I have lived in an age where the people who are sure they are right have committed such terrible atrocities, and continue to do so.²⁹

It was on this basis that he castigated politicians who 'prescribe with blasphemous certitude' the path of apartheid: 'a way which obviously leads to a head-on conclusion with another dogmatic way'.³⁰ He rejected his own 'muddle-headed espousal of Marxism during the war' on the same grounds.³¹

Furthermore, any socio-political doctrine or cultural-aesthetic creed is, in a sense, doomed to fail if it places too much faith in an idealistic vision of humankind. If *Karoo Morning* sets out in celebratory tone to describe 'a good life in a loveable world', *Bursting World* and *A Local Habitation* betray a process of disillusionment, expressing grave reservations about the world that the young Guy Butler discovered outside of Cradock. Quite apart from his moody adolescent experience of 'falling out of love' for the first time, which 'raised misgivings about human nature from which I have never quite recovered', it was his perception of the suffering inflicted so readily upon others that embedded in Butler a cautious cynicism.³² The Nazi death camps and the atomic bombs dropped on Japan forced Butler to confront the horrors of his 'species':

So deep was my disgust that I no longer wanted to be a part of the human race. A creature that could do such things and at the same time dream up proud utopias was insanely self-deluded, hopelessly self-condemned ... It clung to me for years, periodically surfacing like the Kraken, but not dying.³³

Although the war offered Butler the chance to travel widely through landscapes famously associated with art and learning and natural beauty,

²⁹ 'High Corner (13)', p.30.

³⁰ 'The Republic and the Arts', p.102.

³¹ 'High Corner (13)', p.39.

³² Butler, *Bursting World*, p.28.

³³ *A Local Habitation*, p.16.

the scenery had a tragic atmosphere induced by an awareness of the whole human world given over to self-slaughter. The war did not only broaden my mind, it deepened and I think darkened it. My mind won't let me forget those organised madhouses called armies ... [which] set about murdering each other under a variety of holy banners. Little has happened in subsequent years to alter my reluctant discovery that I belong to a deeply flawed species.³⁴

If 'holy banners' lead only to war, then they are not to be trusted; consequently, doubt is essential to true faith and conviction. In recent years, "fundamentalism" has become both a rallying cry and a convenient insult in the mud-slinging match of international diplomacy. Butler died a few months before 9/11 and the subsequent war in Afghanistan, further terrorist attacks and the second Bush fighting a second oil war in Iraq; but he knew how dangerous extremism – both radical and conservative, whether masquerading as Islam or Christianity – can be. His reaction would have been similar to that of Lionel Abrahams, whose poem 'After Wyatt after 11.9.'01' speaks of the 'divergent certainties' aggravating separation and conflict in the wake of those attacks. Abrahams (invoking Yeats' 'The Second Coming') notes that those who have 'passionate convictions' cannot abide 'the insult of my questioning, / the chill treachery of my doubt.'³⁵

An academic who delivers an address entitled 'Why I am a Christian' presents another apparent opposition needing to be reconciled – it is not particularly fashionable for an intellectual to profess religious convictions. Paul Walters, who was taught by Butler as a student at Rhodes before becoming his friend and colleague in the English department, relates his experience as an undergraduate:

It was an article of faith among the brittle and shallow clique who dominated student opinion in those days that it was impossible to be both intelligent and a Christian. Yet here was a man [Butler] whose academic pre-eminence was unquestionable, actively involved [in the church community].³⁶

For Butler, as for Eliot and Joyce (two examples amongst many, given here as near contemporaries from either side of the belief-

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.137.

³⁵ Abrahams, 'After Wyatt After 11.9.'01', *Carapace* (44: September 2003), p.18.

agnosticism divide), centuries of complex theological debate gave Christianity an intellectual depth that was not inferior to the philosophical argument in secular metaphysics. Neither camp is immune to epistemological arrogance; both camps are least convincing when most sure of themselves. Notwithstanding this justification, much of Butler's writing depicts Christian belief in the terms first employed by the forefather of modern Existentialism, the Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard: it is, ultimately, irrational and requires the believer to make a "leap of faith" to attain salvation. I will discuss this further in Chapter Three.

Walters' words above, quoted in a letter to Butler, are taken from a sermon entitled 'Christ the Paradox'. The conjunction implied by this phrase confirmed for Butler the value of Christian humanism. Paradox, after all, is the merging of apparently incompatible words, ideas or attitudes. For Walters, 'reconciliation is precisely what paradox supremely achieves in and through language: God-man; maid-mother; dying god; living dead man.' This is reminiscent of a passage in *Bursting World*. The context is altogether different – Butler is recalling an incident during the war in which his driver, Seedman, was killed after driving over a landmine. Hours after the explosion, steering an army vehicle down a tree-lined road, he had

a queer feeling of existing in mutually exclusive contrasts, of being now with, and now without. The split second in the sun has nothing in common with the split second in the shadow, yet each throws its light or dark on the other; a rattling visual paradox. But is the condition of death complementary to the condition of living?³⁷

Earlier we read Stanley Ridge quoting Butler's 'we give ourselves to the weaving/and are woven into the web'. These lines, re-read in light of the above extract, achieve an effect similar to that wrought by Melville in a famous passage in *Moby Dick*. Ishmael, the irrepressible narrator, describes himself exploring the skeleton of a sperm whale that had been

³⁶ Paul Walters, letter to Guy Butler, 8th June 1983. NELM.

³⁷ *Bursting World*, p.248.

converted into a forest shrine. The massive bones formed a structure on which vines, flowers and leaves had grown:

The great, white, worshipped skeleton lay lounging – a gigantic idler! Yet, as the ever-woven verdant warp and woof intermixed and hummed around him, the mighty idler seemed the cunning weaver; himself all woven over with the vines; every month assuming greener, fresher verdure; but himself a skeleton. Life folded Death; Death trellised Life; the grim god wived with youthful Life, and begat him curly-headed glories.³⁸

This is the loom of life-and-death; its threads are complementary and inextricable opposites. It is a juxtaposition fundamental to the human psyche, and to the stories we tell to explain our condition (as, for instance, the recurrent image of weaving-as-destiny in classical mythology suggests – the Fates, the sword of Damocles, the Gordian knot).

As has been noted, despite his ‘deep-seated dread of certainty’, Butler admitted to being ‘guilty myself of speaking as though I know this or that for certain’. This is the certainty required of the leader (as Anne Stevenson would have it), the confidence required of a prominent figure in public life, the decisiveness of the committee-head, the assurance of the lecturer, the authority of the professor. The writer, however, is allowed more leeway; the poetic persona forges an artistically mediated response, theoretically uninhibited by public office and unrestricted by the need for consistency. In this way, some of Butler’s poetry is more radical and declares a more outraged dissidence than, for example, his published essays and lectures.

Butler maintained a lifelong passion for drama: its stagecraft and its pagecraft, its metaphorical power (‘Life is a play scripted by God’, he writes in *The Prophetic Nun*).³⁹ I would suggest that one of the major reasons underlying his fondness for this performance-oriented form is its inherent subversiveness. Theatre, typically, is multivocal – its dialectic (dialogue) is based on “discussion” rather than “discourse” – and one cannot locate the essence of a play in a particular character or speech. Each performance creates a new “text”, an autonomous but transient version of the play. Dramatic texts are therefore all the more readily available to various

³⁸ Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (San Francisco: Rinehart Press, 1957), p.445.

³⁹ *The Prophetic Nun*, p.61.

readings and interpretations. Consequently, a tradition extending back to ancient Greece grants theatre a licence greater than that enjoyed by other forms of expression; in turn, when this licence is revoked, it is a sure sign that some authority feels threatened. Butler's greatest love, Shakespeare, has been recruited to many purposes but remains unchained because, as Stephen Mullaney puts it, 'his corpus is grounded not in a univocal perspective but in a multiplicity and heterogeneity of voices, an incorporation and appropriation of a wide range of alternative and marginal perspectives.'⁴⁰

Butler's antipathy to any absolute conviction resonates with the poetics of another Romantic: Keats celebrated Shakespeare's 'negative capability' – that is, 'when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.'⁴¹ This is not merely a philosophical tenet, and it has ramifications beyond artistic ability. It is almost a prerequisite to the process of reconciliation in 'societies in a state of rapid change', as Butler pointed out; for without it, uncertainties will only 'make us aware of differences, bring out our assertiveness, our prejudices, our rivalries'.⁴²

Perhaps, then, when Butler referred to moments of 'certainty' he had in mind the one point on which he was adamant – that adamance is self-defeating, is often based on ignorance and invariably perpetuates conflict. Like the Old Jew of Galicia quoted by Czeslaw Milosz in *The Captive Mind*, he was 'suspicious':

When someone is honestly 55% right, that's very good and there's no use wrangling. And if someone is 60% right, it's wonderful, it's great luck, and let him thank God. But what's to be said about 75% right? Wise people say this is suspicious. Well, and what about 100% right? Whoever says he's 100% right is a fanatic, a thug, and the worst kind of rascal.⁴³

Laurence Wright, editor of Butler's *Collected Poems*, has suggested that Butler preferred, whenever possible, to reach a "gentlemen's

⁴⁰ Steven Mullaney, "'All That Monarchs Do': The Obscured Stages of Authority in *Pericles*" in Kiernan Ryan (ed.), *Shakespeare: The Last Plays* (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1999), p.103.

⁴¹ Keats, John, 'Letter to George and Tom Keats, 27 December 1817', *The Letters of John Keats 1814-1821, Volume I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), p.193.

⁴² 'The Development of a South African National Character', p.89.

⁴³ Czeslaw Milosz, *The Captive Mind* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1953), p.v.

disagreement” with his adversaries.⁴⁴ For this reason, the attacks on him by academic opponents (“Butlerism” is the most prominent but not the only instance) vexed him more than he may have admitted.⁴⁵ It is vital, if we are to appreciate Butler’s creative output and the ideas propounded by him, that we question the accuracy of such categorisations; that we reassess the (mis)representation of this “grand old man” of South African literature.

⁴⁴ In conversation with the author, June 2004.

⁴⁵ In her Introduction to Read’s *Guy Butler: A Bibliography* (Grahamstown: NELM, 1992), Catherine Woeber comments that Kirkwood’s paper in particular ‘stung Butler to the quick and accounted for some of the content and organization of material in the last volume of his autobiography’ (p.1).

II “Grand old man” of South African letters

(i) Mirabilis et horribilis

Let us turn, then, to the ‘Stocktaking’ reports. Unlike King Lear, whose tribulations he found so captivating, Butler did not wish to ‘[crawl unburthen’d] toward death’ – but he had undertaken various projects that remained incomplete or had reached dead-ends, and if the summaries exhibit an archivist’s belief in the value of documenting and keeping records, they also betray a frustrated writer’s desire to order and maintain control over proliferating published and unpublished work.¹

1994 was a momentous year, for the country and for Butler personally. That year’s report opens with a question: ‘1994. *Annus Mirabilis? Horribilis?*’² Top of the list is ‘First Free Democratic Elections’. He notes the great honours that were bestowed on him: the Freedom of the City in Grahamstown, an honorary D.Litt from Rhodes. It was also the year that David Philip published his *Essays and Lectures*. The bulk of the document, however, is on matters relating to the Grahamstown Foundation (erstwhile the 1820 Foundation) and the fire in the Settlers Monument. Although Butler was often at pains to give credit to others who were involved in the establishment of the Foundation and the building of the monument, he had invested an enormous amount of time, effort and emotion in these institutions. The monument had become an icon of Grahamstown and the functioning centre of, amongst other things, the National Arts Festival – one of Butler’s better-known achievements. He was shocked by the fire, and the ‘Stocktaking’ report expresses a deep concern that this setback was by no means the only threat to the Grahamstown Foundation’s continued existence. Yet, aged 74, he had set about raising funds through “Project Phoenix”, which would see the monument fully restored.³

In the 1995 report, he writes of ‘a sense of becoming “marginalised” in various spheres, and a sense of “old man’s frenzy” at having so much to

¹ William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Arden edition, ed. Kenneth Muir (London: Methuen, 1968), I.i.41.

² Butler, ‘STOCK TAKING New Year’s Day 1995’, manuscript. NELM.

³ Those who were there love to recount the story of how, when he saw the damage caused by the blaze, his first reaction was to comment that it wasn’t ‘that bad’, and that rebuilding would provide the opportunity to fix all the design flaws of the original structure. This brave face belied his anxiety.

do, and so very little time or energy to fit it in.’⁴ Noting that ‘Jean’s memory is far better than mine’, he bemoans a

mind whose telephone exchange, computer [sic] etc. is going into obsolescence. It is very humiliating, particularly when one is conscious of quite lucid spells, which are not always as lucid as one thinks!

And then one’s capacity for anxiety and remorse grows – for both of us, I think, but about different matters; and the simple fear (a) of dying (b) of things like strokes and heart attacks (c) of going “first” (d) of being left alone.

Despite this, and despite his physical frailty, the next heading, ‘Projects’, shows how much more he was to achieve: ‘I don’t think I have ever been so busy with writing, reading, getting books.’ With a characteristic stroke of self-effacement he notes that more than ever he is

startled by ideas new to me (and, improbably, maybe, to others). Every book or article contains an ambush, a footnote, a red-herring to pursue, a potential cul-de-sac, a distraction, instead of a confirmation or correction of a main line of thought or arrangement. It would be a lie to say that, all too often, I do not succumb to these fatal Cleopatras and forget about my Roman business.

He resolves to show ‘more discipline’ and to avoid getting ‘the wires of my various projects so crossed ... it would be a pity to snuff it with a legacy of four or five incomplete manuscripts.’

Butler’s acknowledgement of ‘fatal Cleopatras’ is significant. An insatiable ‘scholar’s interest’ continually left him with ‘too many pots on the boil.’⁵ Researching his settler play *Richard Gush of Salem*, he unearthed the following description of the historical Richard Gush – a portrait sketch in which Butler no doubt saw something of himself: ‘I found Mr Gush to be a very fickle-minded man. He would plan as much work in ten minutes as could be done in twelve months. This, I think, was the rock he split upon.’⁶

⁴ Butler, ‘Stocktaking 1995’, manuscript. NELM. ‘Old man’s frenzy’ is a reference to Yeats’ poem ‘An Acre of Grass’ (WB Yeats, *The Poems*, ed. Daniel Albright (London: JM Dent & Sons, 1990), p.348).

⁵ In a letter to Canon JB Johnson (14th May 1985), Butler requested information on the late Canon Calata; Butler had taken up the idea of putting together facts and recollections about the life of Calata, whom he saw as an important figure of apartheid resistance. The phrasing of the letter betrays Butler’s weakness: ‘I have no particular project in mind: simply a scholar’s interest in gathering significant information.’ NELM.

⁶ John Montgomery, quoted in Butler’s *Richard Gush of Salem* (Cape Town: Maskew Miller Longman, 1982), p.99. Appendix B, ‘Extracts from “The Montgomery’s of South Africa” (Being an account of the vicissitudes of an 1820 Settler Family)’, pp.98-103. Typescript held in the Cory Library.

(ii) 'He wishes he were very different from what he is'

Guy and Jean Butler celebrated their golden wedding anniversary in 1990. They held a party at which, according to Dorothy Randall ("Dimmie" – a close friend), the aged Butler showed he had lost none of his charisma, remaining on that occasion 'the master of it all, holding us in thrall with his magic, the director of proceedings.'⁷ Butler enjoyed an audience, and in moments of self-deprecation he confessed to egotism (sometimes matched with hedonism):

Over a delicious mutton dinner [we] talked politics, religion and philosophy. As usual I spoke too much.
Wij kijken in de glas
En wij pissen in de gras
En wij compt niet verder nie
was Jimmy Maasdorp's [a wartime colleague and friend] favourite post party utterance.⁸

This is recorded in a diary, kept in August 1989 during a trip with Tim Couzens through parts of Botswana, Louisvale, Pofadder and Port Nolloth. It is a revealing document. In it, Butler describes with both humour and pathos the scene of the following morning:

a large wall mirror in which I see an old man with touselled white hair, and heavy shadows round the eyes and mouth. He is propped up in bed, scribbling something in a file which he holds in his lap. He is 71. He is muddle headed and wishes he were very different from what he is. Outside the old sea sighs and soughs, and the cloudy sky is lightening up for the day.

1989 saw the publication of no less than four titles under Butler's name: the anthology *The Magic Tree: South African Stories in Verse* (edited with Jeff Opland); the "children's novel" *A Rackety Colt: The adventures of Thomas Stubbs*; the prose collection *Tales from the Old Karoo*; and a reprint of his 1975 *Selected Poems*, with additional poems. The long-postponed play *Demea* would follow in 1990. By this time he had already completed his final autobiographical volume, which would appear in 1991. Yet in the diary entry above, the seventy-one year old man, mildly

⁷ Dorothy Randall, card to Guy Butler, undated, c. December 1990. NELM.

hangover and overcome by the pathos of his age to the point of indulging in the pathetic fallacy, is a far cry from the powerful protean figure reflected in *A Local Habitation*.

1989 was also the year in which the English Academy of Southern Africa (having already nominated him as honorary life vice-president) awarded Butler its first medal in recognition of his literary achievements and his contribution to English in South Africa. The notes for his acceptance speech contain a section that was crossed out and not delivered:

It seems to me to have been my function to be a lateral thinker, to give birth to bright ideas which other people have had the brains and determination to implement, or, perhaps, to ask questions to which others have tried to find the answers.⁹

He went on instead to mention others' hard work in the establishment of the 1820/Grahamstown Foundation, the building of the Settler Monument, the founding of the ISEA and NELM. If such self-effacement seems to be merely the easy facade of humility expected of one whose manifold successes are being publicly lauded, we must remember that Butler believed he had good cause to be bashful about his vocation as a "man of letters". After all, what he really wanted – what he had wanted since he was a teenager – was to be a writer and, more specifically, a poet. No matter how high his seat on the institutional dais, his true ambition was the metaphorical laurel crown placed by readers and critics on the head of a "bard". Anthony Akal concludes that 'Butler's literary contributions and community service are indivisible' and that 'this is the mark of his achievement'; one wonders whether Butler would have been disappointed with such a summary, for in praising the service it inadvertently suggests a shortcoming in the literature – a failure to achieve autonomy, insofar as the works cannot stand on their own.¹⁰ (Akal sees Butler's contribution as 'indissolubly "art" or "community service"' – by which, one assumes, he means that the two cannot be separated; it would

⁸ Butler, 'August 1989 Diary – Trip with Tim Couzens'. NELM.

⁹ Butler, notes for speech to accept the award of a medal from the English Academy of Southern Africa, undated (1989). NELM.

¹⁰ Akal, *Forms of Community Service*, p.300.

be a bold claim to suggest that they are truly “indissoluble”, that is to say, will last forever – but the fact is that many readers and critics have made this separation, and while Butler texts remain in circulation future readers and critics will continue to make it.¹¹ Butler’s legacy is thus the poorer if his work is not deemed to have literary merit in and of itself.)

In ‘On Being a Writer’, Butler jokes: ‘My trouble is that I can’t make up my mind which sort of writer I am.’¹² Referring to his poems, prose fiction, drama and history, he concludes that his audience will most likely be interested in (will, at least, have read) his autobiographies, in particular *Karoo Morning*. The opening lines of his address spoof the very profession of the wordsmith as a kind of illness; in the same tone he describes poetry as ‘the first form of the disease I caught’, deriding the disproportion between ‘the amount of time I have devoted to it’ and the ‘very small number of people who read poetry at all, and my own in particular.’

Although it is not quite self-evident that any talented poet who wishes to be published must realistically expect a severely limited readership, it is fair to say that Butler’s words do no more than express the despair experienced at some period or another by nearly all poets. Yet, despite the high levels of illiteracy in South Africa and the further barrier of ‘ethnic and linguistic divides’ within our country’s literary arena, Butler did at one stage enjoy a “nationwide” audience and an appreciable poetic profile.¹³ In 1976, one year after the publication of his *Selected Poems*, Stephen Gray wrote to tell him: ‘I must say your poems seem to me to be absolutely everywhere, in bookshops and homes’ (although reviews were ‘slow, as always’).¹⁴ In the same year Butler could boast that his poems were being studied as far afield as Australia. He did not boast, but rather wrote to Denis Davison – an ex-Rhodes colleague who had been banned from South Africa, and subsequently introduced Butler’s *Selected Poems* to the undergraduate syllabus while teaching in exile at Monash University in Melbourne – with characteristic compunction: ‘This will be the first time

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.2.

¹² Butler, ‘On Being a Writer’.

¹³ See Malvern van Wyk Smith, ‘White Writing/Writing Black: The Anxiety of Non-Influence’ in Smit, JA *et al* (eds.), *Rethinking South African Literary History* (Durban: Y Press, 1996), pp.71-84 for an elaboration of these literary divides.

¹⁴ Stephen Gray, letter to Guy Butler, 14th March 1976.

to my knowledge that notice will be taken of me in volume form. My vanity is pleased. If the class is over 10 let me know.¹⁵

Another letter to Davison, written in 1977, allows us to trace at least one source of this self-disparagement:

The fact must be faced that no literary critic has found me either good or bad enough to get excited about. The SA lefties, or some of them, regard me as an old-fashioned liberal-colonial writer. One of them tried to establish this by a prac. crit. of Bronze Heads. The dishonest little twit indulged in some very tendentious analysis of the first few stanzas of the piece, and failed completely to see how the conclusion of the poem modifies everything that has gone before. This was at a poetry conference in Cape Town in 1976?, 1975? ...¹⁶

The 'dishonest little twit' referred to is Mike Kirkwood, whose paper 'The Colonizer: A Critique of the English South African Culture Theory', delivered at the seminal 'Poetry '74' conference at the University of Cape Town (UCT), introduced the term "Butlerist" as a derogatory epithet for English South African writers who did not sufficiently acknowledge their complicity, as "colonisers", in the racial oppression enforced under apartheid. Kirkwood did buffer his criticism with an ironic courtesy, conceding that Butler's writing could be 'perceptive' and claiming that the paper was not intended as an *ad hominem* denunciation of Butler himself, but aimed rather to reproach a certain kind of mentality.¹⁷ These ceremonial mollifications notwithstanding, the paper constituted a formidable attack.

Butler's dismissal of it in this instance is not convincing, for he could hardly have been unsure about the timing of the conference ('1976?', '1975?...'), which had taken place only three years beforehand and which, moreover, fell in the same year as a very different but equally significant conference that Butler himself had been closely involved in organising under the title of 'English-speaking South Africa: an Assessment'. Convened in Grahamstown to mark the opening of the 1820 Settlers National Monument, the conference brought together twenty speakers on

¹⁵ Butler, letter to Denis Davison, 20th May 1976. NELM.

¹⁶ Butler, letter to Denis Davison, 9th November 1977. NELM.

¹⁷ Mike Kirkwood, 'The Colonizer: A Critique of the English South African Culture Theory', pp.102-133 in Wilhelm, Peter and Polley, James (eds.), *Poetry South Africa: Selected Papers from Poetry '74* (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1976), p.113.

various subjects; the papers were subsequently (1976) collated into a volume edited by André de Villiers – *English-speaking South Africa Today: Proceedings of the National Conference, July 1974* – and were, as De Villiers describes them, ‘devoted to several categories of analysis: public affairs, population and community, the economy, religion, education, language and literature, and the media.’¹⁸ 1974 also saw the appearance of Butler’s *The 1820 Settlers: An Illustrated Commentary*, and in one sense the year could be seen as a high point in his “ESSA campaign”.¹⁹

Yet, if 1994 was a year both ‘*mirabilis*’ and ‘*horribilis*’ for Butler, this was equally true of 1974. Six months before the conference in Grahamstown, Butler had travelled to Cape Town for ‘Poetry ’74’, as he puts it in *A Local Habitation*, ‘totally, perhaps culpably, unaware of any pending assault’.²⁰ The broadside delivered by Kirkwood may have come as a shock to Butler, but Kirkwood’s was not a solitary voice: it represented a growing frustration on the part of younger academics and writers with what they perceived as the reactionary, apolitical and even “colonial” aspects of English South African culture that would be manifested at the Grahamstown conference.

‘English-speaking South Africa: An Assessment’ was not, of course, merely an exercise in ‘congratulatory approval’; De Villiers writes that participants engaged in ‘rigorous examination’ of the ESSA subject: ‘Their objectivity in the midst of the Monument opening’s festival atmosphere provoked some commentators to describe the conference proceedings as “agonized breast-beating”.’ *English-speaking South Africa Today* does, however, record a voice of dissent that is significant for being “external” – one Sydney (Sipho) Sepamla, who was invited to read his poetry at the conference but found himself put ‘at the tail end’ of events:

I think it is unfortunate that every time the White man arranges things, he always thinks of the Black man as a sort of afterthought ... I find it very hard that ... a convention like this one should not have had at least one

¹⁸ André de Villiers, ‘Introduction’, *English-speaking South Africa Today: Proceedings of the National Conference, July 1974* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1976), v.

¹⁹ (W)ESSA stands for (white) English-speaking South African. See Chapter Six: II.

²⁰ *A Local Habitation*, p.247.

Black person to have said something ... at least he'd have given a viewpoint which would be in keeping with Black thinking.²¹

Sepamla went on to remind the audience that, because he believed in 'those principles that have given rise to Black consciousness', he experienced his own presence at the conference as problematic: the fact that he was granted 'honorary White status' in order to attend was an indication of the extent to which the event itself was removed from the everyday experience of black South Africans.

Butler was cognisant of this: in *A Local Habitation*, he writes that Sepamla's poetry reading 'reminded English-speaking South Africans, who might cherish the notion that the Monument was an exercise in nostalgia, that they were a highly privileged small section of a society whose laws were designed to perpetuate ethnic differences.'²² Nevertheless, Sepamla's criticism about the exclusion of black voices from the conference programme could be extended to the marginalisation of black writers by the English literary establishment in the two preceding decades – the very years in which South African English literature was gaining greater "institutional" status. During the course of the 1970s, there was a strong impetus towards rectifying this critical paucity (Tim Couzens' paper on 'The Continuity of Black Writing in English in South Africa Before 1950' is as close as the 1974 Grahamstown conference proceedings come to reflecting this trend), driven by the incontrovertible impact of "Soweto poets" such as Sepamla, Oswald Mtshali, Mongane Wally Serote, Mafika Gwala, Don Mattera and others. This would lead to anthologies such as Michael Chapman and Achmat Dangor's *Voices from Within: Black Poetry from Southern Africa* (1982) and, in the same year, Couzens and Essop Patel's *The Return of the Amasi Bird: Black South African Poetry 1891-1981*; 1982 also saw the appearance of *Soweto Poetry*, a volume of essays and articles edited by Chapman.

²¹ Sydney (Sipho) Sepamla, 'Eleven Poems', *English-speaking South Africa Today*, p.377. The implied criticism – that the white academics participating in the conference are "speaking on behalf of" black people – was one of the standard accusations leveled against liberals under apartheid (see Chapter Six: III).

²² *A Local Habitation*, p.307. It is worth noting Sepamla's wish that the Monument will not just be 'a slab of mortar which you people have put up for your children to see the things that you have done in the country', but that 'it will be used by everybody' ('Eleven Poems', p.377). This mirrors Butler's own vision for the building and its function – one that was certainly not shared by all those involved in the development of the Monument (see *a Local Habitation*, pp.296-307).

Butler was also active as an anthologist during this period – in 1979, he brought out *A New Book of South African Verse in English*, co-edited with Chris Mann, which was ostensibly an updated version of his 1959 *Book of South African Verse*. During an interview published in the journal *English in Africa*, Butler described the circumstances that precipitated the second edition as follows: Ad. Donker, who had published his *Selected Poems* in 1975, informed Butler that the 1959 anthology was out of print, suggesting that a new anthology be put together; Butler contacted Oxford University Press (OUP) to enquire about this, and was informed that they were about to begin reprinting. According to Butler, ‘It came as a shock to me that they were going to reprint a twenty-year-old book of a changing thing like South African verse without referring to its editor.’²³

Butler thus acknowledged that the 1959 volume – even if it had ‘produced sufficient respectable evidence’ for the ‘existence’ of South African poetry and ‘establish[ed] the presence of a sequence of poets in Southern Africa’ – was limited in both its scope and its “relevance” to an audience in the late 1970s.²⁴ For the new edition, the editorial approach was that Butler would select from poets first published prior to 1960, and Mann would edit work that had appeared subsequently. Butler had told OUP he ‘would like the assistance of someone younger to help cover the work produced in the twenty years since the first edition’; the anonymous *English in Africa* interviewer (possibly André de Villiers) suggested to Butler that he felt ‘out of touch with what the younger poets had been doing’, to which Butler replied, ‘I was not out of touch, but I was sure I could not be as tuned in as someone a generation younger than myself.’

This ambiguous assertion (like his comment in the same interview that, between 1959 and 1979, he had ‘changed my views slightly’) indicates Butler’s uncertainty about whether or not he was in fact ‘old-fashioned’. He was, of course, concerned to remain abreast of developments in South African English poetry, whether by white or black poets. Yet the wording of the Preface to the 1979 anthology is such that Butler (with Mann) does not indicate the rift – ‘the anxiety of non-

²³ Butler and Chris Mann, ‘On *A New Book of South African Verse in English*’ (Interview), *English in Africa* 6 (1, March 1979): 1.

²⁴ *Ibid.*: 3.

influence’, as Malvern van Wyk Smith has since described it – between ‘white writing’ and ‘writing black’.²⁵ Discussing one of the differences between the original selection and the new collection of poems (in 1959, a smaller number of poets were represented by a great number of poems each, but in 1979, this policy was ‘abandoned’), the editors affirm that ‘there is no longer any need to build presences, and we have been content to present poems’:

This confidence is due to the surge of English writing that has gathered momentum during the nearly twenty years that have passed since the first appearance of the original volume. Numerous little magazines have brought a large number of poets into contact with a larger readership than before; several publishing houses have boldly and regularly pulished new verse; conferences of English-language poets ... gave the movement impetus and some definition; and the banning and/or exile of numerous prominent writers, both Black and White, has drawn attention to the political importance of the writing community ... we are still too close to the start of the surge to know the sources of the currents which fed it ...²⁶

By contrast, in his Introduction to *A Century of South African Poetry* (published by Ad. Donker in 1978 – the end result of Donker’s idea for a new anthology), Michael Chapman identifies these currents fairly clearly. On the one hand, there is the tradition of ‘liberal humanist poetic activity’ which, entrenched in the 1959 anthology, grew further through the efforts of Butler and others to ensure that South African English literature was accepted by English-speaking South Africans as a valid, autonomous category (when Butler describes how ‘more young people are involved’ because poetry ‘seems to be alive in schools and universities in a way it was not in the fifties’, and comments that ‘there is no longer so acute a lack of critical awareness as there used to be’ on the part of literary scholars and reviewers, this is to a large degree because of his own efforts).²⁷

On the other hand, however, the ‘current’ that fed the burgeoning popularity of the Soweto poets – black rage against apartheid – was not one that Butler had real access to. Certainly, his 1975 address, ‘The

²⁵ Van Wyk Smith, ‘White Writing/Writing Black: The Anxiety of Non-Influence’, p.71.

²⁶ Butler and Mann, Preface to *A New Book of South African Verse in English* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1979), p.13.

²⁷ See Michael Chapman, Introduction to *A Century of South African Poetry* (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1978), p.16.

Language of the Conqueror on the Lips of the Conquered is the Language of Slaves', relies heavily on the status of Sepamla, Serote and Mtshali. Yet the way in which Butler discusses the 'significance and resonance' of 'so-called "township poetry"' in the *English in Africa* interview seems far removed from the urgency of the period:

The cultural shock of urbanisation in sub-Saharan Africa is far more violent than it ever was in Europe ... for the African, on the other hand, the city is an experience alien to his culture. Its business is conducted in foreign tongues and it is administered by people whose laws and beliefs differ radically from his own ... Wherever industrialisation hits a rural community, it acts as a sort of solvent on traditional beliefs and values ... in South Africa [this] is compounded by the fact that there is nothing African in the powerful ferro-concrete centre of the white man's city.²⁸

This analysis is problematic: quite apart from the element of condescension, it misses the key point that the alienation experienced by black people in urban areas was the direct result not simply of industrialisation, but of extreme poverty, pass laws and other oppressive apartheid measures.

Butler's insistence on "aesthetic" rather than "political" grounds for including poets in the anthology – those who 'write poems which are legitimate and effective protests but do not measure up to our standards as poems' were not considered – distances him further from the historical moment of the Soweto poets (Mann is evidently more anxious about this process of exclusion).²⁹ Nevertheless, the difference between Butler's approach to South African poetry in 1979 and the way in which he formulated his anthology in 1959 was a marked one – and this is chiefly the difference between the 'inevitable single-strandedness' represented by that volume, as the *English in Africa* interviewer describes it, and the variegated entity that was South African English poetry in the 1970s (resulting from 'the choice of English as the medium for their poetry by

²⁸ 'On *A New Book of South African Verse in English*': 10.

²⁹ *Ibid.*: 8-9. Consider also Butler's letter to his son David, in which he expresses his response to reading an issue of *The New Classic*: 'The expected Anger & Anguish, the inadequate English, the dubious history, the Marxist catch-phrases; in spite of which, there are good things in it, & some very sensible grappling with ... the need for writers to practice a craft as well as exercise their consciences' (19th December 1983). This is not to say that Butler was unwilling to engage with young black poets who wrote to him asking for help and advice; on the contrary, he acted as a mentor to a number of aspiring black writers (including some, such as Matthew Goniwe, who became known not for their literary ability but their political activism).

non-mother-tongue speakers' – that is, black and coloured writers).³⁰

The *English in Africa* interview is particularly interesting because a number of Butler's comments on the shortcomings of *A Book of South African Verse* echo those made by Chapman in his Introduction. Butler admits that he should have included black poets writing in English such as HIE Dhlomo and JJR Jolobe in his 1959 anthology, as Chapman points out (although AK Soga, the 'first really serious black South African poet writing in English', remains excluded from *A New Book of South African Verse*).³¹ Butler also rescinds his assertion that, because of a lack of popular songs and ballads amongst ESSAs, South African verse has largely been 'an educated man's affair'; referring to magazines and journals such as *Staffrider*, he affirms not only that 'poetry has become a popular mouthpiece' for black protest writers (with 'less concern for polish, elegance, conscious style, and an attempt to get closer to the experience of ordinary people'), but also that 'black poets have certainly achieved an audience never accorded to whites'.³² This, too, is similar to the position taken by Chapman in disputing the phrase 'educated man's affair'.³³

Although Chapman's lengthy introduction offers a useful critical framework in which to frame his selections, and gives a heavier weighting to black poets of the 1960s and 1970s than do Butler and Mann, it could be argued that their respective anthologies are not altogether different in scope or direction. They both start with Thomas Pringle and include works by non-South African English poets ("imperial sojourners");³⁴ they are both

³⁰ *Ibid.*: 2.

³¹ See Chapman, Introduction to *A Century of South African Poetry*, p.17 (Chapman is quoting Tim Couzens).

³² 'On *A New Book of South African Verse in English*': 7. It is worth pointing out that there are several variations on this description: Butler refers to a 1956 interview with the BBC in which he spoke of South African poetry as 'a gentleman's affair', while Ernest Pereira, introducing *Unisa English Studies* 1993 (31), misquotes Butler and alludes to 'a cultivated man's affair' (3).

³³ Chapman, Introduction to *A Century of South African Poetry*, p.14. In *South African English Poetry: A Modern Perspective* (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1984), Chapman counters the 'educated man's affair' stance by referring not only to more recent black poetry but also to 'digger and Boer War ballads' and the 'jingling music-hall compositions' (21) adapted by Andrew Geddes Bain – which, of course, Butler engaged with more thoroughly subsequent to 1959 (in *Cape Charade* and elsewhere).

³⁴ It is Butler and Mann, in fact, who take the more defensive stance in justifying their inclusion: Mann warns that 'literary nationalism' should be avoided, even if 'we prefer a writer who is grounded in his historical context'; Butler asserts that 'All poets of any stature write poems with precious little dependence on either geography or history. Only some poetry needs to have these specifics' ('On *A New Book of South African Verse in English*': 4). Moreover, he argues, 'there are South African writers born [sic] who do not penetrate the South African scene like some birds of passage. Must we do without Pringle, Kipling, Plomer and so on?' Mann notes that Pringle was included not because he signals the "start" of South African English literature, but because 'he says things which apply to us today' (5).

limited by the constraint of being unable to reproduce the work of a major poet such as Dennis Brutus because of banning orders by the Ministry of Justice; they both divide their content equally between pre- and post-1960. Nevertheless, a contemporary reviewer such as Ian Glenn found the Butler-Mann anthology wanting in various respects, particularly an ‘editorial bias against certain themes or styles’ reflecting ‘*New Coin* strengths and limitations’ (Butler was founder and editor of the poetry quarterly):

a dislike of modernism and post-modernism; a distrust of the political and the public; a suspicion of political statement or ideology; a preference for reasonable moderation (whatever or wherever that may be); a dislike of the bloody, the ugly, the vulgar, the sordid, the apocalyptic, the frightening ... Anything threatening or angry or bitter has been tactfully omitted in favour of a sanitized, de-gutted version, without any real consideration of the problems involved in dealing with protest poetry.³⁵

These are the grounds on which Chapman’s anthology can be distinguished from *A New Book of South African Verse in English* (Chapman in fact quotes Glenn in his 1984 work *South African English Poetry: A Modern Perspective*).³⁶ The strengths of Chapman’s anthology notwithstanding, it shares with the Butler-Mann selection the more fundamental problems presented to any white anthologist of English-language poetry under apartheid by, as Glenn’s review describes it, ‘the movement of black poetry [during the 1970s] from a poetry of appeals to liberal whites to an aggressive collective poetry of black nationalism, using English as a lingua franca to protest and bear witness to the largest audience possible’.³⁷

What is particularly interesting about the critiques offered by both Chapman and Glenn is that, while they chastise Butler-as-anthologist, they do acknowledge his merits as a poet. Glenn writes that *A New Book of*

³⁵ Ian Glenn, ‘Review of Guy Butler and Chris Mann, *A New Book of South African Verse in English*’, *English in Africa* 6 (2, September 1979): 70-71. Glenn’s generalisations about ‘*New Coin* strengths and weaknesses’ are not altogether convincing, and it is perhaps unfair to map the narrow editorial policies – necessarily so, if only because of the combination of editors’ tastes and space restrictions – of journals and magazines onto the wider record of an anthology; one could not, for instance, describe Butler’s 1959 *Book of South African Verse* as a “*Standpunte* anthology” (only five poems published in *Standpunte* appeared in that volume), even though Butler was editor of the journal from 1955-1958.

³⁶ Chapman, *South African English Poetry: A Modern Perspective*, p.19.

³⁷ Chapman notes this in his Introduction to the volume of critical essays in *Soweto Poetry* (Johannesburg: McGraw Hill, 1982).

South African Verse fails to contribute to ‘our’ (WESSAs?) ‘self-understanding’ because it does not offer examples of how the tradition of “veld and vlei” verse has suffered the strains of ‘an intrusive social and political setting’ and ‘the realisation that the landscape was people’; he cites, as three poets whose work could – if correctly selected – be seen to represent this tension, Cullinan, Livingstone and ‘Butler himself’.³⁸ Chapman, in his Introduction to *A Century of South African Poetry*, writes sensitively of Butler: as one of the poets of the 1940s and 1950s whose work ‘can yield its own music once the ear is attuned’ to ‘the peculiar tension between the stark facts of war and a calmly reporting voice’; in terms of the ‘almost imperceptible shifts from the discursive to the illustrative’ in Butler’s poetry examining the ESSA dilemma (being ‘indebted to a Western European heritage, yet seeking a home in South Africa’); and even with reference to the ‘colloquial rhythms’ of ‘Tourist Insight Into Things’ which anticipate ‘the radically altered sensibility of style’ which would ‘most fully reveal itself during the 1960s’.³⁹ Chapman thus sees Butler’s poetry as evidence that ‘the liberal humanist voice is richer and more varied than Butler’s own remarks [in the 1959 anthology] might seem to imply’.⁴⁰

What, then, of the poetry that Butler was producing around the time that he was working on *A New Book of South African Verse in English*? We have seen his response to black poets writing in English, but how can he be placed relative to his fellow white English-speaking South African poets (WESSAPs)? After all, Chapman lists him under the poets of ‘1940-1960’, as if in a different generation to Douglas Livingstone, Ruth Miller or Sydney Clouts. Yet Butler would produce just as much poetry after that watershed year as he had before it (even if, by his own admission, the early work was his best), and Stephen Gray’s 1976 anthology, *A World of Their Own: Southern African Poets of the Seventies*, opens with a group of Butler’s poems.

³⁸ Glenn, ‘Review of Guy Butler and Chris Mann, *A New Book of South African Verse in English*’: 71-72.

³⁹ Chapman, Introduction to *A Century of South African Poetry*, p.16.

⁴⁰ In *South African Poetry: A Modern Perspective*, however, Butler’s observations in *A Book of South African Verse* are deemed to be ‘reinforced by his own poetry of the 1950s’ (23). Even though the two Chapman works under discussion here share some text verbatim, the attitude towards Butler as both poet and anthologist is, curiously, more sympathetic in *A Century of South African Poetry* than it is in the later text.

None of the poems deemed by the anthologists (Gray, Chapman and Butler-Mann) to be representative of Butler's work could be said to address political issues of the day overtly. Some of them date to Butler's early engagement with the Europe-Africa dichotomy, or form part of his continued efforts to negotiate between and find ways to synthesise the two ('Karoo Town, 1939', 'Myths', 'Home Thoughts', 'Tourist Insight Into Things'); some of them speak to the related question of "belonging" or, in turn, the subject of settler history ('Farmer', 'Ayliff and the Lepers'); many are personal, "de-politicised" meditations or narratives ('Stranger to Europe', 'Sweet Water',; 'Great-Great-Grandmother', 'Whoever-Whatever-You-Are', 'Near Hout Bay', 'Epitaph for a Poet').

In Chapter Five I shall discuss Butler's approach to the notion that a poet is somehow obliged to respond in his or her work to immediate socio-political matters. At this stage, however, it is worth mentioning that – insofar as Butler did use his poetry to comment on current events, or even to persuade the reader as to appropriate forms of action – the other two poems anthologised in the late 1970s represent a controversial intervention. 'The Divine Underground' and 'Body Grows Old, Heart Stays Young', like 'A Prayer For All My Countrymen' (which appeared in *South of the Zambesi*, 1966), can be read as advocating a patient pacifism, perhaps even passivity, in the face of either violent oppression or violent rebellion: 'as we drive/or are driven apart' in 'ages of iron', the speaker celebrates those who divine 'an innocent justice' and 'endure' the 'grand and murderous razzmatazz'. This is a message echoed in 'Soweto', from Butler's *Songs and Ballads* (1978):

In hours like these
 let's take no child for granted; let's curse
 those treacherous years; grasp at, seize
 each small chance for good, tenderly nurse
 each just seed, rejoice in smallest traces
 of mercy; open our heart, hand, door and purse.
 Dear law-makers, dear law-breakers, may it please
 the Gods to give us the needful insights and graces.

History, however, would judge in favour of the law-breakers (the protesting students of 1976), and even though he condemns the apartheid

government, Butler's desire for peace and reconciliation irrespective of political circumstances – 'hoping at last to reach and learn/the ground beneath all feet, all fists, all voices' – does not offer a convincing solution. Again, it is a moot point whether or not poets have a responsibility to do so. Yet Butler's belief, that it is better to be a spiritual-historical 'pilgrim' (in 'Pilgrimage to Dias Cross' he seeks to understand the root causes of South Africa's racial conflict, to meditate upon them and to pray for resolution) than to 'burn with rage/in a damned land/in an insolent age', is not a position that can be meaningfully adopted by those wishing to act against an oppressive regime.

Apart from 'Soweto', there is no urgent engagement in *Songs and Ballads* with the political *status quo* – although 'Homeland Haiku' addresses rural poverty and the consequences of migrant labour, and 'Natal, 1497' tries to forge a measure of unity between the European, African and Indian forebears of that province's conflicting race groups.⁴¹ Despite its poetic merits (particularly in terms of close attention to form), there is little that marks *Songs and Ballads* as a volume that speaks palpably to the concerns of potential readers at that time.⁴² Nevertheless, it would not be fair to say that Butler's poetry from this period is completely "out of step" with more politically conscious poems by WESSA poets. Here I am referring in particular to what is one of Butler's most powerful poems from the 1970s – one that unfortunately remained unpublished until it appeared in the *Collected Poems* – 'Dream of a Buffer Strip'.

Asked to describe themes prevalent in *A New Book of South African Verse*, Chris Mann identified a 'poetry of dread', running from Roy Campbell's 'The Zulu Girl' (he had in mind the closing lines 'the first cloud so terrible and still/That bears the coming harvest in its breast') via Wopko Jensma's 'If only a Dream were not Real' ('a terrifying vision' of a

⁴¹ Tony Voss, in a review of the volume, found the haiku 'among the least successful poems' because Butler chose the wrong form for a socio-political "message": 'Haiku are better for images and emotions than for ideas'. ('Review of Guy Butler, *Songs and Ballads*', *English in Africa* 6 (2, September 1979): 72.)

⁴² Who these readers might be is also debatable; as Voss notes, the 'community' to which Butler addresses himself is 'problematical': 'Who are "we"' in poems such as 'Soweto' and 'Body Grows Old, Heart Stays Young'? (*Ibid.*: 73).

city 'devastated by political violence') to Mike Nicol's 'The Refugees'.⁴³ The latter poem, in particular, 'expresses white English-speaking South Africans' dread of the future'. Andrew Foley defines one key aspect of the 'poetry of dread' in terms of WESSAPs' exploration of their fellow WESSAs' 'sense of being under constant threat of attack in their racially exclusive suburbs and homes'.⁴⁴ Discussing the work of Christopher Hope, Patrick Cullinan (whose *Today is Not Different* appeared alongside *Songs and Ballads* in the "Mantis Poets" series), William Branford and Mann himself, Foley argues that the 'poetry of dread' consciously demonstrates how 'WESSAs are, to a great extent, themselves responsible' for their own fear:

WESSAs, instead of working actively towards a more equitable society in South Africa, have allowed themselves to become paralysed by dread, and so, left sitting on the (political) fence, have contributed in large measure to their own downfall ... [the danger] is not so much the menace of some vague barbarian enemy that they feared, but rather the dehumanising effect of their own paranoid, xenophobic absence of charity and compassion.⁴⁵

There is some resonance here with Butler's attempts, in his essays and public lectures, to coax WESSAs out of their political apathy. His poetry, however, never quite reached the level of polemic; moreover, in 'Dream of a Buffer Strip', Butler not only critiques the generic WESSA 'dread' but also exposes personal fears, both for his family and for the country. The "stream-of-consciousness" style allows for illogical, associative leaps: a street child in a township, catapult in hand, recalls the young David who slew Goliath; but in the poem's closing lines it is the older King David's lament for his dead son Absalom that is invoked, as the street child, "crucified" on the buffer strip fence, transmutes into the speaker's own son: 'ensnared/in our ten foot diamond fence/hangs dead

⁴³ *Ibid.*: 6. The lines from Campbell's poem appear in *A New Book of South African Verse in English*, p.70. One could also refer to the ending of Campbell's seminal 'Rounding the Cape' – 'Night, the Negro, murmurs in his sleep' (p.77) – or, for a slightly later example, Anthony Delius's 'Pretoria Afternoon', which presages some "black" revenge on "white" oppressors in its description of a highveld thunder storm: 'a black tremendous man who's dressed/in plumes and ox-tails, urged by drums/with spears of lightning in his fist.' See Roy Macnab (ed.), *Poets in South Africa: An Anthology* (1958) (Cape Town: Maskew Miller, 1968), p.36.

⁴⁴ Andrew Foley, 'A Poetry of Dread', *Unisa English Studies* 31(1, April 1993): 33.

⁴⁵ Foley's article defends WESSA poets and the 'poetry of dread' against critics such as Stephen Watson, Jeremy Cronin and Isabel Hofmeyr, who did not 'draw a clear distinction between, on the one hand, the general limitations of WESSA culture, and, on the other hand, the particular values and ideas expressed by individual poets' (25).

my son my son' (the older of Butler's two biological sons is named David). Indeed, it is a brave poem insofar as it admits – through the “irrational logic” by which nightmares often proceed – to the poet's dread of, or guilt about, his own prejudices.

Chapman quotes Butler's address at the opening of the English Academy conference in 1969 (somewhat out of context) in order to disagree with the assertion that 'old-fashioned techniques that are no longer helpful in Europe' may be revitalised in South Africa; for Chapman, 'South African experience has been too complex and varied to be wholly accommodated by modes that can be termed “conventional”.'⁴⁶ The question of appropriate forms for South African poetry in many ways encapsulates the two approaches that can be taken to Butler's poetry from this period: either we read the variations on “convention” in *Songs and Ballads* as attempts to breathe new life into old (European) forms by appropriating them as a South African poet, or we set them against the more radical experimentation of 'Dream of a Buffer Strip' – in which case we will deem most of these poems 'old-fashioned' (with rare exceptions) in the sense that, despite his ironic use of the term, Butler feared.

(iii) 'A dying art form'

What probably stung Butler most about Kirkwood's attack on “Butlerism” was that it was really only a springboard into an otherwise standard neo-Marxist attack on white South Africa at large, a fairly obvious target whose actions and attitudes Butler could not in all fairness be seen to endorse. Twenty years later, Butler was sent a review of *Poetry South Africa: Selected Papers from Poetry '74*, the book that proceeded from the conference, by Patrick Cullinan. Cullinan's review was, broadly speaking, pro-Butler and anti-Kirkwood – but it had been 'misplaced' by Jack Cope, and was never published. Butler (now seventy-eight) was both grateful and gratified, so long after the fact, to read Cullinan's “defence”:

Although it opened the odd old wound in rehearsing the Kirkwood performance, it did my ageing morale a lot of good. My real grievance – like

⁴⁶ Chapman, *South African Poetry: A Modern Perspective*, p.40 (see also the Introduction to *A Century of South African Poetry*, p.19).

yours – is against Jack Cope for not publishing it. Kirkwood got away with it, just as most of the idol worshippers do.⁴⁷

We will encounter Kirkwood, the ‘SA Lefties’ and the programme of South African English acculturation again in these pages. Here, however, it is worth mentioning that – although the ‘Poetry ’74’ incident undoubtedly shook Butler’s confidence – this was by no means the first time that his views had been denigrated, misrepresented or dismissed out of hand. He came under fire from the radical left in the seventies, but in the fifties and sixties it was the conservative establishment that showed its disapproval: first, in educational and literary circles, because of his campaign to give equal place to South African literature in school and university syllabi for which, at that time, only canonical English texts were considered appropriate; then, when the apartheid government looked to intellectual figures to act as apologists for its segregationist policies and Butler persisted in calling for mutual engagement rather than separate development.

The juxtaposition of hostility from both extremes of the political spectrum may have strengthened Butler in his resolve to oppose the ideologically stubborn, but also weakened the hopes he harboured of attaining widespread popularity as a writer. In addition, the fact that he couldn’t even ‘make up my mind which sort of writer I am’ and, moreover, was so distracted by his numerous public roles that writing often lost priority, left him feeling that his literary and intellectual project lacked consistency. When Margaret Daymond invited Butler to contribute to a festschrift for Raymond Sands (published in 1984 as *Momentum: On Recent South African Writing*) by reflecting on his own poetic manifesto of the 1940s – the ‘Search for Synthesis’ – and his preoccupations since then, he gave an illuminating reply.

The difficulty is this: The examination of a portion of ones [sic] career raises questions about ones entire career. As a result I find it extraordinarily difficult to see myself in perspective. Not that one ever

⁴⁷ Butler, letter to Patrick Cullinan, 2nd April 1996. NELM. The two poets were correspondents for many years after the combined appearance of *Today is Not Different* and *Songs and Ballads* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1978).

does. I find it increasingly difficult to take myself seriously except in a fairly comic light.⁴⁸

Self-mocking comedy was a common theme in Butler's public pronouncements about his own writing. While his son David was performing compulsory army service, Butler wrote him lengthy weekly letters describing his own experience of growing up in Cradock; these letters – titled 'My Lousy Education' – were to become the basis for many of the recollections in *Karoo Morning*. Privately, Butler spelled out his intentions in writing the letters to David: 'your generation is going to have to make great adjustments in awareness and behaviour towards Black and Coloured South Africans; and I devoutly hope that many of the things I say will shock you.'⁴⁹ In 'On Being a Writer', however, Butler explains the letters and the origins of *Karoo Morning* in an altogether different tone: 'Note the arrogance of giving a retrospective diary of each week,' he warns his audience, as if pre-empting the criticism levelled at many a writer of memoirs.⁵⁰ He goes on to say that, when it comes to the 'narcissistic venture' of writing autobiography, 'objectivity is impossible', borrowing from Spike Milligan in a hyperbolic summary of *Bursting World: My part in Hitler's Downfall*.

In 1988, giving a talk at the launch of a new volume on TS Eliot, Butler submitted a similarly light-hearted version of his life 'bound up with books.'⁵¹ The self-portrait painted in this speech (by an academic who remained critically aware of the potential for academic aloofness) implies that professorship is "just a regular job" and that the professor is "just a regular guy":

To keep the wolf from the door [my brother Jeff and I] both started as hardworking, honest school teachers, took fright, and sank defeated into professorial easy-chairs. I sometimes wonder what would have become of me if my family had not been in books and printing ... we children had to help correct the galley proofs of the *Midland News and Karroo Farmer*, a task at which I did not excel. I am slightly dyslexic. My hero was Mark Twain, who said: 'I have simply no respect for a man who can spell a word

⁴⁸ Butler, letter to Margaret Daymond, 30th March 1982. NELM.

⁴⁹ Butler, letter to David Butler, 1st November 1975, incorporating 'My Lousy Education', XVI (Race Relations). NELM.

⁵⁰ 'On Being a Writer'.

⁵¹ Butler, manuscript of speech given at the opening of a new Exclusive Books branch in Cape Town, 2nd November 1988. NELM.

only in one way.’ My father finally sacked me as a proof-reader when I failed to pick up a misprint in an advertisement for furniture, which illustrated a luxury bedroom suite. Instead of reading “Bedheads lend a touch of luxury to any bedroom”, it read “Redheads lend a touch of luxury to any bedroom”.

Despite this unassuming account, the speech goes on to make great claims about the vocation of the poet. TS Eliot’s poetry had been close to Butler’s heart since he was a young man – ‘The Waste Land’ was *de rigueur* among the proto-modernist fraternity at Rhodes during his undergraduate years, and he carried a copy of *The Dry Salvages* (1941) with him as a soldier – and the Eliot book under discussion inspires an unequivocal conclusion about the role of the poet. Eliot’s poetic career was not a smooth one, and in South Africa ‘the same desperate struggle of poets for poetry goes on ... by comparison, prose writers are a lot of laidback fat cats’. Yet Butler implores his audience to ‘take special care of our poets’ because, ‘make no mistake: the poets are the frontline people – the touchstones, the innovators, the purgers of the dialect of the tribe.’

It was not easy to maintain such triumphant rhetoric in the face of an ever-dwindling readership, even in the ‘fat-cat’ world of prose. ‘Stocktaking 1995’ reports that Butler showed a collection of short stories to his friends David and Marie Philip (publishers of his autobiographies, his poetry, his collected essays and other works), but that in reply they showed him

thumbs down, saying they were anti-Afrikaans, old-fashioned etc. Which touches an old man like me on the raw. But I see what they mean. Maybe I am “past it” and have lost whatever touch or grip I had on my subject matter.⁵²

In the same document, his response to reading contemporary poetry from South Africa and elsewhere is captured in an ambiguous admission: ‘I am very old-fashioned indeed; in fact, pre-myself, pre *Stranger to Europe!*’ Yet the idea that he held more “radical” views, whether politically or poetically, as the young poet of *Stranger to Europe* (1952) is undermined almost immediately by his frustration with the fate of the significant but (then) incomplete long poem, ‘Elegy: For a South African Tank Commander’,

most of which dates back to the war years – ‘Who on earth would publish such “colonial” stuff?’

Four years later it was published, as part of the *Collected Poems* (1999). In his Foreword to this collection, Laurence Wright hails the book as representing ‘one of the most compelling and substantial poetic achievements to have appeared on the South African literary scene for many years’ and confidently expects to ‘see increasing attention being paid to Guy Butler’s poetry.’⁵³ It is all the more discomfiting, then, to read in a letter of the very same year not only that Butler doubted the value of his own poetic effort, but also that this doubt induced him to call into question the worth of the genre itself:

In my gloomier moments I regret having wasted so much time on a dying art form. Who reads the stuff? But writing verse is not so much a matter of choice as invincible addiction, and is cheaper than alcohol.⁵⁴

Indeed, as it was not a matter of choice, he never stopped writing, continuing to produce poetry until he died.

Wright’s Foreword to the *Collected Poems* notes that Butler’s later poems explore

a relaxed, conversational mode, risking poetry as close as possible to the spoken rhythms of the natural voice; deftly skirting the bounds of the prosaic to seek the numinous in the matter-of-fact, the humane in the human.⁵⁵

A less generous commentator might suggest that Butler’s later work (and even some poems from the “middle period”, decades either side of 1978’s *Songs and Ballads*, would have to answer the same criticism) sacrifices too much in the name of ‘conversational’ intimacy. Butler noted that ‘moving away from rhymed, stanzaic and highly structured verse ... closer and closer to ordinary speech and conversation’ is ‘a dangerous policy for a poet, but a fascinating one.’⁵⁶ In his case, he ‘did not think [the move] out. It happened.’ He suggested that it may have been an ‘inevitable’

⁵² ‘Stocktaking 1995’.

⁵³ Laurence Wright, Foreword to Butler’s *Collected Poems*, p.ix.

⁵⁴ Butler, letter to Tim Couzens, 29th May 1999. NELM.

⁵⁵ Wright, *op. cit.*, p.x.

consequence of his experimentation with verse plays. Still, posing the question, 'How can one use ordinary language to suggest the extraordinary elements in our lives?', Butler was not able to offer a clear answer. Sometimes, in his poetry, 'ordinary language' in point of fact fails to meet this challenge.

Wright is correct to affirm that Butler was a 'technically accomplished' poet, with a 'playful mastery of a wide range of verse forms'.⁵⁷ As he grew older, however, Butler was less concerned with poetic intensity, the sound of words under pressure – a quality that he so admired in poets like Hopkins, who 'seemed to have a way of making words in combination give up secrets which no one had ever suspected were there' – and more concerned with the telling of thought-provoking stories, offering old age's perspective and wisdom.⁵⁸ As an elderly anthologist, he foregrounded this story-telling function of poetry; the Introduction to *The Magic Tree* dismisses the loss of linguistic particularity in certain poems as a result of translation because 'the story, which is our main concern, can survive intact.'⁵⁹ As a poet, it seems that the "grand old man" (again, I use the term ironically) assumed a voice of authority rather than trying to wrestle with his readers' collective linguistic imagination.⁶⁰

The final section of *Collected Poems*, 'Family and Friends', contains a number of late pieces that narrate, sometimes in the first person and

⁵⁶ Butler, *Thirst*, unedited electronic manuscript (courtesy Priscilla Hall/NELM), p.209.

⁵⁷ Muriel Bradbrook concurs, and in her discussion of Butler's variations with form and rhythm she also comments on the 'conversational' tone of some of his poetry – she refers to his 'earlier' poetry, but Butler would continue writing for 20 years after Bradbrook's essay was published. (' "A dome of many-coloured glass": The Lyric Poetry of Guy Butler' in Malvern van Wyk Smith and Don MacLennan (eds.), *Olive Schreiner and After: Essays on Southern African Literature in Honour of Guy Butler* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1983), p.160.) André Brink's section on Butler in *Three South African Poets: A Critical Study* contains a close technical analysis – Brink even tests his general theory on the rhythmic and semantic patterns of *vers libre* through an exposition of 'After Ten Years' – which suggests the careful craft of Butler's early poetry; in fact, Brink concludes, Butler 'is a more studious worker than Campbell ... If he does not always attain the same heights as Campbell, he is more consistently a poet' (p.196). Akal notes that the introductions to *South of the Zambezi* (by William Plomer) and *Songs and Ballads* (by Ruth Harnett) both refer to Butler's command of technique.

⁵⁸ *Thirst*, p.ix and *Bursting World*, p.73.

⁵⁹ Butler and Opland, Jeff, *The Magic Tree: South African stories in verse* (Cape Town: Maskew Miller Longman, 1989), Introduction.

⁶⁰ Malan's comment, in 1986, that Butler is 'most vulnerable to criticism' when his poetry is little more than 'the expression of his own personality' thus seems to anticipate the weakness of some of the late poems (*Guy Butler: Poet and Dramatist*, p.239). Alternatively, there is Don MacLennan's theory that although (or perhaps because) 'On First Seeing Florence' is 'the real measure of what Butler is after in poetry' – discovery, and 'presenting discovery as discovery' – the experience and the poem represent 'such a powerful discovery that much of the subsequent poetry appears to be an echo of the original ... the poems begin to take on a false

sometimes in the third, the incidents and insights of Butler's final years – but unfortunately, on more than one occasion, interesting content is lost within the self-indulgence of a diary-keeper. The poems no longer skirt 'the bounds of the prosaic' but become, in fact, prose in a poetic form. In 'The Acorn Man', *King Lear* and *Nebuchadnezzar* are invoked to inform the relationship that develops between an 'ageing Professor of English' (Butler) and 'a black man on his hands and knees/raking acorns into a sack with his fingers' to feed his pig. 'A Bee' depicts that same old academic learning that 'he will not want for wonders' when he looks at the world through the eyes of his grandchild. 'Ntsikana's Bell' has the historian, who sees Ntsikana (the first Xhosa to convert to Christianity, the hymn-writer, the prophet) as an important historical figure and symbol, blushing at being associated with a film crew's ignorance about and indifference towards a community in the Eastern Cape. The extract 'From the second burial of Thomas Pringle' celebrates the life of a writer who, born cripple, with 'one leg and a crutch/stood his ground on principles' and left a legacy: 'South African poets in English have so far failed/to find a path without his footprint on it.'

All these episodes and reflections are engaging material, and they represent aspects of Butler's project – care and concern for individuals, reverence for the natural world, respect for South African tradition and history – but the lengthy, sometimes clumsily constructed lines may just as well have been stitched together into prose paragraphs in a memoir or journal. 'Hands', for instance, relates the loss of an index finger Butler suffered as the result of an accident with a circular saw while he was restoring an old house. The injury and consequent consultation with a surgeon led him to reflect in amazement on the development of opposable thumbs in the early primates. The same story, with similar emphasis, is recorded in *A Local Habitation*. The autobiographical anecdote makes for good reading, but the poem, unfortunately, does not.

Other late poems and certain memorable lines, however, demonstrate a more exacting effort: acute diction, metrical tautness, a musical ear. Butler's uneasiness over growing old, combined with the

certainty, the taken-for-granted quality of ideology' ('The Poetry of Guy Butler' in Michael Chapman *et al*

nuances of his literary anxieties (but also with his undiminished capacity to be astonished by the world around him) produced innovative and refreshing poems such as 'Geriatric in Spring'. Here, the speaker imagines that, as winter comes to an end, 'prides of emerald lions are licking wounds/or sniffing in sleep the first rain-sexy breeze.' Despite his awe at how spring causes 'each naked shape' to be 'quite transformed', when the poet turns his observing eye on himself, the tone changes suddenly. The final lines of the poem are a puzzle:

No autumn sun
will bless my year with sweet predictable fruit.
Through me far different seasons shone and stormed.

Is this simply the trepidation of not knowing what lies in store, or is it ultimately the fear of approaching death? Is the poet celebrating or regretting his past? The cycle of the seasons is reliable, 'predictable', but by contrast, human life does not conform to comfortable patterns; we often have little control over joy (the sun that 'shone') and pain (the rain that 'stormed'). This can perhaps be understood in the retrospect of old age, but it does not make the experience easier.

'A Baptism', which appears as the final piece in *Collected Poems*, has been described as an acute expression of the 'underlying feeling' in Butler's last poems 'that growing old is a very painful process'.⁶¹ The second stanza of the poem, written on the occasion of a grandchild's baptism, reads:

I've come to this service believing
it has something to do with heaven.
Man hears the earth he is steadily leaving
quite clearly at seventy-seven.

The poem sets up a contradistinction between 'the joy of newness and birth' and the old man's awareness of 'time's black rolling stream', asking with a hint of despair if

(eds.), *Perspectives on South African English Literature* (Parklands: Ad. Donkler, 1992), p.207).

⁶¹ Dan Clouts (son of Sydney), letter to Guy Butler, 29th August 1997. NELM.

The time for the writing of verses
for those whom we love is over?
Outside this church waits a queue of black hearses
for the parent, the child and the lover?

Encouragingly, however, life – love on earth, and the Christian afterlife – triumphs over death, restoring the old man’s confidence:

I look at my wife with wonder
at our son, his wife, and their daughter.
Whatever the threat in the sinister thunder
there’s the gleam in this blessing by water.⁶²

A poem such as ‘A Baptism’ thus exemplifies both the virtues and the vices of Butler’s later work (which, for a critic like Dawid Malan, would include all poems from the second half of his career): lucid and humane, it demonstrates an acquired command of form – in this case, metre and rhyme – but the poetic or spiritual resolution may strike the reader as too “easy”, perhaps even glib, and it does not, finally, have the epiphanic quality achieved in some of his earlier poetry.⁶³

⁶² In a letter to Butler (20th January 1997), Ken Durham leans towards a more sombre reading: ‘it is a celebration of life and wonder – which can never be “sad”. But it is the first time I have encountered in your writing explicit strands and darker images of a closing life ... “wistful” or “reflective”’. NELM.

⁶³ Malan writes: ‘In terms of literary production, Butler was almost midway in his career as a poet when the Second World War ended’ (*Guy Butler: Poet and Dramatist*, p.140). The additional material in Butler’s *Collected Poems* – work written and published subsequent to Malan’s (1986) assessment – does modify this claim somewhat, but in terms of both quantity and quality the assertion remains instructive.

CHAPTER TWO

I The hobo and the nun

(i) Praiseworthy piety

The spirit of benediction in ‘A Baptism’ (benediction in both senses of the word – God’s blessing through the Church, or a concluding affirmation of faith and solidarity in Christ) also presided over the preparation of *The Prophetic Nun*, Butler’s final published work.

Ostensibly an account of the lives and works of three remarkable women – artists Sister Margaret and Sister Pauline of the Community of the Resurrection in Grahamstown, and altruistic activist Sister Dorothy Raphael of the English Community of Saint Mary the Virgin – the book in fact represents a project of ambitious scope. A slice of South African history spanning the bulk of the twentieth century, the subject-matter combines the visual arts with Christianity and the Church, social outreach with architecture. The Author’s Preface acknowledges ‘a certain impertinence’ in taking on the material: ‘I am neither an artist nor an art historian and know very little about theology or the religious or ascetic life.’¹ This overstates the case somewhat. Butler did paint; *Bursting World* betrays a healthy *amour propre* regarding his familiarity with various schools of art; and seventy years of study (combined with near daily Bible-reading for much of his life) would suggest that his theological knowledge was sound. Nevertheless, it is appropriate that he asks his readers ‘to regard this as a reconnaissance ... an amateur’s attempt’, for the study does occasionally stray from its proposed subject, allowing Butler to indulge in anecdotal interests and recollections: the fate of a South African soldier who was twice wounded in the Second World War, for instance, or the chapter offering ‘Mainly Personal’ information in what is already a personal book.

If Butler turned an amateur’s eye to his material, however, he did not divest himself of the scholar’s habits – patiently cataloguing names and places, establishing a chronology of events, insisting on accurate

¹ Butler, *The Prophetic Nun*, p.13.

details. The effort to track down missing works and the nomination of certain paintings as ‘problematic pictures’ invests the artworks and the artists with significance, placing the book and its subjects within a tradition of academic research in order to draw those subjects ‘out of obscurity’. Butler does, however, foreground one particular departure from this tradition:

While I have tried to supply sources for my information, I have not attempted to dignify and depersonalise my findings by strict adherence to scholarly conventions, and I have frequently taken the somewhat heretical step of mentioning my source personally in the narrative. The stylistic practice of the book thus springs from its emphasis on individuals.²

In this way, Butler’s final published work is both a culmination and a renewed declaration of his lifelong struggle to affirm the value of the individual, set against (albeit in the context of) his or her historical moment. In *The Prophetic Nun*, this desire manifests itself in two distinct but related concerns.

The first is appropriate in Butler’s only book-length work dedicated entirely to “Christian” content:

Why have I called these nuns prophetic? All three lived their lives in a way that convinced others that the person of their Lord, who had lived and died two millennia ago, was alive in the present ... To attempt to write about such people and their work without taking account of their person-centred religious convictions is impossible.³

The person of Christ is emphasised as the ‘foundation stone of Christianity – what has been called the “scandal of particularity”’, and this in turn directly addresses Butler’s misgivings about ‘rationalist and modernist’ attitudes to religious faith:

The rationalist and modernist position rests on the free play of reason, and reason has a powerful prejudice in favour of generalisation. Christianity may well generalise, but it cannot generalise its essential story. It is committed to an old, old story, different elements of which will be emphasised in different ages and places.⁴

² *Ibid.*, p.14. Further comments on Butler’s “resuscitation” of individuals from their “entombment” in history can be found in Chapters Five and Six.

³ *Ibid.*, p.16.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.19. See Chapter Three for an elaboration of the faith-reason confrontation in a different context.

Secondly, if the quiddity of Christ is reflected in those who have served Him ('Like Him, their presence challenged the present', writes Butler; elsewhere he quotes 'As kingfishers catch fire' by Hopkins, asserting that 'the just man .../Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is – /Christ'), then their lives, too, merit close attention. '*What I do is me: for that I came*', declares 'each mortal thing' in Hopkins' poem, and the figures who emerge in *The Prophetic Nun* demonstrate their individuality as the author demands that 'we accept the primacy of each changing individual above his or her race or class.'⁵

Race and class nevertheless play an important part in the story, primarily because Butler stresses the non-racial (or multiracial) character of true Christian evangelism. Butler denied that missionaries and ministers were, *ex officio*, collusive in the evils of the colonial process, the dilution of African culture and increasing degrees of racial oppression. One major focus of the book is on Dorothy Maud (later Sister Dorothy Raphael) and her tireless social work in Sophiatown. The sections on Sister Margaret and Sister Pauline show that, contrary to 'the adverse attitude to indigenous African arts customarily found amongst early missionaries intent on replacing traditional religions with Christianity', which caused missions to be 'assigned a predominantly negative role in the annals of South African art', the Church in fact 'had a positive role to play' in promoting black South African artists.⁶

The Prophetic Nun discusses the works of sculptors Ernest Mancoba, Job Kekana and David Chituku at great length, not simply because these three were protégés of Sisters Margaret and Pauline, but because in themselves they constitute a significant trio in modern African wood-carving and in the development of local religious art and iconography. Butler counts Sisters Margaret and Pauline 'among the prophets of African Christendom' because they did not seek to impose European models on African worship (including artistic depiction of biblical subjects), realising that 'Christ, the saints, and the Bible story are not prisoners of European

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.61. See 'As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame', GM Hopkins, *Poems and Prose* (London: Penguin, 1985), p.51.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.16.

culture any more than they had remained prisoners of Middle Eastern Hebrew culture.⁷

Despite this “Africanist” element in the project, however, Butler remained anxious about its perceived relevance: ‘who wants to hear about missionaries from a fallen Empire at its height?’⁸ Perhaps his fears were not without foundation; after all, David Philip passed the manuscript on (it was published by Random House). Yet Butler was so immersed in the subject matter that he wrote in ‘Stocktaking 1995’ – *The Prophetic Nun* would only be published five years later – ‘it has got as deep into my shallows as anything has ever got.’ When the book eventually came to fruition, he was tremendously satisfied with it. As a material product, in terms of illustration, design and layout, *The Prophetic Nun* is arguably the most appealing of all Butler’s publications.

The nonchalance of Butler’s reference to his ‘shallows’ is modified by the ambiguous statement that follows: ‘I doubt if I have real deeps, but I know that they are there.’ The ‘deeps’ seem to allude to some religious profundity, an assured faith and spiritual contentment. Researching the lives of the nuns – lives of personal devotion to Christ, absolute commitment to the Church and unwavering service to both – perhaps left Butler feeling that his own “pool” (or source of religious resolution and confidence) was comparatively empty. It had been drained by Marxism, by the Second World War, by South African politics, and by manifold intellectual challenges to belief in God and faith in Christ.⁹

(ii) Irresistable impiety

The Prophetic Nun, ‘sparked off by two frescoes by an artist nun’, has its germ and central subject in Sister Margaret CR. The narrative expanded organically to include Sisters Pauline and Dorothy Raphael, then

⁷ It is strange, therefore, to read on the next page that ‘the few attempts to blend African artistic conventions with Western in the depiction of religious topics’ have not been ‘fruitful or successful’ – although here the reference is surely to technique, not to subject, for Butler makes specific mention of Mancoba’s original ‘Black Madonna’ (p.18).

⁸ Butler, ‘Stocktaking 1995’. NELM.

⁹ With regard to Marxism, Akal notes that it is important to bear in mind the ‘East-West antithesis’ of the Cold War, specifically its ‘Judaean/Christian-atheist conflict’, as a global backdrop to Butler’s work (which should therefore not be viewed solely in terms of the North-South axis of the Europe-Africa divide); for instance, *Judith* (1953) clearly alludes to the consolidation of power by the totalitarian regimes of the USSR and China,

Mancoba, Kekana and Chituku. In its early stages, however, the material on Sister Margaret was only one half of a work provisionally titled 'The Hobo and the Nun':

This attempt to leapfrog these opposites was quite rightly turned down by David Philip. The Nun, however, took over ... The Hobo or "Tramp" – or whatever – has not died, but exists in a more or less readable form ... But [I] doubt its saleability unless [I] can get a publisher with strong AA sympathies!¹⁰

Who was the Hobo? His character, Plessis Foster, was 'based on my memories and the wide folklore about (PFJ) Coetzee Kotze, the watercolourist'.¹¹ Kotze was a drunk (hence the reference to the AA) but a gifted painter, and it is easy to see why Butler at first hoped to 'leapfrog' him together with the holy figure of Sister Margaret – the contrast between these two talented artists is an effective one. Butler no doubt saw in the fusion of their 'opposites' a picture of his own dualism, the kind of tension that can be harnessed for creative use; 'in all of us two continents collide', as the seminal poem 'Home Thoughts' has it.

If Butler identified with Sister Margaret's Christian beliefs but found himself falling short of her "prophetic" and profound conviction, then at least his earthy and altogether less "pure" side was not quite as degraded as the drunkard Kotze. Still, he felt an affinity with the frustrated painter. Butler began his reincarnation of Kotze by 'using him as a sort of stalking horse, fictional narrator of a sequence of stories.' Imagined and remembered conversations between the two of them developed, with Butler acting as interviewer; alongside these are soliloquies, interrogations carried out by the author on himself, as it were. 'I am happier with the sessions with Foster [Kotze] than I am with the sessions with myself,' wrote Butler in 'Stocktaking 1995'. These personal reflections 'in fact do, in parts, fill in on what I left out of the autobiographies, my religious pilgrimage, but this would involve areas of private agony which I do not wish to expose to the public.' In the manuscript that Butler completed,

and the Middle East as a site of the struggle between communism and capitalism (see *Forms of Community Service*, pp.47-51).

¹⁰ Butler, 'Summary of work in progress, Early 2000'. NELM.

¹¹ 'Stocktaking 1995'.

many of these ‘personal reflections’ have an academic tone – indeed, even at their most intimate, they tend towards generalised meditations on themes already prevalent in his essays and lectures, drama and poetry. In a number of instances, they also detract from the Plessis Foster narrative, which is more interesting both as a story and, I would argue, as a lens through which to gain a greater insight into Butler himself.

Priscilla Hall, who has edited the text along these lines (‘masses of stuff ... was cut out’), explains Butler’s urge to contrive the inclusion of much apparently unrelated material: ‘he admitted that he used this text as a vehicle for lots of things he wanted to say somewhere – the usual “baggage van” idea’.¹² The redundancies contained in the unedited manuscript (anecdotes extraneous to the narrative, and the repetition or re-wording of his ideas on South African political and cultural history) are nevertheless of great interest to the Butler researcher. Their inclusion is informative, even poignant, precisely because they indicate the frustration of an aged writer who perhaps still felt that he had not quite said what he had been trying to say throughout his literary career.

According to Hall, Butler ‘wasn’t happy about the title’:

It was tentatively called *Memoirs of a Watercolourist*. Ron [Hall] hit on the brilliant title, *Thirst*, and Guy liked it too and said, ‘That’s it.’ It really is right for this book about an alcoholic who’s a guzzler for living. And in a way I think Guy’s fascination with the man was that he himself liked being the same furious existentialist but at heart had always been something of a self-presenter ... it could be read as a final confession.

Plessis Foster is a kind of *doppelganger* to Butler. He seems to acknowledge this as an author, beginning his Foreword by noting that ‘we had at least two things in common’ – firstly, a love of painting, and secondly, ‘a search for identity, an endemic problem for me in an ex-colony whose various peoples had discovered but did not know each other’.¹³ One of the central themes in *Thirst* is Plessis’ status as an outsider; he is a hobo, but moreover, he has “a touch of the tarbrush” on his paternal side. While Plessis swings from flaunting his racial status to hiding it, Butler exploits this uncertainty because he recognises it in himself: ‘I sometimes

¹² Priscilla Hall, e-mail to the author, 16th February 2005.

¹³ Butler, *Thirst*, p.1.

felt compelled to reject with all the resources I could muster the official propaganda in favour of (white) South African identity.’

As a character, however, Butler is reluctant to be associated with Foster, or to recognise the resemblance. During one of their chance encounters, Plessis narrates with delight his “confession” to a church warden:

‘... there were long bouts of sin which I enjoyed remembering and writing down, with extra touches. Would you like to hear them?’
I really was tempted. Perhaps I could tell him some of mine.
Swapping sins. Sudden shame overcame me.
‘You are not my father confessor, nor am I yours,’ I said.
‘You’re just yellow. Can’t face up to yourself,’ he replied.
‘Facing up to you, Plessis, is not facing up to myself.’¹⁴

The differences between the two of them are appreciable. Plessis was raised in an abusive home, rejected his father and created ancestors for himself. Butler grew up in the loving environment of “The Poplars”, and proudly traced his heredity via the settlers of the Eastern Cape back to England. Plessis “got a girl into trouble”, was raped during a stint at an orphanage, ran off with the circus while he was still a teenager, lived an aimless life of binge-drinking and poverty, and was variously involved in drug-running, gambling, prostitution and scamming. Butler’s antics as a student were tame by comparison, and he spent most of his adult life as an esteemed public figure. Yet it is precisely Foster’s crudeness – his vulgar, bitter selfishness – that Butler finds so fascinating. Plessis’ circumstances give him licence to offend; he spurns God and social propriety alike, just as (he feels) he has been spurned by both God and man.

If Butler experienced a mild ‘Anglican/Quaker ambiguity’ while growing up, Plessis’ religious conflict was more severe: ‘My own damn mother ... Poor woman, just an English-speaking Irish Catholic peasant ... my father, a Calvinist atheist, an ignorant, dumb engine driver.’¹⁵ He scorns the ‘Liquorice Allsorts’ of his multi-denominational youth, and his

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.80.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.40.

irreverence knows no bounds.¹⁶ Seeing a book 'with a nun on the cover' (one is reminded of *The Prophetic Nun* as Plessis' polar opposite), he warns the young Butler: 'Beware of the Virgin Mary ... Propaganda. All that business about the Virgin Birth. Where did it come from? Who else, but Mary herself? She dreamt it up as an excuse.' Plessis knows his Bible well but rejects its contents. He can place the patterns of his alcoholic lifestyle in parables of failure ('My sympathy is all for the man who has got rid of his unclean spirit, walking through the dry places, seeking rest, and finding none. That's me exactly'), but has no desire to submit to Christ: 'Who the hell is He? How can you expect me, an intelligent man in the twentieth century, to be for or against a character some Jews dreamt up two thousand years ago?'¹⁷

Plessis gives dramatic voice to Butler's barely verbalised uncertainties. With his brash agnostic swagger, he has no qualms about voicing doubts or questioning doctrines. A 'furious existentialist', as Priscilla Hall describes him, he lives a life of revolt and protest against an unfair cosmos. His metaphysical frustration often manifests itself in physical violence: 'I lash out, I break out. It's mad, but marvellous, the fight.'¹⁸ Yet in his stubborn resistance he does not find the freedom or satisfaction of, say, Albert Camus' *Sisyphé*. His self-pity (evident in his parody of the "Hail Mary", 'Sies, Plessis, you bucket of dung. The devil is with you. Cursed are you among men. And cursed is everything you do') is matched by a bemused self-admiration: 'I'm indestructible, dammit. I don't want to live, but I go on living. I did not ask to live. I have always been in a box or a cage, shoved about.'¹⁹ Hearing this makes Butler think of 'a despicable character somewhere in Shakespeare who says, "Simply the thing I am shall make me live". *The thing I am.*' Plessis is morally indifferent and almost entirely without guilt; he considers the gratification of his cravings (alcoholic and otherwise) sufficient ends to justify any means. He has suffered so much that self-preservation is his primary

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.76.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.131-132.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.28.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.213 and p.202.

motivation – his language is riddled with reflexives: ‘What I want is me. Self-fulfillment. None of this self-denial stuff.’²⁰

One senses that Butler, as both narrator and protagonist, envies this lack of guilt. Plessis’ status as “victim” (of a father’s cruelty, of racism, of cosmic injustice) allows him to abjure social responsibility. Butler did not have this luxury. In 1959, Butler’s ‘Crisis Year’ – he and his wife were considering emigrating – he kept a journal entitled *Jottings: Who am I?*, extracts of which are quoted in *Thirst*. The entry for Good Friday contains this reflection:

Most sins and self-indulgences spring from an interior anxiety and insecurity, are, in fact, distractions and opiates ... When a temptation is irresistible, it is only so because one’s whole life is off-balance – one is either evading one’s correct destiny or living a big lie. This may have been my case ... a fundamental doubt as to one’s own purposes and functions in a fragmented society so patently without common bonds. Is my self-doubt the result of a cowardly evasion of my duties as a Christian in my country? Possibly ...

How, how to experience the assurance of the friendship of Christ – this, in the age of Kafka, Beckett, Kruschev and Verwoerd?

Perhaps acting without any sensation of Divine assurance, but simply according to conscience ... may break whatever barrier in me prevents it. For surely it must be in me.²¹

The ‘sins and self-indulgences’ referred to here plague Butler’s social conscience, yet much of the material in *Thirst* emphasises not “political” guilt but the guilt that springs from licentiousness and lust. It is made clear early in the text that ‘getting a girl into trouble ... is one of the themes of this book’; sex, in its various manifestations, drives both Plessis’ life-story and the Butler-Foster narrative.²² Plessis’ teenage seduction (as he describes it) by a girl called Petra – love across the colour bar, and the only real form of human love he ever experienced – led to his decision to run away with the circus, where he met and fell in love with Michelle, a French trapeze artist:

Wonderful to watch her risking her life, night by night, on the high-wire – it wouldn’t have looked so lovely and dangerous if she’d had more clothes

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.99. This is very likely a deliberate re-working of Hopkins’ ‘*What I do is me: for that I came*’ in ‘*As kingfishers catch fire*’.

²¹ *Thirst*, pp.168-169.

²² *Ibid.*, p.16.

on ... women have delicate skins that deserve to be clothed in silk and satin, made for gentle stroking ...²³

Michelle didn't have a monopoly on Plessis' affection. In fact, she had to '[play] second fiddle to a Burmese elephant' named Molly, who was 'big, round, gentle and all curves'; 'with such a sway in her walk' and 'a knowing look in her eye', Molly 'was a real lady.'²⁴ The young Plessis' dedication to Molly was unwavering, certainly unmatched throughout the rest of his life, and Butler notes that 'what interested me most was a tramp loving a Burmese elephant more than a French trapeze artist.' Molly held Plessis' firm devotion because, despite her brute strength, she was gentle and kind to him as no human had been, and could be depended on for protection. Plessis' sexual drive – 'the forbidden world', 'the maddening compulsion' as desperate as alcoholism, 'the sense of touch' that affirms 'someone wanted me, yes me, body and soul' – seems to be a kind of replacement for genuine and reciprocated affection.²⁵

If the above reads like pseudo-psychoanalysis, it is germane to *Thirst*, in which Butler brings numerous subconscious desires and frustrations to the surface of the narrative. One episode in the Butler-Plessis saga finds these alter-egos engaged in an underwater struggle. Plessis tries to drown himself, to be 'clean shot of the shit of being alive', and then attempts to drown Butler too when the latter comes to his aid: 'I still have nightmares about that wrestling match in deepening water,' admits Butler, foregrounding the subconscious connotations of the medium.²⁶ Months later, after he discovers that Foster has raped an attractive American exchange student (Angela, alias Scarlet O'Hara), Butler is perplexed by his own reaction:

I spent a terrible night. Plessis Foster raping Scarlet O'Hara. Hell. The possible legal implications for Plessis and the personal effects on her were all mixed in turmoil with nightmares in which my struggle with a suicidal man in the water mutated into ecstatic, horrendous images of myself wrestling naked with that gorgeous girl.²⁷

²³ *Ibid.*, pp.67-68.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.71-73 and p.66.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.107-108 and p.78.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.106. One is reminded of the 'symbolic force' behind Butler's childhood wrestling match with a young "Bushman" boy, recorded in *Karoo Morning* and, originally, in 'My Lousy Education'.

²⁷ *Thirst*, pp.147-149.

The following day he finds himself conversing on this ‘acute psychological dilemma’ with a female professor: ‘in an access of honesty, I told her of the nightmare in which I, not he, was raping her. “In fact,” I said, “I suppose I envy him”.’ Thus, although Plessis’ sexual malevolence is an instance of the victim perpetuating the crime – raped as a boy, and severely beaten by his father, he grows up to perpetrate the same violence – he does not simply represent a moral lesson for Butler to expound on. The subject sheds too much light on the author for any such moralising.

Not only does Plessis enact Butler’s libidinous desires, he also tugs at the writer’s deepest insecurities. On one occasion, Plessis is escaping from an angry crowd and crawls through a sewer; he is attacked by crabs, has an aborted infant dropped onto his lap while he waits in a sump, and finally escapes amongst ‘thirty buckets of shit’ on the back of a refuse removal wagon.²⁸ Butler finds himself in no position to judge, however: ‘Who, after all, was I? Crawling about, lost in the already deep intellectual drains of an ex-colonial society which, I thought, was part of a civilisation on a downward spiral.’ Caught midway between Europe and South Africa, carrying multiple personae (literary and otherwise), Butler could sympathise with Plessis’ quest for identity – his mixed blood, his numerous impossible ancestors, his permanent state of being “without fixed address”.²⁹

Moreover, ‘for all his identity crises ... Plessis was, for me, a distinct person.’³⁰ He can make claims that Butler cannot. For one thing, despite part-time jobs as a cobbler, taxi-driver and handyman, Foster knows what his primary vocation is. As an artist, he submits himself entirely to his

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.204.

²⁹ In this regard, it is worth remarking on the special place reserved in Butler’s work for homeless people, runaways, vagabonds and wanderers. These figures represent both a universal condition of alienation and specific socio-economic problems such as endemic poverty or domestic violence. Importantly, however – even though their plight is so often a direct result of race legislation – because they are permanently in transit they undermine the strict attempts of government to segregate and delimit South Africa’s racial groups. Plessis’ character is perhaps foreshadowed by Tim Jones, half *picaro* and half Everyman, the ‘enigmatic’ protagonist of Butler’s unpublished play *The Silver Spoon* (see Akal, *Forms of Community Service*, pp.95-102). Jones runs away from home at a young age, lives ‘on either side of the colour divide’ and becomes involved in ‘illicit diamond buying and poaching game’, but challenges the ‘grasping materialism and the racial prejudice’ of the small-town community and ultimately, having overcome the nemesis of his childhood, undergoes a ‘spiritual regeneration’. *A Rackety Colt, Tales from the Old Karoo* and various poems have similar “homeless” figures. In Butler’s work, coloured characters often typify the condition of being “in between”; see Chapter Six (II).

³⁰ *Thirst*, p.119.

'brush name': 'What I do with my brush is me.'³¹ By way of contrast, Butler's *Jottings* diary for 1959 begins with these hesitant answers to the question, *Who am I?*:

Writer? Professor? Of English? Or Drama? South African committed to see it through? Or a possible "intellectual" émigré? I might know the answer if something would start flowing from me with passion and conviction. A paralysis of the will? A profound subconscious cowardice? Or simply the exhaustion of a small talent?³²

As a creative artist, Butler does not have Foster's combination of callousness and self-assurance. Their final, absurd encounter is a further, admittedly comical, reminder of Butler's insecurity over his own literary career, and indeed over the value or usefulness of all literature. Plessis, now sober, has been employed by a Grahamstown retailer to destroy an excess stock of old books (the task echoes that issued by Butler's 'Uncle David Basket' to Foster and Butler on the occasion of their first meeting – using an unwanted library of books to catch the water dripping from a leaky roof). Butler comes across Plessis "drowning" the books by casting them into a dam. Horrified, he confronts Plessis, who explains the terms of employment and ultimately succeeds in recruiting him to the cause:

It was a moment of crisis in my life as a Professor of Literature when Plessis said to me, 'Don't you want to help? I'm getting what is called tennis shoulder.'

To refuse would be churlish, perhaps even priggish. But to drown a book – whatever its contents – would be a symbolical act. I'd recently quoted to English III Milton's famous lines: 'A good book is the precious life blood of a master spirit embalmed and treasured up to a life beyond life.'

I looked through the box and doubted if any of the books therein were by master spirits. I thought I could risk nemesis by taking hold of one of the seven much abused copies of the twenty-fifth edition of someone's Latin Primer. I threw it into the dam. After that it was easy ... I threw in the others two at a time.³³

Plessis is unequivocal about the nature of his profession. He claims, 'I would never commit myself to a doctrinal view of man which took no

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.129.

³² *Ibid.*, p.161. See *A Local Habitation* p.233 for an edited version of these "jottings".

³³ *Ibid.*, p.236. This episode was published as part of a 'Work in Progress' under the title 'A Semi-Fictional Friendship' in *The English Academy Review* 16 (December 1999): 173-180.

account of art and sin.³⁴ Art and sin are facets of the same human urge (for self-expression, for self-obliteration, for freedom) and, just as Plessis gets drunk on alcohol, he also gets drunk on the beautiful colours of the Namaqualand daisies. He has no concerns about the ethical implications of his art, about consequence or circumstance or political correctness; he speaks his mind plainly, careless of offence. Butler, however, was rarely in a position to dispense with diplomacy. Whatever his religious doubts or criticisms of the Church, as a public Christian figure of some standing he could never claim, as Plessis does, that although church spires make ‘nice useful verticals’ for watercolours, they are otherwise ‘useless’, fraudulently ‘boasting as if they had done or could do so something’.³⁵ Foster thus becomes a mouthpiece through whom Butler expresses ideas and sentiments that would be considered outlandish coming from a dignified, “orthodox”, aged professor.

The line between the two characters is constantly blurred. During the course of the narrative, certain conceptualisations and turns of phrase that ostensibly sprang from Plessis/Kotze’s uneducated eloquence are only convincing as interpolations by Butler. Consider the changing tone and register in this passage:

I’m told there’s a thing called peripheral vision. The centre of your eye may be blind, but the circumference is seeing – you can’t stop it from seeing. I dunno, but ... it came to me as a possibility – a thin chance – that that is what I, me, my ego, they call it, was like. The self conscious “I” was a blind eye, but an “I” that couldn’t stop seeing with the clear edges of its sight. It frightened me, this awareness of things I couldn’t see by looking at them straight with my ordinary eye. This vague other vision haunted my I/eye.

When Butler depicts his chance encounters with Plessis, the latter is invariably described initially as an anonymous figure (a fisherman on the river banks, a raving drunken madman at the front door of “High Corner”, a painter at an easel, a silhouette throwing books into a dam) and only later identified through the tag-line: ‘It was Plessis Foster’. This pattern communicates Butler’s surprise at the quirks of fate that brought them together, showing that their relationship was not contrived. It also

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.186. This resonates with Butler’s sense, while he was a student at Rhodes, that ‘art was immoral, or at least artists were immoral’ (*Bursting World*, p.11). See Chapter Three (I).

has the effect, however, of emphasising Plessis' anonymity, which in turn foregrounds his fictitious status. He is not, after all, just a partly fictionalised portrait of PFJ Kotze; he is more Butler's creation than the author's Foreword suggests. If Plessis Foster exists in *Thirst* (and he only exists, after all, in the text, which ends by telling us that 'no one knew where his grave was') as a 'stalking horse' – a pretext – then it becomes clear that the primary subject of the piece is, in fact, Guy Butler.³⁶ By writing *Thirst*, Butler hoped to call into question many of the roles and attributes with which he had previously identified himself, or been identified by others. Not least among these is his standing as a "family man", which will be explored further in the next section.

³⁵ *Thirst*, p.194.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.247.

II Family man

(i) Life at High Corner

We noted earlier that in 1974 Butler was asked to address the congregation of the Grahamstown Cathedral on the topic, 'Why I am a Christian'. The sermon stresses his 'awareness of failure' and 'a guilty conscience' because 'I have injured and failed not merely my enemies, and my friends, but those who[m] I love and who love me. It is here, more than anywhere, that Christ speaks to my condition.'¹ This seems a reference to the source of his and his wife Jean's different forms of 'anxiety and remorse', vaguely alluded to twenty years later in 'Stocktaking 1995'. In that document, referring to his research on Church history in South Africa, he writes with conviction that 'Christianity is triumphant because it springs out of a person, Christ. But my own faith and practice as a Christian makes [these projects] presumptuous.' Whatever the nature of the "injuries" he inflicted on others, it is clear that he did not maintain an idealised vision of himself.

Butler could not have referred to 'those who I love and who love me' without thinking of Jean, his mainstay through all the decades of public life. In *Bursting World* and *A Local Habitation* Butler paints a glowing portrait of her, one that is endorsed by friends and acquaintances. A vivacious personality emerges through Jean's correspondence with her husband during periods when they were apart. The letters are playful, sharp and often irreverent. Occasionally, there is a wry, frustrated tone – she heads one letter, written from "High Corner", 'High and Low' – or even a frank admission that 'I am feeling fairly battered I can assure you.'² The heroism, or perhaps stoicism, of motherhood is noted by Butler in a letter to his sister Joan written during one family holiday in Port Alfred:

We're at Kowie enjoying ourselves in the way families do at the sea, with the children beating each other up, and Christopher swearing at Grannie, and plenty of fish biting the bait, and fish pie as a result ... It's always been a crazy household anyway, and nobody is going to be bored! Jean, of course, bears the brunt of it all, and is bearing up very well.³

¹ Butler, 'High Corner (13)'.

² Jean Butler, letter to Guy Butler, 19th July 1981. NELM.

³ Joan Butler, letter to Guy Butler, 16th December 1965. NELM.

Just as the Butlers enjoyed themselves ‘the way other families do’, they confronted the problems that all families face; more, perhaps, than the usual share. Letters from friends mention ‘your joy and your sadness with your family ... quite the most complicated at times.’⁴ At the end of an entertaining epistle to family and friends describing their 1970 holiday to Greece and England, Jean wrote:

now we have returned, refreshed in mind and body, sort of HEALED after all our cares and traumas. All right, we’ve still got many MILLSTONES, but we’ve acquired a new resilience and zest to enable us to cope better with all our problems.

What were these millstones?

A Local Habitation glosses over family life in a chapter entitled ‘High Corner’, listing the dates of arrival of the four Butler children and relating a few anecdotes from their childhood. The reader is left to surmise why the Butlers adopted two infants (Patrick and Jane) before producing two children of their own (David and Christopher). Nor does Butler mention at any stage in *A Local Habitation* certain factors that made family life particularly difficult. Patrick and Jane are only referred to once. A 1981 letter to Butler from Frances Ames [Castle] unknowingly predicts this omission:

Your autobiography would be spectacular if you devoted it to Patrick and Jane – unbelievable experience that should be grist to your mill if you did it simply without explaining, justifying. Just told it as it was, or has merciful forgetting robbed you of much of the fact?⁵

Patrick was born with a form of brain damage causing him, in Butler’s words, to act with ‘diminished responsibility’. As he grew up, it became apparent that he would not be able to live fully independently and would need supervision and care. The Butlers established a trust fund to accommodate this, which was a substantial financial burden.

⁴ Norah and Denis (surname unknown), letter to the Butlers, 27th February 1998. NELM.

⁵ Frances Ames, letter to Butler, 14th October 1981. Ames was a friend and associate who figured in the legal-medical protest over the death of Steve Biko (a cause to which Butler donated) and was also involved with Butler in various academic boycotts. NELM.

Over the years, Patrick's circumstances brought about a number of predicaments. On one occasion the owners of the boarding house in which he was staying abused his ingenuousness by trying to blackmail the Butlers on the basis of fabricated evidence that Patrick had seduced one of the black servants of the house (a threat with serious repercussions under the Immorality Act). Patrick later married and had a son, but he and his wife Lena became estranged and their marital conflict was a source of great concern to Butler in his old age. He wrote letters to both, urging forgiveness and reconciliation, but his 'Stocktaking' report for 1994 regrets 'the endless concerns, the impossible yearnings to help what cannot be helped'. In a letter to his brother Jeff, he described Patrick and Lena's situation as 'a saga of interminable anxieties', bemoaning 'how children can tie one's entrails in knots'.⁶ In addition,

Jane's daughter, Wendy, has a baby, but is not married to the father, who is out of work. Wendy works in a supermarket. So we are great grandparents of babes born under inauspicious stars into the New South Africa, whose chances of success are very slender indeed. Or am I unduly pessimistic?

David and Christopher – now a headmaster and a medical doctor respectively – were and are in many ways very different to their father, although they both inherited his love of poetry. Of the former at age twenty, Butler wrote 'he's not stupid, but no academic or intellectual'.⁷ Of the latter, Frances Ames wrote to Butler, in her somewhat melodramatic way, 'Darling Chree – he sees himself as your "last white hope" – ease his burden'.⁸ As an older man David was to express a deep unhappiness with his childhood years, listing the troubles of many a disaffected teenager and young adult: difficulties at school, thieving, drugs, casual affairs. He wrote to his parents that he battled with 'living up to standards and patterns of behaviour that make me unhappy'.⁹ Nevertheless, he was at pains to reassure them that this revelation was 'not an accusation' against them. On the contrary, a tender and affectionate tone fills the correspondence

⁶ Butler, letter to Jeff Butler, 9th November 1993. NELM.

⁷ Butler, letter to Pat and Harry Clive, 24th November 1976. NELM.

⁸ Ames, letter to Butler, 26th December 1982. NELM.

⁹ David Butler, letter to the Butlers, 10th December 1983. NELM.

between parents and sons, both of whom have spent long periods of time overseas. “High Corner” evidently maintained the atmosphere of love and security that thrived at “The Poplars” and at young Jean Satchwell’s family home in Johannesburg, “Ons Hoek”. Christopher’s letters from America, New Zealand, Britain and Canada are fond, caring and frank; they engage in numerous literary and political ideas but are full of family jokes, peppered with South African slang and light Anglo-Saxon oaths.

As for the Butler parents, with their brood of biological and adopted children spread across the country and the globe, they were left to admire the *Malus Floribundus* tree in the garden at “High Corner” that had become a symbol of their marriage and their home. A poem titled after the tree’s ambiguous biological name (the Latin *malus* can refer to an apple or fruit tree, but the negative connotations of the word are clear) describes, in a mixture of pride and nostalgia tinged with sadness, how

this tree grew up with our family, providing in time
a fine umbrella for the prams, the go-carts and the trikes.

How still and quiet it is. Remember their cries
of delight at the rainbow-coloured clothes you made them?

Now all have gone their far and individual ways.

Apart from the disclosing intimacy of such poems, the brief sketches offered in *A Local Habitation* and the sublimation of generational clashes into dramatic texts (Akal points to ‘the problem of fatherhood and the emotional structure of the family’ in many of the plays), Butler’s writing steers away from documenting family life – no doubt in order to maintain an element of privacy for “High Corner”.¹⁰

There are two notable exceptions. One is *Thirst*, and it is again not surprising that this confessional text, which exposes other ‘areas of private agony’, should mention family details not found elsewhere in Butler’s

¹⁰ Akal, *Forms of Community Service*, p.117. In *The Dam*, old Jan de Bruin remarks wryly to his son Sybrand that ‘it is the nature of fathers not to understand their sons’ (Cape Town: Balkema, 1953, p.10). When we read in *Karoo Morning* that Ernest Butler was appalled by his youthful son’s ambition to be a poet – this is by no means the only point of father-son friction recorded in the autobiographies – the line resonates with the difficulties in the relationship between Ernest and Guy Butler. Yet the depiction of this tension in *The Dam* (the play also contains a protracted dialogue in which the Long brothers bicker over a Freudian analysis of their parental relationships) unknowingly anticipates the father-son conflicts of the next generation, between Guy Butler and his own sons, which are in turn reflected on stage and page elsewhere.

autobiographical writing. The extracts taken from the *Jottings* notebook and reproduced in the unedited *Thirst* manuscript include a list of 'Present pre-occupations' circa 1959, one of which is 'Patrick's education'; another entry describes 'Jean downstairs making a bright shirt for Patrick' (echoing the 'rainbow-coloured clothes' in '*Malus Floribundus*') while the *pater familias* sits upstairs, watching anxiously as a thunderstorm breaks over his house: 'The storm outside is not nearly as dangerous and treacherous to the children, perhaps, as the parent in crisis who shelters them from it.'¹¹

The text that offers the greatest insight into life at "High Corner", however, is found in *Tales from the Old Karoo*: 'The Death and Resurrection of Henry Rock Pigeon', which stands out from the other stories in the collection in both its style and content. The story provides an account of the antics of four young siblings, the frustrations of their mother and the cogitations of their father – this family, the Hawkridges of "The Heights", being a thinly veiled version of the Butlers of "High Corner". The focalising figure in the story is William (Guy), a secondary school teacher with a tendency to '“have ideas” on all sorts of way-out topics', so that to his wife and mother-of-four Sally (Jean) he occasionally seems to be simply 'another difficult child': 'he was so helpless, needed so much attention, and talked such fanciful nonsense.'¹² Their children, Percy (Patrick), Jill (Jane), Desmond (David) and the blonde-haired, blue-eyed baby Kit (Chris), are looked after by a longsuffering nursemaid, Violet Nkwinti (whose first name, at least, was not changed – Violet Ngqia helped look after the Butler children for many years).

Percy, we soon discover, 'is the eldest by two years, a most beautiful child, just arrived home for his holiday from a school run by Catholic nuns, for mentally handicapped children'; he is 'hyperkinetic, slightly unco-ordinated and blissfully cheerful and trustful', such that his presence at home during the holidays is 'very exciting for the children, taxing for William and torture to Sally.'¹³ Five pages of the story are taken

¹¹ Butler, *Thirst*, pp.161-162.

¹² Butler, 'The Death and Resurrection of Henry Rock Pigeon', *Tales from the Old Karoo* (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1989), p.63.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.64.

up by William's reading of and response to two reports on Percy, one from 'Sister Scholastica' at the special needs school and one from 'Dr Rosen', the paediatric psychologist. They are pages full of tender paternal touches, a mixture of deep affection for the child and fears for his future. The tone of humorous anecdotes is simultaneously and spontaneously sorrowful at the clinical accuracy of the reports ('God, how true ... Dear God, how true ... Yes, yes, yes, dear God, yes ... Alas, [it] springs from a damaged brain, with which he was born, and for which there is no cure').¹⁴

Butler paints a mildly derisive self-portrait. William tends to be an inept head-of-the-house because he is an impractical daydreaming intellectual: '[Sally] wished he'd get down to brass tacks. One day she said to him, "Why don't you get down to brass tacks?" But he said, "Why *brass tacks*?" and went off to the big dictionary in the public library, and came back only slightly the wiser.' While the children are causing havoc in their attempts to nurse a dying pigeon (one of many rescued 'from the jaws and claws of Lucky', the family cat) back to health, William sits down to read 'a popular work on religion and anthropology, in both of which great subjects he was a slightly opinionated amateur.'¹⁵

The story seems to present to us another set of conflicting roles: the academic and the family man. William's ruminations on the disappearance of mystery from the secular world, like his intellectual cynicism (he has an ambivalent attitude towards the Church, for example – 'he had long since ceased to attend'), is at odds with the naïveté of his children. When his reading is interrupted by the news of the pigeon's death, William finds himself involved in the children's elaborate funeral rites. He writes a card on behalf of Lucky the cat: "Forgive me my irresistible impulses as you hope to be forgiven yours." It was a funny message which no one understood. Its composition exhausted William, who withdrew from the obsequies into his book.' Soon, however, the children's reverent

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.65-70.

¹⁵ The intersection of religion and anthropology allows Butler, both as narrator and as William, to indulge in a favourite subject – one of the chief concerns in Part Two of this study – 'the irrational and profound needs of man' (p.70). William/Butler

was fascinated by the gradual slide away from the ancient sacred world of many mysteries into the modern profane where all is naked in the light of science. There was a time when everything that lived was holy ... If life is holy, everything that gives life to man is holy, like sex and food, and no

questioning stumps him: his books have no answer to the question, 'How long does a soul take to leave the body and ascend to heaven?' Nor does a passage on 'the effects of mechanisation on culture' affect him as profoundly as the sight of the pigeon, plucked (his feathers now being used for the children's "Indian" head-dresses) and ready to be burned on a makeshift pyre, 'Oh so naked and Oh so dead.' Indeed, having lit the fire, William is left speechless: 'He had never felt so touched and so confused in his life. He took an aimless turn on the lawn and then went inside.' Reflecting on this, William/Butler realises that the distractions, difficulties and apparent inanities of raising a young family can in fact pose intellectual, emotional and spiritual challenges without equal:

For once in his life William's interest in anthropology's links with religion became painfully serious. He saw now that, all day, he had been in the presence of great, very ancient, perhaps eternal mysteries; on the brink, as it were, of the divine; but the fact that he knew as much as he did prevented him from crossing the barriers to belief set up by his intelligence. He could no longer enter His gates with uninhibited praise like Sally and Percy could. He had no rituals to help him on that journey, no believed-in rites of passage which he could perform. He was rational 20th century man, very naked and very dead. His soul was the unhappy inheritor of the philosopher's heaven of abstraction.¹⁶

(ii) *'Denial of the body's cry'*

Mountains of letters and cards greeted the Butlers on the occasions of their gold and diamond wedding anniversaries. Yet amongst the hearty congratulations and warm sentiments, there are also quiet reminders of more arduous circumstances: 'you both have survived the ravages of time, accident, disaster, acrimony, bankruptcy.'¹⁷ One card quotes Peter Ustinov: 'Love is an act of endless forgiveness, a tender look which becomes a habit.'¹⁸ One wonders what significance this may have held for Guy and Jean Butler. What was there that needed to be forgiven?

In *Bursting World*, Butler narrates two occasions during the war on which he was tempted, or attempted, to be unfaithful to his wife. Once,

sex act, or birth, or death, must be casual or taken for granted. But now man has progressed so far in his explanations that he believes in a rational world. Nothing need be mysterious or sacred.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.73-74.

¹⁷ Don MacLennan, card to the Butlers, 7th December 1990. NELM.

¹⁸ Card to the Butlers, sender unknown, 7th December 2000. NELM.

alone, picking peaches in a Tuscan orchard, he saw a young woman approaching him:

Her body moved beautifully, easily; her carriage erect, her fingertips played lightly to right and to left of her thighs ... an emanation of this landscape, soft, sweet, ripe as peaches for picking ... I was flummoxed as to what to do. So I took a mouthful of peach. I knew exactly what I wanted and it was not a mouthful of peach. True enough, my body craved with frantic craving – but some counter-need sabotaged all poise, all ease ... I stared at her, and as I looked away, my disobedient eyes swept down her neck, her breasts, her waist, her feet.¹⁹

He goes on to explain that she agreed to meet with him that evening, but that ‘the Fates decided otherwise’ and he was posted elsewhere. The second instance was a drunken night in Florence, when Butler’s hopes of leaving a ‘wild party’ with ‘a gorgeous busty girl I’d known when I was a boy’ were dashed by the arrival of her husband; he ‘had not kissed anyone for two years’, and their brief passionate embrace ‘was piercing sweet.’²⁰ Towards the end of *Bursting World*, Butler quotes himself to mock his hypocrisy:

‘Faithfulness’, I wrote, ‘although regarded by the sophisticated as somewhat irrelevant and old-fashioned, is still for me one of the essentials of love. Denial of the body’s cry is damn difficult, but it is worth the knowledge that one’s love is strong enough to conquer it.’

Brave words. My virtue had been saved on more than one occasion by quirks and accidents of fate which had infuriated me at the time, and for which I had been subsequently grateful.²¹

‘Keeping a Distance’ (written in the late 1950s) describes another moment of temptation. The speaker in the poem is mesmerised by an ‘American girl’; his ‘eyes drift over [her] as lazily as clouds’ and he knows that, ‘were [he] to touch [her] hand a circuit would close, / Windows blow open, doors crash’ – a ‘lightning flash’ would set the room alight and, ‘alone on a blackened floor’, they would ‘melt to a single centre’. Yet, knowing that this is forbidden, he seems to enjoy the frustrated pleasure of ‘deliberate distancing’: a ‘perfect present’ in which the passionate ‘acids

¹⁹ Butler, *Bursting World*, pp.249-50.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.263.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp.297-8.

of Lautrec', the delicate 'pastels of Degas' and 'the discipline/Of Paul Cezanne' are held in balance.²²

Thirst relates a scene from the same period – the Butlers' visit to America in 1958, with the Carnegie Travel Fellowship – in which, with his wife having returned to South Africa, Butler meets Plessis Foster's rape victim, Angela ("Scarlet O'Hara"). He recounts his guilty fear of 'that dark part of me that wanted to be seduced', noting how 'my hands would make involuntary gestures which were, I suppose, smothered moves to grab her.'²³ The bristling sexuality underlying their encounter culminates in an ambiguous massage that is simultaneously affectionate, dispassionate, comforting and erotic; it fulfils (or replaces) the wish expressed by Butler the previous day: 'If only Jean were with me we could have handled the problem together. She might also massage the back of my neck, which was knotted with tension.'²⁴ Ultimately, the meeting ends with nothing more than a parting peck on the cheek. After Angela leaves, Butler curses Plessis in anger – and with a hint of confused envy: 'on impulse, I got up and dashed to the window to see if I could get a glimpse of her ... Nothing. Disappointed and relieved, I started a letter home.'²⁵

Butler's 'virtue', as he refers to it in *Bursting World*, probably did not remain intact throughout the course of his marriage. The Grahamstown rumour-mill is not without grist on this account; there are hints of an affair, or affairs, but these cannot be substantiated. Notwithstanding this, various plays and poems allude to marital problems of infidelity and estrangement. One of the more obvious examples is *Two Timers*, an unpublished play (Akal dates it to 1957-8, placing its depiction of a crumbling colonial administration in the fictional African territory of "Tanga Uranga" alongside the actual events of the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya) which sees first a husband and then, in revenge, his wife having meaningless sexual affairs with unlikeable partners. Ultimately, following the 'familiar transcendental pattern' of Butler's plays, they experience a

²² Don Maclennan comments on this poem: 'Restraint is necessary if art is to stand beyond, yet finally incorporate, the realities of human life' ('The Poetry of Guy Butler', p.205).

²³ *Thirst*, p.150.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.147.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.159.

'spiritual renewal in their marriage'.²⁶ Stanton and Patricia Wade may break the taboo of infidelity, but they are by no means unique in Butler's dramatic texts. Douglas and Jane Long, Karel and Sarah van Heerden, Richard and Margaret Gush, Andrew and Maria Bain: all these couples are separated by past traumas or present disagreements, and all are finally reunited.

A number of the poems in *Songs and Ballads* have as their subject the breakdown of relationships rather than the faithfulness of love; instead of unity, there is fragmentation.²⁷ 'Watching the Seed-grass' warns that the 'ephemeral flowing together' of two lovers may, like 'the black stream plummeting' over a cliff near which they are lying,

mean months, mean years in the gorge below
where frozen birds fall from the trees
beside dark pools.

In 'Three Glances at One Photograph', the image of a past lover plagues the viewer with distant memories of their physical passion:

Unmasked for, unexpected, avoiding heart and eye
a presence returns to brush my lips and side,
the first wind of spring, shaking the naked branches,
my tired body quivers with the ghost of its bride –
a casual flash of phosphor on a single breaker
announcing whole oceans thronging in to tide.

'To an Ageing Friend, After Her Divorce' offers the consoling words of one observing a broken marriage and, as an outsider, encouraging the divorced couple to show mutual kindness. The speaker who has been directly involved in 'The End of an Affair', however, is not able to achieve the same stoical detachment: 'I could cry/could howl to call our old love back again'. 'Enraged' by the 'patient apathy' of his 'suddenly distant love', the speaker foresees the pain of their separation being repeated through memory:

²⁶ Akal, *Forms of Community Service*, p.73. See pp.68-85 for further discussion of the play.

²⁷ Hennie van der Mescht's *The Poetry of Guy Butler* (1980) and Malan's *Guy Butler: Poet and Dramatist* (1986) offer slightly different "chronologies", but it seems that some of the poems date to the early 1940s; this would explain the different tone in 'To an Ageing Friend, After Her Divorce' and the mild disjunction in subject matter (consider religious pieces such as 'Natal, 1497', settler pieces such as 'Thomas Philipps' Picnic', or the clearly topical 'Soweto', which were written in the 1970s).

How noon turned cold one hot day one December
and froze your eyes, I shall, I shall remember;
and how my rage
beat out itself in words on this dead page
and not on you, my love,
my suddenly distant love.

Perhaps the placement of this poem alongside 'Iago's Handkerchief Song' (in both *Songs and Ballads* and the *Collected Poems*), in which an obviously fictional persona is adopted, is designed to remind the reader that the speaker in 'The End of an Affair' should also be dramatically distanced from the poet.

Nevertheless, what these poems show clearly – especially when read in light of the “circus world” of *Thirst*, replete with sex and blood and irreverence – is that Butler was by no means a prude. *Bursting World* consciously and consistently demonstrates how the strict morals of “The Poplars” received a rude shock after Butler left Cradock, from irreverent student pranks to the rough humour of the army. One of his letters from the Italian campaign offers a crude but delightful example:

The Yanks have produced a rather natty anti-VD slogan:
 'If she's game, she's got it;
 If she's got it, you'll get it;
 If you get it, YOU'VE HAD IT!'
Our own is more succinct:
 VINO
 VENUS
 VD.²⁸

Butler's wartime experiences also inspired poems that protest the tragedy of dead and dying youths through variations on the theme of *liebestodd* (love-to-death, love-in-death, or death-as-love). 'Bomb Casualty' is not particularly original, but concludes with a memorable couplet:

These hands that felt the warmth of breasts
and tautened at the tremor of a thigh,
these arms that clasped, lie random, loose,
limp on the sand, an empty noose.

These lips, whose lusting flames were quenched

²⁸ *Bursting World*, p.219.

against the jasmine fountain of her mouth,
now shape nor word nor song, whisper not, nor sigh
but kiss the careless wind, the bloodless sky.

His earth contracted in a single kiss,
his life was summoned in one caress,
when from the wings of metal seraphim
Death paused a second to ravish him.²⁹

Similarly, the disjointed, haunting 'Love in Arlonna' depicts a soldier who, straight after returning from combat (his 'metal-weary hands warm in battledress'), engages in a bawdy transaction: 'he comes with his lust to bargain with her hunger, / half a loaf of bread for an hour's caress'. The poet, it seems, does not judge this soldier, who can only assert 'I am still alive' when his 'limbs smoulder and glow'.

Sex also entered Butler's academic discourse. A 1974 essay on Roy Campbell details that poet's ambiguous sexuality, and quotes his criticism of those who 'intellectualise and moralise their instinctual urges, and reduce what should be ecstatic and joyful to a solemn or guilt-ridden duty.'³⁰ Thirty-five years later, in a brief article entitled 'The African Renaissance – A Long View' (1999), Butler would introduce a discussion on the sexual instinct in similar, if somewhat earthier, terms: 'Conceived in ecstasy, born in blood, nurtured at the breast, we are driven by desires, hungers, emotions, and we use thought to help gratify them.'³¹ The context for this summary is, however, altogether different to Campbell's vitriolic dismissal. As he grew older, Butler became more and more fascinated by the study of early humans. It was a fascination that enabled him to endorse (then president-elect) Thabo Mbeki's vision of an African Renaissance. We will come to 'The African Renaissance – A Long View' again in Chapter Four, but in the present context it is worth noting the combination of biological frankness and apparent ethical sophistication with which Butler describes those sexual adaptations that were necessary to human evolution:

²⁹ Don MacLennan comments that the poem's presentation of violence through the 'compression' and 'neatness' of the 'Elizabethan conceit of death and love/ravishment' in fact 'makes it more difficult to feel the poet's attitude to the experience' – he observes that 'finding form to match feeling is difficult, and part of a poet's growth' ('The Poetry of Guy Butler', p.202).

³⁰ Butler, 'Roy Campbell', *Essays and Lectures*, p.138.

... [the female] also had to bring about a change in hominid sex life. It was essential that there should be a measure of stability in her relationship with [the male]. For one thing, she had to be constantly compliant to her mate and abandon physical displays of her periods of fertility which characterise other apes. She succeeded in adding the sober responsibilities of parenthood to the intoxication of courting and mating, to turn a male in rut into a man who not only desires and enjoys, but cares for her and their mutual offspring. Self-gratifying erotic desire was qualified by communal familial affection.³²

This quasi-scientific advocacy of a balance between passion and responsibility echoes sentiments expressed earlier in Butler's career. According to Akal, the unpublished historical play *Judith*, written in the early 1950s, pivots on the 'constant struggle' between flesh and spirit; the Israelite Judith is torn between, on the one hand, 'her "self-will" and the vibrant experience of her womanhood renewed by her growing attraction to Holofernes' (the commander of Nebuchadnezzar's army) and, on the other, 'the "selflessness" of her response to the calling of her God' to defend her city against the Assyrian siege. Judith loves Holofernes, but his feelings for her are lustful, 'grounded in Judith's physical beauty and her intelligence, and not in the spiritual dimension of her being.'³³ Their relationship is thus doomed to end in tragedy. In the Preface to *Karoo Morning*, Butler bemoans 'the increasing cynicism about even the possibility of lasting human relationships, and the elevation of sexual attraction above loyalty and affection', two factors that he identifies as 'leading to a loss of faith in the family – the most important of human institutions.'³⁴

Should we accuse Butler of hypocrisy for this virtuous lecturing, in light of whatever "indiscretions" he may have committed himself that would undermine 'loyalty' or 'the family'? I do not think so. The hypocrite takes a moral stance without acknowledging his or her own shortcomings, whereas Butler publicly proclaimed an 'awareness of failure, a guilty

³¹ Butler, 'The African Renaissance – A Long View' (Draft typescript, 1999), p.1. NELM.

³² *Ibid.*, p.2. As Jared Diamond points out in *The Rise and Fall of the Third Chimpanzee* (a work that Butler consulted – and contested – in his research into evolutionary biology), there are numerous conflicting theories regarding 'the origin of concealed ovulation and concealed [and restricted] copulation in humans'; unsurprisingly, given the implications for male-female power relationships, none of these theories is free from gender bias (London: Vintage, 1991), pp.66-69.

³³ *Forms of Community Service*, p.43 and p.46. Akal refers to Holofernes' use of a 'succession of rapine images supported by the phallic undertones of "spear"' to describe the sacking of the city and, by implication, 'of its identifying symbol, Judith' – but this is not realised as, having failed 'to turn Holofernes to the greater love of God', Judith inverts the penetrative imagery and stabs him: the chorus narrates how, 'in finest silks and subtlest scent/She veiled her breasts and thighs', then 'crushed him with her beauty'.

conscience' and humbly confessed that 'I have injured and failed ... those who[m] I love and who love me.' Moreover, notwithstanding the breakdowns (literally, in Jean Butler's case) and trauma they experienced during the course of their marriage, the Butlers stayed together, upholding 'loyalty and affection' – ultimately, preserving their love and their family, that 'most important of human institutions'.

One of Butler's earliest poems is the short lyric, 'Coal':

The coals glow, giving to you and me
sun's warmth stored three hundred million years ago,
when evolution's best experiment
was a tentative amphibian on the fringes of the sea.

I wonder if we ever shall evolve
beyond the simple beauty of this hour:
You drying your hair before this ancient heat
and I aware of your primaeval power.

The 'ancient heat' of burning coals is a recurring image in the poetic depiction of their marriage.³⁵ Towards the end of 1946, after a visit to South Africa during the Oxford summer vacation, the Butlers decided that Guy would return to England alone, and that Jean would join him in the spring of 1947 because she 'dreaded another English winter.'³⁶ Butler's 'Aubade' seems to date from this period. The poem conflates the speaker's emotional state with the conditions of physical parting, and in turn with the gloomy weather. Contrasts of heat and cold dominate from the opening lines: 'Disintegrating, the coals split, crack/in the grate, shedding a dying heat', and it is feared that, just as 'all fires die', so 'the loves of two/like insects left on the yellowing lawns' will 'die in the weathers that freeze and rend'. For the separated lovers, there is only the prospect of 'the burning in our limbs' becoming 'ash and acrid smoke'; their hearts will 'lie stiff in cold, stopped streams', as 'cold stars, great gales divide our destinations'.

The trope of coal is used again in a love poem of a very different sort, 'Patience'. In this sonnet, the speaker (presumably Butler himself)

³⁴ Butler, *Karoo Morning*, p.ix.

³⁵ 'Winter Solstice' also ends with an image of 'unquenchable coal', but it is a spiritual fire ('Even within/The ice-fields of your heart He shall not die'); the same poem, it may be noted, denounces the 'dreamt escape from human love and lust' for 'through these and through the round year's liturgy/Speaks God, now born as Man.'

³⁶ Butler, *A Local Habitation*, p.54.

and his love (Jean) have had a heated argument – a ‘sudden storm-tormented night’ – and she is inimical, her once ‘rippling pulse’ now ‘levelled to a dead-beat metronome’. They are separated from each other by a ‘monochrome’ landscape of snow and ice; one imagines the Oxford of *A Local Habitation* in the grip of a freezing, alienating winter. The poem concludes, however, with an affirmation:

Darling, I love you still; be sure all through
your frigid solstice I'll keep hearth for you,
I'll kindle coals: when you are cold come home.

Their ‘hearth’ remained, to borrow Shelley’s phrase, ‘unextinguished’.³⁷ Butler’s 1994 poem ‘Signal Hill (After the fires that threatened the 1820 Monument)’ shifts from a defiant response to the literal fires – ‘A phoenix sings through flame and ash’ – towards the celebration of a very different “fire” that first made Signal Hill significant to him. He and Jean had climbed the hill, overlooking Grahamstown, soon after they met in 1937; ‘a cold wind came up’ and they sought shelter near the old fort on the crest of the hill:

Wrapped in our macs,
out of the wind
our bodies welcomed this wall.
The flame in each other
needed no kindling at all.

Almost sixty years.

Ignorant in our bliss
this was our first hearth,

the fire is burning still.³⁸

³⁷ PB Shelley, ‘Ode to the West Wind’, *Poetical Works*, ed. Edward Dowden (London: Macmillan, 1890), p.527.

³⁸ For a light-hearted account of a different romantic trip up Signal Hill, see *Bursting World* pp.52-53.

PART TWO

Preamble: Relocating the rational

An interesting perspective on Butler's search for synthesis is provided by Gareth Cornwell's 'Colonial Discourse and Culture in South Africa'. This paper, delivered in 1991 amidst the hesitant excitement and anxiety of the transition to democracy, addresses various points of view on the process of defining and establishing a national culture. Reviewing the effective deconstruction by postcolonial theorists of the binaries inherent in colonial discourse ('settler/native, centre/margin, presence/absence'), Cornwell notes that some 'oppositional discourse' – he gives the example of Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* – has itself adopted this dualism, so that decolonisation has been envisioned as a 'process of complete symbolic inversion ... necessarily violent', thus negating the possibility for a peaceful transfer of power such as was underway at the time.¹

Furthermore, the idea of a South African national culture, Cornwell suggests, must acknowledge a multiplicity of existing "nations" within that culture; 'cultural hybridism' demands a continual process of negotiation rather than 'a unitary national culture capable of accommodating diversity because it is so confident of its own dominant centrality as the culture of "the people" or "the masses".'² This kind of confidence he attributes to Albie Sachs, as expressed in a 1989 article on 'Preparing Ourselves for Freedom.' Although Sachs was ostensibly advocating 'openness, tolerance and indeterminacy' under prospective ANC rule, Cornwell argues that

the gestures towards syncretism which inform this discourse often mask a view of the cultural domain as an arena of political struggle in which the winner takes all, in which, at the end of the day, one side emerges victorious as the authentic national voice, and can then set about consolidating a new hegemony, marginalising and silencing its "opponents".

¹ Gareth Cornwell, 'Colonial Discourse and Culture in South Africa', pp.43-52 in Reckwitz *et al* (eds.), *The African Past and Contemporary Culture*. (Essen: Die Blaue Eule, 1993), p.43 and p.45.

² *Ibid.*, p.50 and p.47.

'Syncretism' here connotes an inconsistent and imbalanced fusion – in fact, a failure of synthesis. Although Butler's search for synthesis stemmed from and was expressed in different historical circumstances, it is worthwhile testing it against the same critique. In his desire to see Africa and Europe fused in South Africa, did he dispute the binaries of colonial discourse or did he work within them? Did his synthesis imply hegemony, the dominance of one over another?

'Always intrigued by myth and archetype ... Butler was early attracted to the Nietzschean complement of Apollo and Dionysus, the former representing a European dispassionate rationality, the latter an African intuitive passionality.'³ Thus, Malvern van Wyk Smith in *Grounds of Contest: A Survey of South African English Literature*, highlighting the importance of the Apollo-Dionysus paradigm to Butler. That van Wyk Smith, Butler's friend and colleague for many years, should foreground this aspect of his work is an indication of its impact: 'the theory is, of course, a highly problematic one ... it underlies an ancient and, ultimately, unfavourable contrast between Europe and Africa.'⁴ This sounds like syncretism rather than synthesis. If the European-African encounter formulated as the Apollo-Dionysus encounter is an overarching theme in Butler's writing, then 'The Republic and the Arts', first delivered as a lecture in 1962, represents the major prose interpretation of that theme ('Home Thoughts' is perhaps its poetic counterpart).⁵ A brief consideration of one or two 'problematic' aspects of 'The Republic and the Arts' will serve to introduce the task of relocating rationality as a leitmotif in Butler's writing.

The union between Apollonian and Dionysiac forces suggested by Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* (1870) is used by Butler to make some radical statements. A lecture that sets out to assess the future of the arts in South Africa ends with strong political overtones. As far as the dramatic arts are concerned, 'no great advance is possible ... until theatres are

³ Malvern van Wyk Smith, *Grounds of Contest: A Survey of South African English Literature* (Kenwyn: Juta, 1990), p.81.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.82.

⁵ They are not, however, the first attempts to apply the paradigm; long before his visit to West Africa, Butler had experimented with the artistic and intellectual potential of the Apollo-Dionysus opposition. *A Local Habitation* records that 'Winter Solstice' – a poem dating from Butler's stint at Oxford – contains such experimentation. (p.146).

available and open to all, and until audiences and casts are mixed.⁶ The apartheid government and the Dutch Reformed Church are mistaken in using ‘powerful symbols of difference and distinction’ such as ‘the equation we draw between skin pigmentation and civilisation’.⁷ Butler challenges the white population for ‘dying of dignity’: ‘Who do we think we are, anyway? We need to unbend a little, and talk.’ In closing, along with a warning against a ‘high-minded moral tone’, he declares: ‘Let the universities and theatres be open to all.’⁸ These statements demonstrate a strong opposition to then-current apartheid legislation, posing direct challenges to the provisions of, amongst others, the Separate Amenities Act, the Bantu and University Education Acts, and the Urban Areas Act.

Butler does not, however, mention the momentous events that had defined the two years prior to his address: the anti-pass demonstrations that led to the massacre at Sharpeville in March 1960; the state of emergency that followed, along with the banning of the ANC, the PAC and other political organisations; the referendum in October of that year when white South Africa voted in favour of becoming a republic; the general strike planned to coincide with the Republic Day celebrations in May 1961; and Nelson Mandela’s announcement of the launch of the armed struggle at the end of that year. His lecture, part of a series hosted by Wits University entitled ‘The Republic in a Changing World’, seems to take all this for granted. Nevertheless, Butler’s stance is clearly an oppositional one – to the post-apartheid reader, it is not his conclusions that are unsatisfactory, but rather the methods employed in reaching these conclusions.

Butler carefully inserts comments that subvert any characterisation of whites as sophisticated and non-whites as savage. Introducing his subject, he refers to the outdated ‘pioneering mentality’ leading to a ‘barbarous rejection of the arts’ that, refreshingly, ‘does not apply to “Coloureds” or Africans’.⁹ Throughout he is at pains to make it ‘clearly understood that I do not for one moment accept that each continent has a

⁶ Butler, ‘The Republic and the Arts’, p.110.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.112.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.113.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.100.

monopoly of a god'. NP van Wyk Louw's *Raka* is lauded for achieving 'universality' by not dividing its Apollonian and Dionysian characters along racial lines. Nevertheless, even in hoping that the 'White Apollo' will acknowledge 'the Apollo in his black opposite number', and the 'African Dionysus' will see 'his brother inside the White man', Butler bases his argument on a premise (and couches it in a language) that reinforces these stereotypes.¹⁰ Laurens van der Post's depiction of 'dread' in race relations is left to stand as a first principle:

...we dread the Black man because he symbolises an anti-self, a portion of our natures suppressed and starved; and the black man dreads us because we symbolise other human traits, mainly rational and intellectual, which his culture did not develop.¹¹

'The Republic and the Arts' puts the Nietzschean complements to altogether more productive use, but does not dissociate the message of inter-racial engagement from, for example, van der Post's *The Dark Eye in Africa* or the racially skewed hope – however progressive or radical for its time – expressed in William Plomer's *Turbott Wolfe*, of 'the great compromise between white and black; between civilisation and barbarism; between the past and the future; between brains and bodies'.¹²

Butler publicly signalled his interest in Apollo-Dionysus as early as 1953, in 'An Aspect of Tragedy', his inaugural lecture at Rhodes. In this instance his focus is on the spiritual or psychological suffering and redemption of the classical tragic hero figure (anticipating, as Malan and Akal show, the transcendental pattern that Butler's own drama would follow) and not on the disputed ground of South African politics. The lecture also 'draws the parallel between Dionysus and Christ: they have fates that are common to the cyclical pattern in nature', insofar as both of them die in order to bring new life.¹³ This equivalence, were it emphasised, would substantially modify the Apollo-Dionysus analogy; the negative connotations of "Dionysiac" forces are undermined as pagan-Christian resonances are foregrounded. Butler does not take the point further,

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.113.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.101.

¹² William Plomer, *Turbott Wolfe* (London: Hogarth Press, 1965), p.188.

¹³ Akal, *Forms of Community Service*, p.19. See also Malan, *Guy Butler: Poet and Dramatist*, pp.10-11.

however, and even though 'An Aspect of Tragedy' suggests an additional dimension to the model, 'The Republic and the Arts' remains the critical hub.

The invocation of the Apollo-Dionysus encounter in the latter text is less convincing precisely because Butler's sources are given such acute attention. Whilst Butler claims to be 'fully aware of the dangers of historical parallels', seeking only to use the example of ancient Greek theatre as 'a parable or allegory for one aspect – and one aspect only – of the current struggle in Africa', his attempt to match a mythico-intellectual model with an historico-political reality becomes too elaborate, requiring an awkward inversion: 'In Greece, the invader was Dionysus; in Africa the invader is Apollo.'¹⁴ The extensive quotation from *The Birth of Tragedy* and from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* results in a misreading of history. In the penultimate quotation from Nietzsche, after the 'pacification' (an historically loaded term) of Dionysus, 'the two great antagonists have been reconciled'.¹⁵ Yet their relationship, for all its mutual respect and consequent creativity, is described in the same way that apologists described apartheid: 'Each feels obliged henceforth to keep his bounds, each will honour the other by the bestowal of periodic gifts, while the cleavage remains fundamentally the same.' In quoting these words without acknowledging that they detract strongly from his thesis, Butler exposes himself to those critics who would argue that, however his lecture may seem to encourage a meeting of white and non-white, it actually serves to uphold the *status quo*. Over the years, he himself questioned the appropriacy of the analogy. In a letter to his brother Jeff, written thirty years after the lecture was delivered, he refers to the reaction that it provoked: 'I infuriated the Marxists because I thought Nietzsche's *Birth of*

¹⁴ 'The Republic and the Arts', p.104. Dirk Kloppe sees the problem as one of 'trying to make a psychological paradigm fit a political context' ('Soliciting the Other: Interpenetration of the Psychological and the Political in Some Poems by Guy Butler', *English in Africa* 21 (1994): 148).

¹⁵ 'The Republic and the Arts', p.112. Kloppe's psycho-sexual analysis of 'Home Thoughts' reinforces the negative connotations of 'pacification': Apollo and Dionysus are characterised as 'male and female' and the poem 'announces their exclusivity rather than their mutuality' (*op. cit.*: 144-147). Although 'interpenetration' or a 'true dialectical relation between self and other' is 'implied' by Butler, Kloppe argues, it is not 'developed' – 'their union is a temporary violent penetration by Apollo of Dionysus. Apollo both defines and violates his estranged other'. Nevertheless, Kloppe concludes that 'however inadequate the union of Apollo and Dionysus may be ... the possibility has been glimpsed of a chymical wedding that will reintegrate the psyche and heal the wounds of political conflict.'

Tragedy more relevant to the arts in SA than *Das Kapital*. Water under the bridge, words into the wind. But it all makes you think.’¹⁶

‘The Republic and the Arts’ fails to express adequately Butler’s complex and often contradictory attitudes to the meeting between “rational” Europe and “irrational” Africa. Akal correctly points out that ‘the Apollo-Dionysus nexus’ as utilised by Butler ‘underwent several modifications and reformulations’.¹⁷ Moreover, the Apollo-Dionysus metaphor was by no means the only lens through which Butler viewed (and viewed critically) rationality itself. We must look to other sources in his poetry, plays and autobiographical writing if we are to gain a fair perspective. Some critics have attempted to do so, but it has still not been clearly established what rational or irrational attitudes and patterns of behaviour signified to Butler, nor have the multiple strands of this preoccupation been untangled. In the following pages I propose to develop a more thorough understanding of his (ir)rationality.

¹⁶ Butler, letter to Jeff Butler, 9th November 1993. NELM.

¹⁷ *Forms of Community Service*, p.151. I do not, however, concur with Akal that these changes represent ‘a steady evolutionary process’ in which the model gradually became more intricate and sophisticated as it adjusted to ‘African immediacies’ (p.151), and that the ‘final treatment of the theme’ came in the mid-1970s, after which Butler ‘believed he could take it no further’ (pp.213-214). Butler saw no such neat delineations in the development of his work, even revisiting his early ideas towards the end of his life. Furthermore, he did not abandon the paradigm ‘in favour of other more immediate concerns’ (Akal’s phrase is unfortunate, given his earlier reference to the ‘African immediacies’ that drove the “evolution”); the critical lashing Butler received did discourage him from promulgating the Apollo-Dionysus version of synthesis, but he continued to refer to the model – not least because he felt he needed to defend it and himself against the critics.

CHAPTER THREE

I Christian, Romantic, soldier

(i) Modernity and Romanticism

Stephen Watson, in his Introduction to the *Essays and Lectures*, places Butler 'on the cusp of the old and the new' and suggests that 'his work is in part an embrace of modernity, in part a critique of it. There is both attraction and repulsion, at the very least a tension.'¹ This tension is a result of the much-contested "achievements" associated with modernity. Watson quotes Octavio Paz:

The key concepts of the Modern Age – progress, evolution, revolution, freedom, democracy, science, technology – had their origin in criticism. In the 18th century, reason turned to the criticism of the world and of itself, thereby radically transforming classical rationalism and its timeless geometries. A criticism of itself: reason renounced the grandiose structures that made it synonymous with Being, Good, or Truth; it ceased to be the Mansion of the Idea and became instead a path, a means of exploration.²

The Enlightenment conception of reason as 'exploration' has, Watson notes, certainly brought about necessary social change. It is largely responsible for the values and practices of constitutional democracy, such as a universal franchise and equality before the law. Nevertheless, modernity's adaptation of 'the scientific vision based on a rationalistic and increasingly materialistic interpretation of nature' has also brought about 'those dilemmas which are, by now, almost synonymous with the modern condition: moral ambiguity, cosmic loneliness, and latent despair'.³ Moreover, the extreme manifestations of

¹ Watson, Introduction to *Essays and Lectures*, p.4.

² *Ibid.*, p.6.

³ *Ibid.*, p.7. There are, of course, counter-critiques offered by scientists such as Richard Dawkins, who argues that science and scientific knowledge can increase our appetite for wonder at the natural world and for human sympathy. Dawkins rejects the 'hostility to science in general' of both neo-romanticism and 'the sophisticated academic left', whom he considers purveyors of a 'higher superstition' – see *Unweaving the Rainbow* (London: Penguin, 1998), pp.20-21; against this may be set Butler's sense that 'the worship of science and the adulation of the scientist have reached superstitious proportions, to the blushing embarrassment, be it said, of all true scientists' – see *The Republic and the Arts* (Booklet. Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 1964; this extract is not included in the version reprinted in *Essays and Lectures*). Dawkins' definition of "good science", however, is so narrow as to exclude other forms of "rationalist" human activity and patterns of thought that Butler felt 'have stripped the stars of myth' ('Elegy', IV.v). Moreover, he glosses over the 'genuine

modernity have also produced tragedy – the atomic bomb, or the racial theories underlying apartheid. As I noted earlier, Tony Morphet has argued cogently against this latter association, claiming that it is only from a “white” point of view that apartheid can be aligned with ‘North Atlantic’ forms of modernity in the twentieth century; for black people, apartheid was rather ‘the devastating experience of being thrust back by coercive force into the conditions of the pre-modern world’, and thus ‘their grasp of the meaning of modernity was bold and uncompromising – it was, and indeed is, freedom.’⁴ Notwithstanding this contention, what remains evident is that numerous Enlightenment utopias were perverted into the all-too-real nightmares of the twentieth century.

At this point it is necessary to digress briefly in order to address some inconsistency in the critical lexicon: the ‘Modern Age’ and the notion of “modernity” as it is being discussed here should not be confused with “modernism”, nor indeed with late-twentieth century claims to be “modern”. Michael Chapman’s *South African English Poetry: A Modern Perspective* (1984) bears out the peculiarly South African version of this confusion, which seems largely to resist equating “modern” with “post-Enlightenment” because the ‘Modern Age’ in Europe was accompanied by colonial expansion – the very opposite of ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy’ for the colonised (this is similar to Morphet’s view).⁵ ‘Modern South African poetry’ has been variously understood as beginning with Campbell, Plomer and contemporaries of European high modernism before World War Two; as being defined in opposition to Romantic or ‘colonial’ poetry; and as ‘sociologically relevant’ or protest poetry.⁶ For Chapman, “modern” describes a consciousness which ‘registers a crisis of authority, its sense of dissociation from received conventions being reflected in often sharply altered attitudes to poetic language, syntax and to the function of art’. Butler features prominently in Chapman’s distinction, representing a

philosophical difficulties’ of scientific research and theorising but does not consider the problem of “prejudice” – see Chapter Four (II).

⁴ Morphet, ‘Promoting the English’: 18.

⁵ A more recent instance is David Attwell’s *Rewriting Modernity: Studies in Black South African Literary History* (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2005).

⁶ Michael Chapman, *South African English Poetry: A Modern Perspective*, p.10.

supposedly 'traditional' (as well as 'rural') school of poetry – by comparison to a 'modern', 'city' poet such as Wopko Jensma.⁷

Watson affirms that Butler 'clearly belong[s] to the tradition of Romanticism'.⁸ He quotes Paz again:

A rebellious child, Romanticism was a criticism of rational criticism. To historical times it preferred the time of origins, before history; to the utopian future it preferred the immediate present of the passions, love, and the flesh.

Romanticism may have been a 'rebellious child' of modernity, but it shared a 'filial' relationship (Paz's term) with its forebears in the Enlightenment insofar as it represented, in its more radical forms, a similar challenge to the authority of the state and in some instances the Church. Questions of faith and religious practice are a crucial part of the 'tension' between tradition and modernity experienced by Butler from a young age.

Life in Cradock did not, at first, discourage Butler's engagement with the Romantic spirit. The English settlers, so vital a part of his community and family identity, had enacted a Romantic urge in their (ad)venture into Albany. Reading Keats under pear trees planted in the sparse Karoo, the young Butler established an ambiguous relationship with his natural surroundings; elements of this "communion" are comparable in spirit to that of the Lake poets, although the altogether different geography and topography of the two regions intensified by contrast Butler's conception of the Karoo as a severe, harsh, unwelcoming (African) landscape.⁹

The unique blend of his parents' Quakerism/Methodism and Anglicanism instilled in Butler a Christian faith that was not allied to any single religious institution. Rather, as Watson suggests, he was rooted 'in

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.29-33. Chapman's emphasis on syntactical innovation and the destruction of 'classically correct sequences and diction' as a result of the modernist poet's experience of 'shock, disturbance and crisis' is, however, confounded by his later description of Jensma as a 'postmodernist' (p.10). There are numerous other problems with Chapman's categorisation, quite apart from the fact that his definition of the 'central metaphors' of the 'modern' ('change, transition and the plurality of culture') could be used to describe much of Butler's poetry: firstly, the influence on Butler of European modernists such as Eliot and Yeats; secondly, the awkwardness of dissociating Butler from contemporaries such as Clouts and Livingstone, whom Chapman considers modernists; and thirdly, the evidence of Butler's own technical experimentation and disruption.

⁸ Introduction to *Essays and Lectures*, p.12.

⁹ The relationship – more accurately, the scope for conflict – between Romanticism and "African ecology" is discussed at greater length in Chapter Six (I).

a symbolic order, a system of values, which both explained the world and provided consoling beliefs for those aspects of it which seemed to confound reason'.¹⁰ Certainly, this is true of Butler as an older man, who perceived certain aspects of the Christian faith as necessarily "irrational". As a young man, however, he reacted strongly against his upbringing. Although "The Poplars" was by no means a conservative household in the political sense – its strident pacifism and broadminded opinions on race relations were almost unheard of elsewhere in Cradock – these values were based on a strict biblical orthodoxy. When Butler commenced his studies at Rhodes in 1936, the joys of alcohol and revelry formed a sharp contrast to the temperate sobriety of his formative years. His new home, the old Sanatorium in College House residence converted into a shared flat, was dubbed "La Boheme". *Bursting World* recounts the excitement of his discovery that 'art was immoral, or at least artists were immoral'.¹¹ When Butler returned to Cradock at the end of his first year it was with 'outrageous thoughts' and, in discussion with his family, he inevitably 'alternated between a considerate self-censorship ... and sudden reckless and provocative statements'.¹² He struggled with the combination, maintained at "The Poplars", of a deep religious conviction and a simultaneous emphasis on the application of reason in all matters:

The real difficulties came in my relationships with my father Ernest and his sister, my saintly Aunt Mary, the Quaker half of the family: both pondering people who thought their way to particular stances on particular social or political issues ... I harboured a deep, unformulated resentment of their cool, sweet Quaker reasonableness. Not only was their reasonableness an indictment of my own impatient leaping to conclusions, frequently wrong, but also it activated a ghastly uncertainty, which was growing month by month, that all the ultimately reasonable and loving assumptions in which they had nurtured me were open to question: that

¹⁰ Introduction to *Essays and Lectures*, p.2.

¹¹ Butler, *Bursting World*, p.11. Don MacLennan argues that a major poem such as the *Ode: On First Seeing Florence* constitutes 'an answer to this youthful antinomy' between 'art' and 'the Bible' by demonstrating that 'poetry itself has the dimensions of religious experience and justifies the ways of a sensual son to a stern, moral father. After all, the entire Renaissance combined sacred and profane, and managed to transcend such Puritan opposition' ('The Poetry of Guy Butler', p.205). Tony Voss, on the other hand, sees the *Ode* as 'a pagan poem' because 'its pantheon includes Sophocles and the heroes of the Renaissance and Romanticism'; of the war poems, it is the *Elegy* that 'grapples directly with questions of Christian faith' ('Thank You and I'm Sorry: News from the Country of Old Men', *English Academy Review* 16 (December 1999): 233). Michael Chapman maintains that Butler is one of those poets who 'tend to exalt poetry by making it serve religious purposes' – as opposed to, say, Douglas Livingstone, who 'seeks to save religion or myth by showing ... that it is in essence poetry' (*South African English Poetry: A Modern Perspective*, p.102).

¹² *Bursting World*, p.17.

there might be no God; that Christianity was a bedtime story; that religion was the dope of the masses.¹³

The 'uncertainty' would grow, with Butler's experiences during and immediately after the Second World War, to a near rejection of the apparently 'reasonable' assumptions of Christianity. When he again embraced his Christian convictions, it would be with an 'unreasonable' faith.

(ii) The limitations of language

There is one important component of Quaker worship that is not recognisable as 'reasonable' or even rational: the mystical and almost transcendental focus on silence. Typically, Quaker meetings are not formally structured; unlike most other Christian denominations, Quakerism does not require songs and readings to be arranged before the service; there is no sermon. Some of those attending may choose to share an idea or a reading or a prayer, but large portions of each meeting are taken up by silent meditation and reflection. This silence had a lasting effect on Butler. His sermon on 'Why I am a Christian' emphasises the importance of knowing 'where language stops and where silence begins' precisely because 'when man listens, God speaks'.¹⁴ In 1994 he wrote on the subject to Patrick Cullinan (whose translations of the Italian poet Eugenio Montale had recently been commended):

Silence is the centre of Quaker worship. When that silence comes down, the entire Bable [sic] of civilisations can disappear and an assurance come that Time is not everything, nor Material ... Both you and Montale, however, do experience moments which put time, place and language itself, in their proper places, as the mere geography of those moments – a geography which is redeemed by them.¹⁵

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.18.

¹⁴ Butler, 'High Corner (13)', p.43. The principle that 'When man listens God speaks' also finds a place in Butler's foreword to *Thirst*; those formative Quaker meetings, in which 'it was exceptional for any word to be uttered', were based on the premise that '[God] spoke with an inward, soundless voice. The stillness, the communal ridding of minds of worldly noises, made it possible for the inner ear to hear Him' (p.7).

¹⁵ Butler, letter to Patrick Cullinan, 7th December 1994. NELM.

The letter goes on to confirm this emphasis as found in the mystical, transcendent verse of ‘that Job’s comforter, TS Eliot’.¹⁶ Yet the question remains: is language really nothing more than the ‘mere geography’ of experience?

The conflict in South Africa’s ‘material’ history has always been inextricably linked to language; the new constitution enshrines multilingualism because imposing certain languages and denigrating others was for so long a tool of oppression. Culture and race are subsumed in language, and its divisive power is further attested to by a plethora of derogatory terms and labels. In ‘The Language of the Land’ (1960 – at which time it could hardly be anticipated that forty years later South Africa would have eleven official languages), Butler suggests that ‘we underrate just how great a barrier to understanding and national unity bilingualism or trilingualism is.’¹⁷ For the English-language poet in South Africa, using a language exported by a colonial power to colonies whose people, flora and fauna that language is ill-equipped to describe, the problem is exacerbated. Many of Butler’s essays deal with this difficulty. Stephen Watson suggests that several of Butler’s poems, too, ‘are really about a confrontation with the cultural, political and even ontological problematics of language’.¹⁸ Watson is referring to ‘the kinds of difficulty encountered by the poet when there is a disparity between language and land, thing and name, scene and sign’ – he gives the example of Butler’s ‘Myths’. In that poem, Butler regrets that ‘the sounds on my tongue’ are as ‘alien’ to Africa as ‘the pink on my skin’, repeating a sentiment voiced in the early poem ‘Servant Girl’:

Neat swallows on smooth blue rocks
about whose contours purl
pale amber waters; a Xhosa girl
washing a white girl’s cretonne frocks,

¹⁶ This is an odd use of the epithet ‘Job’s comforter’, which Butler appears to have used here and elsewhere as a compliment.

¹⁷ Butler, ‘The Language of the Land’, p.84. Dirk Klopper frames the dilemma in this way: ‘linguistic barriers’ prevent someone of European descent from ‘getting completely inside African culture’, but at the same time Butler sought to avoid ‘European conceptualisations’ which have, ‘in the past, proved to be an obstacle to understanding’; it was this impasse that drove Butler ‘to demonstrate that there is a transcendent ground from which Europe and Africa can be surveyed without prejudicing either’ – hence his preoccupation with myth (‘Soliciting the Other’: 142).

¹⁸ Introduction to *Essays and Lectures*, p.12.

and singing a song which seems more integral
with rain-rinsed sky and sand-stone hill
than any cadence wrung
from my taut tongue.

Silence, then, offers an escape from language as a point of conflict and separation between people in South Africa. The cultural and political implications of multilingualism are ultimately, however, secondary hurdles; the ‘ontological problematics of language’ present themselves on a more fundamental level. Those systematic, logical (rational) meaning-makers, ‘time, place and language’ cannot fully encompass or comprehend the fluctuations of existence. The concession that language, in particular, is a limited system – a flawed construction – has become a familiar one, but a poet does not need post-structuralist theories to be convinced that there are depths of experience to which language cannot do justice. This is a painful but vital realisation for any writer: borrowing from Roland Barthes, one might say there is a “degree zero”, an opacity to which all works of literature ultimately submit.¹⁹ Still, the insuppressible urge to communicate thoroughly and intimately and clearly – with other human beings, with God, with himself – underscores much of Butler’s writing.

In ‘Elegy: For a South African Tank Commander Killed in Action in Italy, October 1944’, one of Butler’s most substantial war poems, the speaker confronts the inadequacy of language to express grief or to comfort those who grieve. The ‘beautiful form of words’ at the young soldier’s funeral service is ‘a ragged ritual’, an unsuccessful attempt to forget ‘how all his features will disintegrate’ (I.iii). Later we read that

when death appears, abstractions disappear
and grammar crumbles when we come to die;
under the frown of individual grief
the finest phrases shrivel up and dry.

(III.i)

¹⁹ This is not the sense in which Barthes uses the term, which was coined chiefly to describe “neutral” modernist prose lacking tone or inflection. See *Writing Degree Zero* (1953), trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977).

This sense of helplessness breeds an aversion to language. Indeed, language, which we assume will offer us meaning – or at least access to meaning – is like art,

...a con-man with a clever stunt
of taking life's bedevilled pack in hand
to flash the happy sequences we want.
(I.iii)

Language deceives us by promising to provide structure and order to an unstructured and unordered world, but failing to do so. This mirrors the conundrum posed by Nietzsche in *The Twilight of the Idols*: "That for which we find words is already dead in our hearts. There is always a kind of contempt in the act of speaking."²⁰ An over-dependence on language is, therefore, an act of bad faith in the Sartrean sense; alternatively, one might invoke Derrida's critique of "logocentrism".

The card-playing metaphor is used again later in 'Elegy':

So shuffle the pack of words. It's time you won.
You'll find you have some aces. None at all.
The pack's been stacked since human life began.
(IV.ii)

The cynical, war-weary Captain Butler is a very different figure to the mature autobiographer who wanted to share his 'good life in a lovable world'. Nevertheless, in 'Elegy' we encounter the same distrust of words, the same longing for silence that the older Butler identified with Quakerism. Towards the beginning of the poem,

... shepherds, friends and poets worlds apart,
knowing that secret codes of sacrifice

are broken only in the listening heart,
in silence will escape, as if to kneel
before the blessed sacrament of art;

stopping their ears to earth's eternal brawl
they'll briefly slip into a timeless trance ...

²⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Twilight of the Idols* (1889), trans. Anthony Ludovici (Edinburgh: TN Foulis, 1911), p.59.

Time and language are associated in terms of their capacity to limit and not to liberate. Liberation is figured as an escape from the rational restrictions of co-ordinates, maps and compass points: of time, language and even place.

It is not only at the insurmountable obstacle of tragedy that words stumble. 'Near Hout Bay' expresses frustration with the (lack of) conversation at a reunion of old friends. Attempting to describe a scarcity of language, the poem in fact becomes prolix – but if this circumscription is a weakness, it is also a manifestation of the desire to fill a void with words:

talk which, try as we would to make it heal or hide,
only exposed the gaps, unbandaged sentence by sentence
the gashes and wounds of time, great spaces and falls
between us all. Each thread of phrase drifted from lips
like a spider's web from a cave in a thousand-foot cliff,
out, out into distance, finding nothing to cling to.

Then the false starts at conversation are stopped by 'the sufficiently epic view' of the mountains and the bay:

Silence took charge, a blessed burial of words.
Each forgot his failure, longing, boredom, fury
in that subsidence of even a pretence at speech.
We stood a long time, just listening ...

When 'the talk returned' it 'attempted nothing whatever'. The poem ends in a tone of calm resignation:

We accepted separation
as the ear those ignorant sounds
that filled that primitive silence
with sadness and with praise:
cicadas; doves; wind; surf.

This simple list, reducing language to non-linguistic elements (cicadas, doves, wind, surf), gives the ending a compact quality that is wanting in the rest of the poem: a compactness in which the silence underlying the

words is more powerful than the words themselves. Butler would later note that he had tried to achieve this effect ‘periodically’ throughout his life, using ‘words to acknowledge my awareness of this wordless silence, this precondition of speech and writing’.²¹

If ‘Near Hout Bay’ demonstrates how natural phenomena can provide comfort when language is impotent or absent, there are also instances in Butler’s writing of bright sun, high rocks and crashing water combining to purge the mind from an overpowering “excess” of language, offering an escape from – even an annihilation of – the academic and literary persona. *A Local Habitation* narrates how, while a student at Oxford, he travelled to the Lake District to relieve some of his anxiety about upcoming final examinations. His mind full of books and authors and quotations, he made a

short, steep climb alongside a stream, noisy, white, gushing, splashing, tumbling over sharp black jumbles of rock. Laden with time and metaphor, deliberately I move upstream, contrary to it. But I envy that abandoned fluid ... I lie on the deep, matted grass ... No wind. Sun.

Shoulders aching, body weary, heart beating, lying on my back, I relax every muscle and even shut my eyes. No thought, no quotable quotes, aware of physical sensations only, the weight of my body pressed skywards by the earth, but my heart was pulsing, particularly in my throat. In my ears was a sea-deep silence. There is no silence like that of mountains.

As I open my eyes, the sky is very blue. Life is very simple in that instant. Beyond metaphor, beyond the current arithmetic. Stillness absolute. Light steady and equal.²²

Surrendering thus, he allows the mysterious presences of mountain and sky to supersede ‘the world of magic, of words’.

Over thirty years on, after a day at a museum in the Northern Cape, Butler would write: ‘my brain reels from the endless stream of words and information’.²³ He was rescued from drowning in this metaphorical stream, however, by a natural force – the powerful cataracts of the Augrabies Falls: ‘Yes. Rock and Water ... furious energy unleashed.’ Of course, this non-verbal impression was still recorded in a diary; the writer’s unyielding urge

²¹ *Thirst*, p.7.

²² *A Local Habitation*, pp.87-88.

²³ Butler, ‘August 1989 Diary – Trip with Tim Couzens’.

to capture experience in prose overcame the aged professor's verbal fatigue.

There are moments in Butler's poetry that evoke his awareness of the 'wordless' more successfully. The sonnet 'Game' places two lovers in a prelapsarian landscape of wild animals, 'a hinterland that mocks mere history'. After the 'thunderstorm' of their 'great passion' has spilled into a 'pristine hush', the words they speak to each other merely 'stress an elemental calm', like bird calls that 'underscore the stillness of the bush', or brief 'sunbursts on a level sea'. Here, language is transformed into song and light.

A similar effect is wrought in the 'Interrupted Letter, from Hospital', which opens by addressing Butler's fellow poets and literary artists:

Dear Friends, in the craft of mystery and words,
most speech is mere noise countering noise
while song assumes an absolute stillness;
for or against nothing at all,
is needed by no one except the singer
who may, sometimes, be overheard.

As the speaker sinks into an anaesthetised unconsciousness before undergoing an operation, he has a mystical experience. In contrast to words 'precisely chosen' by the surgeons as tools, like so many clinical scalpels, he remembers (and exhorts his 'friends in the craft' to remember) how once

our eyelids closed
the better to hear

exactly chosen
words in sequence
call into being
stillness glittering

singing moving
white remote
perfect within
a cosmic poise.

Here, the poet seems to have access to, and desires to communicate, a magical, pre-linguistic vision of poetry. Poetry may consist of 'exactly

chosen/words in sequence', but the effect aimed for in the latter stanza is one of words flowing, as if instinctive and unprocessed, in a stream-of-(semi-)consciousness. Whether or not this effect is actually achieved is a moot point. The poet's pre-verbal intuitions are undermined by his attempt to share them; they fade away in the very moment of communication.

The poem closes with shades of Eliot's *Four Quartets*, but in a voice distinctive to a South African poet concerned with the practice of poetry in a politicised country. The 'noise' of apartheid politics forced many to 'shout' (protest), but artists can also eschew transient history and 'sing in the presence of absolute stillness':

Friends, I am surer than ever,
I invite you to overhear:
though it's against our mortal habit
not to shout in the face of noise
let us always sing
sing in the presence of absolute stillness:
a verse, given that audience,
has been, is, and will be heard.

Again, one could argue that the mystic's vision is lost in transcription, or, to be more elaborate, the divine insight gained by the priest in the Holy of Holies is forfeited when he turns his attention to the people in the temple. If readers are left feeling that Butler has "preached" to them in the final stanza – a response not without justification or plausibility – the mystical tenor of the poem is lost.

It is significant that 'Interrupted Letter, from Hospital' associates singing with silence, in opposition to 'speech' and 'the craft of words'.²⁴ Music, like language, can be cognitively (even mathematically) structured and is not a non-rational form of expression as such; yet, insofar as language is frequently divisive, the harmonies and rhythms of music unite. In 1945, as the Italian campaign was coming to an end, Butler organised a soldiers' visit to the opera at war-ravaged Lucca. Many Italian civilians were in attendance. *Bursting World* quotes from a letter describing the event: 'The Opera House was crowded with soldiers of all nationalities ... young and old, of all stations in life ... all the clash of nations and the

complexes of race and colour were dissolved in song.²⁵ Butler was passionate about music, but he professed to be ‘a disgraceful ignoramus about one of my chief sources of pleasure’.²⁶ It was, in part, precisely because his interest was (as he described it) ‘mindless’ that he was able to enjoy it so much.

The same may be said for his painting. Butler realised early on that he would not be a great painter, but it was a liberating, non-linguistic distraction for a professional man of words. Those twin figures who held so firm a grip on Butler’s imagination in later life, “the hobo and the nun” discussed in Chapter Two, had little in common except that they were both painters. In *The Prophetic Nun* Butler describes Sister Margaret CR’s fresco in the Church of Christ the King, Sophiatown, containing both biblical scenes and elements from day-to-day life in the township,

at which I would stare with a critical, admiring, envious eye. It was the most powerful image in paint of what I was struggling to do in words: to use my language, which happens to be English, in such a way as to make life in Africa at home in it, and it at home in Africa.²⁷

The visual arts thus informed both Butler’s poetic practice and his self-conception as a poet – in ‘Farmer’, the speaker describes himself studying the physical bulk of his subject ‘as a painter might’; ‘On Seeing a Rock Drawing in 1941’ concludes with an alliance between the poet and the anonymous artist²⁸ – and, like music, offered some respite from the tyranny of language. The Foreword to *Thirst* ropes Butler’s passions for music and painting together in a culminating affirmation that, since ‘I became conscious of the limitations of language while still in my teens’ (for

²⁴ See Maclennan, ‘The Poetry of Guy Butler’, for a discussion of the difference between ‘silence’ and ‘stillness’ (pp.209-211).

²⁵ *Bursting World*, pp.288-9.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.55.

²⁷ Butler, *The Prophetic Nun*, p.94. Making English ‘at home in Africa’ is not quite the same thing as making ‘life in Africa at home in English’ – in fact, the two processes can contradict one another. Chapter Six (II) explores how these twin aims are reconciled in the conceptual shift from English as the language of the coloniser/settler to English as “the Promethean fire”.

²⁸ Throughout his life, Butler was fascinated by the rock paintings of the San and Khoi. In this poem, the act of creating art, of representation, informs the process through which man becomes more than an animal with sophisticated hunting techniques: ‘He did not always choose to kill/but drew them in a deadly game.’ The ancient painter’s art is inspired – some ‘weird fever warmed his flesh’ – but also requires rational faculties: ‘cool detachment lit his eyes’, and the picture itself is ‘evidence of hand obeying brain’. After the war (in ‘To an Artist Friend: Florence 1947’), Butler would go so far as to balance ‘Bruegel, Giotto, the whole Uffizi’ with

language alone could not encompass his experience in South Africa, as ‘a youth in the mid-1930s, on the brink of a cataclysmic world war’),

I have never been a submissive devotee of words. These poor things only achieve some sort of artistic status when they manage to suggest what is usually way beyond their competence in honest prose. What use are they when it comes to colours, sounds, taste and touch?²⁹

I will return to Butler’s emphasis on the primacy of sensory experience later in this chapter. First, it is necessary to explore some of the more curious manifestations of his preoccupation with the “irrational”.

(iii) Ghosts, Shakespeare and ‘self-obliteration’

Butler maintained numerous academic and non-academic interests that centred on irrational phenomena. He was intrigued, for example, by ghosts and ghost stories, and in 1985 began collecting stories ‘from people who have experienced encounters with the rationally inexplicable’.³⁰ His curiosity was sparked by teaching colleague Ken Durham’s tales of the ghost haunting Drostdy Lodge, the building that housed the English Department during most of Butler’s lengthy tenure (they were amongst the anecdotes he had hoped to publish in an ‘Unofficial History of Rhodes University’).³¹ Butler’s poetry, from the early war poems to his long narrative *Pilgrimage to Dias Cross*, is littered with images of ghosts. In *Pilgrimage*, the attempt to revivify and unite certain historical figures fuses a Christian spirituality with a version of “African” communication with ancestors. Butler was encouraged by what he understood to be a greater recognition, in African culture, of supernatural elements. Although it reductively brackets “Africans” as pre-industrial, the following extract from ‘Notes on Seeing and Hearing Shakespeare’s Plays in South Africa’ (1992) is significant in this regard:

cave paintings produced in ‘African light’. In most contexts, ‘primitive’ Stone Age man is aligned with the irrational insofar as he is seen to have inhabited a “primal” Africa. See Chapter Four (I).

²⁹ *Thirst*, pp.3-4.

³⁰ Butler, letter to DM Blackhurst, 16th September 1985. NELM.

³¹ Butler and Durham later corresponded on various aspects of the tension between ‘scientific reduction’ and ‘reverence, wonder, marvel, mystery’; in a letter to Butler (20th Jan 1997, NELM), noting that over-analysis has the effect of demystification, Durham quotes Whitman’s poem ‘When I heard the Learn’d Astronomer’, in which ‘proofs, figures ... charts and diagrams to add, divide, and measure’ caused the speaker to feel ‘tired and sick’, until he ‘wander’d off’ on his own and ‘look’d up in perfect silence at the stars.’ Butler’s

Africans are generally more aware than Europeans that death is not a dead-end, but a change in status into a shade or ancestor. They have far less difficulty with Shakespeare's ghosts than we do. They are altogether more aware of the numinous, the unearthly, the sacral.³²

Thus, an African imagination is seen to facilitate 'a more spontaneous response' to the ghosts in *Macbeth* or *Hamlet* and the magic of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *The Tempest*.

Shakespeare was, we have noted, Butler's cardinal literary-academic pursuit. His autobiographical writing attests that, in his easy familiarity with the plays, he occasionally responded to irrational phenomena through a Shakespearean self-characterisation. *Bursting World* relates a comic episode in which an encounter with a monk, some heavy drinking, a book of Edgar Allan Poe short stories and a rat "hiccupping" in a dark room combine to persuade Butler that there is a ghost at his bedside. In his intoxication he tries to make scholarly sense out of the ordeal, remembering *Hamlet* and Horatio's ruminations on ghosts.³³ A less conscious allusion to *Hamlet* comes in *A Local Habitation* when he depicts himself, seeking out the tombstone of an ancestor at a cemetery in England, as both the *Hamlet* of the suicidal soliloquies and Horatio's graveyard companion:

Leaning on headstone after stone, inspecting illegible inscriptions and obliterated dates, I moved irregularly among mottled shadows under the trees. I sat down on a horizontal slab, so weathered that no trace of a letter could be seen beneath the green, grey and orange circles of lichen. I ran my fingertips over the surface to see if I could find any remnant of the legend by braille. Nothing. So I stopped moving my hand and still kept my eyes shut.

Nothing. Not even the awareness of nothing. No one to be aware. Like sudden absolute sleep.

I came to, startled, confused. Where was I? How long had I been away? Where had I been?³⁴

The interplay between rational and irrational forms of consciousness also informed Butler's work on *King Lear*, which included a

(admittedly lacklustre) poem 'The Pleiades' offers a different treatment of the same theme.

³² Butler, 'Notes on Seeing and Hearing Shakespeare's Plays in South Africa', *Essays and Lectures*, pp.223-4.

³³ See *Bursting World*, pp.269-70 and *Hamlet*, I.iv.65ff.

³⁴ Butler, *A Local Habitation*, p.15.

foray into the field of clinical psychology to “diagnose” aspects of Lear’s madness: delusion, hysteria and manic-depression. Above all, Butler cherished the reasoned, compassionate insight gained by Lear in the midst of his madness, along with the “wise folly” of the fool/clown. Like *Hamlet*, *Lear* figures in Butler’s interpretation of his wartime experiences. As a visiting officer at a Christmas party in Egypt in 1943, he was singled out to play the ‘mock monarch’ in a pageant: blindfolded, seated on a toilet for a throne, given a melon for an orb and an inflated condom for a sceptre.³⁵ The parody – which, despite Butler’s aversion to literary theory, one is tempted to interpret as a Bakhtinian gesture towards the carnivalesque³⁶ – caused much hilarity, and despite his embarrassment, he found the experience ‘instructive’ as it gave him ‘an insight into the relationship between kingship and foolery which few other professors of English can possess’.

Years later, colleagues and friends would observe in Butler’s demeanour ‘a consistent and coherent quality’ of ‘cheerful sanity and wisdom’.³⁷ Professor Butler, however, was not always comfortable with the staid, rational conduct expected of a leading academic figure. Moreover, he expressed a mild resentment at the role of the intellectual bureaucrat which, like so many leaders, he often had to play. In *A Local Habitation*, Butler conveys this frustration by reflecting on his participation in the communal threshing of wheat during a visit to a farm in Ireland after the war:

A man who is subsequently doomed to spend his life at a desk will recall with peculiar intensity moments when his body was happily engaged in physical work, especially team-work, of a kind whose significance is both ancient and contemporary.³⁸

This was not the only occasion on which Butler identified a symbolic value in the healthy physical strain of agricultural labour: ‘The haze, the rhythmical movements and the dumbness imposed by the noise produced

³⁵ *Bursting World*, p.190.

³⁶ See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1968).

³⁷ Calvin Cook, letter to Butler, 11th May 1993. NELM.

³⁸ *A Local Habitation*, p.25.

a near-hypnotic state in which I relived a similar immersion in this final ritual of harvest.³⁹ The first episode had taken place in Tuscany, a year earlier; a group of soldiers, many of them ‘of farming stock’, had pitched in to help the local farmers with a moonlight harvesting. Set against the insanity of nationalism and the war machine, the scene was one of ‘young soldiers handling the sheaves [of corn] with familiarity, rhythmically building the haystack ... driven happily lunatic by the sanity of what they were doing.’

It may be noted here that Butler’s transposition of sanity and lunacy not only complicates the differentiation of rational and irrational experience, but also undermines the neat categorisation of Europe with the former and Africa with the latter. Following the threshing on the farm in Ireland, Butler visited a pub and ‘followed the unpredictable hare of Irish conversation dodging this way and that, always escaping the boring hound-packs of rational expectation.’⁴⁰ Similarly, having described the complex rules of rowing on the Thames River in Oxford – a city that embodies both “reason”, in its culture of erudition and research, and “romance”, in terms of its aesthetic cachet – Butler concludes that people in England ‘learn and accept innumerable illogical “laws” by osmosis’.⁴¹ He adds, as an aside: ‘Their idiosyncratic spelling demonstrates this, surely.’ In earnest, however, he depicts the ‘hypnotically timed stroke’ and ‘extreme physical exertion and rhythm’ of rowing as a means of escaping the demands made by intellectual thought processes.⁴² ‘After a while ... you [only] notice the shoulders and spine of the man in front of you’; and, in the synchronicity of the eight rowers, ‘the more you forget yourself, the more you find yourself liberated.’⁴³ It is, he claims, a ‘happy near-oblivion’.

Although he seemed not to recognise it, the feeling Butler had while rowing at Oxford was, in fact, a presentiment of the powerful sensations evoked in him by the ‘hypnotic ... beautiful and magical’ ceremonies of

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.24.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.26.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.38.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.37.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.39.

drumming and dancing that he witnessed during a visit to West Africa ten years later.⁴⁴ This was the scene at a funeral in Ghana:

... song, drum and dance made a single dynamic action, created by all the participants who had lost their identity in it. They did not dance the dance, the dance danced them ... Their eyes were open but there was no observant ego in them, only a glazed communal echo.⁴⁵

Although the environment was alien to him – and one senses in his representation a desire to project onto the funeral rite some form of barbarian frenzy – it is surprising that he should assert, ‘No group of Westerners could achieve that happy self-obliteration, that immolation in community.’ After all, did not he and various other ‘Westerners’ experience ‘immolation’ in the rhythms of threshing and rowing?

(iv) *‘Live through the body’*

‘Watching the Seed-grass’ offers another example of complete immersion in physical sensation – in this instance, not through action but through passive reception:

Though light flows in and out of our faces
and cool then warm waves soak our skin
unchanged lie you and I.

...

Time for a moment is wrecked on these hills;
we lie eternal, in shade, in sun;
this place is nowhere, everywhere.⁴⁶

A number of Butler’s early poems accentuate the dominance of the senses over the intellect. Hennie van der Mescht’s study of Butler’s poetry begins with a discussion of this motif, quoting the uncollected ‘Poem’:

Live through the body. Let the sense
Receive uncensored the naked second.
Return to your flesh ...

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.219.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.227. Butler may have had in mind the question posed by Yeats in ‘Among School Children’: ‘How can we know the dancer from the dance?’ (WB Yeats, *The Poems*, p.263).

⁴⁶ Compare the words Butler gives to young Tom Stubbs in *A Rackety Colt* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 1989), describing the “eternal present” of love, or at least infatuation: ‘I sat opposite [her], for a full half an hour, blissfully happy, unthinking of past or future, simply and wildly alive in the present’ (p.29).

For what is the use of will and brain
But to serve the red red heart?⁴⁷

Van der Mescht links this to the ideas expanded upon in 'The Difficulties of Teaching a Non-Indigenous Literature' (1949): 'The five senses must be trained. No great writer is without a strong sensory equipment.'⁴⁸ In that essay, however, the emphasis is on using the senses with 'discrimination' rather than sheer abandonment to physical sensation.

If the head/heart distinction in 'Poem' is rather crude, a more composite delineation emerges in the war poetry and after:

Yes, it might be a great relief
to fill one's lungs, curse God, or die.
But cursing's passé, like belief,
and suicide's a sort of lie.
A godless Job, for all his sores,
is nothing but a bore of bores.

What then shall I do? Assume
belief in some known lie? Follow,
because the world itself seems hollow,
the smug insistence of some drum?
Or be a weathercock to show
myself which way my instincts blow?

Since all meaning's mere tradition
deriving from old altars, thrones,
submit to senses, not to sense.
Sack all those well-bred chaperones,
the prim insisters on distinctions,
maintainers of nice indifference;

escape your skull, elope with, cling
to the unashamed and naked thing;
set the ambush of your ear,
spread the white net of your skin,
and through your cool eyes' poised portcullis
entice the whole world outside in.⁴⁹

The final line encapsulates the need, as expounded in 'The Difficulties of Teaching a Non-Indigenous Literature', for poets and readers of poetry to concentrate on "sense data". In this case, however, the decision to 'submit

⁴⁷ Hennie van der Mescht, *The Poetry of Guy Butler* (Masters thesis. Rhodes University, 1980), p.15.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.8.

⁴⁹ Malan records the extract as Section VII of the awkwardly titled 'Stanzas Written in Dejection Near Naples While Recovering From a Bout of Logical Positivism', published in *Standpunte* in 1964. He dates the poem's

to senses, not to sense' is a result of the refusal to 'assume/belief in some known lie' of faith. Religious belief is conservative ('all meaning's mere tradition/deriving from old altars, thrones'); exhilaration through the senses is accompanied by an abandonment of 'sense', and thus a rejection of 'sensible' religious conviction.

Yet this line is blurred, for in other wartime poems, experiences depicted as primarily sensual – observing the natural world, or making love – are still shown to be distorted by the carnage of war. As we noted earlier, sex and death are fused in 'Bomb Casualty'. In 'Bitter Little Ballad', the beauty of nature is distorted by violence:

The sun threw shadows on the hills,
shadows of metal and mothers' sons.
The primrose split! A million wills
blossomed in bayonets, wounds and guns.

If religion is of the head and sensual delight of the heart, then what happens when both of these sources of consolation, mocked or tainted by death, are removed? The poem 'Camouflage' suggests an answer to this question, as well as an explanation for the 'callous, indifferent tone' Hennie van der Mescht identifies in much of Butler's war poetry.⁵⁰ This is the emotionless state of the soldier:

His heart has net and camouflage,
protecting him lest Pity should
sting to tears, or Fear surprise.⁵¹

The troops in 'Air Raid Before Dawn' are unmotivated – there is 'no goad/to be going and getting things done at all'. Looking on at rural scenes that should brighten or comfort them, they feel 'like ghosts at a window pane/who watch the hearth, but remain unknown' (Geoffrey Hutchings considers this the focal image of Butler's war poetry).⁵² The ghostlike, war-weary soldier is only half alive; or, as 'From a War Diary:

composition to 1953, but the content and tone of this extract place it with Butler's religious disillusionment during the 1940s.

⁵⁰ *The Poetry of Guy Butler*, p.31.

⁵¹ Tony Voss suggests that the changes in voice from first to third person reflect the 'deprivations and distortions of war' ('Thank You and I'm Sorry': 231).

Beyond Verona' has it, 'I wait, alive, technically alive, feeling/no gratitude, detached from passions shaking the world.'⁵³ This emotional and spiritual alienation is emphasised in 'Letter from Monte Stanco'. As the speaker addresses his mother, the pathos of his fear is curbed because he and his companions are mere 'shadows':

shadows are men to the end of time,
who can't care much if the end of the climb
is Golgotha's hill or the hill of the Ark;
a shadow with shadows I walk alone.

This letter-poem gives vent to the loneliness of separation from home and from the familiar. Van der Mescht claims of Butler's evocation of "mindlessness" or mere physical feeling that 'an experience is rarely seen as a moment or two in isolation, severed from past or future'; but he also acknowledges that, when it comes to the war poetry, 'the power of the humanising image from the past, the recollection of home, and the moment of passion seems to wane.'⁵⁴ Yet in the otherwise unremarkable 'Killing the Time before the Time of Killing', while the speaker is

Oblivious to the clash of voices,
unconscious of the noose of heat,
reading a letter from home, apart,
I know my soul to be my own again
by the tension and turmoil in my heart.

The heart that feels 'tension and turmoil' is not the same as the heart that lives only 'through the body'. To 'submit to senses' is to risk the exclusion of emotion and thought, which is to dehumanise. The speaker-subject of 'On the Brink' has

All but lost
Awareness of being. No pain, no joy
Except of the body.

⁵² See Geoffrey Hutchings, 'Ghost at a Window Pane: The War Poetry of Guy Butler', *English in Africa* 15 (2, October 1988): 25-38.

⁵³ The diction is ambiguous. Here, the 'passions shaking the world' – hatred, fear, a desire for retribution – are in fact at odds with the life-giving passions of love or lust; as Brink notes, in Butler's poetry the 'almost frantic belief in passion' is a form of protest against 'the ruination of vitality and creativity by war' (*Three South African English Poets*, p.175).

This is a dangerous state – as dangerous as the “rational” ideologies against which we are warned in Lionel Abrahams’ poem ‘The Lustful Mind’:

... chaste deliberate machines,
the merciless idea, the cold ideal
equip the factories of war.

If the separation of head and heart is a cause of war, then war causes those involved in it to separate themselves from their emotions.

Butler describes this separation in *Bursting World*: ‘this remoteness, this detachment, this divorce between heart and head ... perhaps our species in its fight for survival had developed this disconnecting reflex, automatic during war’.⁵⁵ In ‘Elegy’, meditating on the death of a childhood friend and fellow-soldier, the poet is caught between a reluctant acknowledgement of the necessity for this ‘disconnecting reflex’ and a strong desire to preserve or nurture intense emotion. He observes himself as one of the ten mourners attending the funeral who, ‘like weathered statues on a temple wall’, form ‘a well-spaced frieze’ – reflecting bitterly that ‘no private cries/must interrupt a soldier’s funeral’ (I.iii). Although the soldiers are there together, they feel alone: ‘Though each knew him, bare seas and endless sands/divide our hearts, exiled and set adrift’ (I.v). This division is compulsory, because if they spoke to one another, shared memories of the deceased, or showed any emotion,

a common chord would stun the watching nerves,
and every heart, giving tumultuous word

to pent-up joy and largesse of our lives,
would rise to smash the stone, but saving, wall.
Far better each one separately grieves.

Beware of contact. Sing no hymn at all.
Forget the others. Be a single stake,
be driven deep to mark his burial.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ *The Poetry of Guy Butler*, p.15 and p.31.

⁵⁵ *Bursting World*, p.249.

⁵⁶ Malan also links the ‘disconnecting reflex’ or ‘censor at the door of the heart’ described in *Bursting World* with the determined emotional occlusion of ‘Elegy’, and marks the significance of the war in Butler’s shifting poetic vocabulary: ‘In Butler’s pre-war poems “the will” is simply equated with the brain or reason’ (set in opposition to the body or heart); in the war poems, however, ‘it is presented as a deeper-lying force that contrives a divorce between the heart and the head’ (*Guy Butler: Poet and Dramatist*, p.168). See also stanza

In the midst of the poet's restrained grief, however, memory imposes itself in the form of childhood recollections. The exile is reminded of home, and the effect of this reminder is profound; although the ceremony is finished and the soldier-mourners return to their roles as 'dull baggage mules beneath the war god's goad',

Heart cannot be
so simply silenced, simply satisfied,

heart has its own reasons ...

(IV.i)

Here the poet asserts his feelings, demands at least a degree of emotion – if only to feel grief. Despite the rituals of burial, however, despite even the 'deep lament' (I.v) sung by the poet, it is inevitable that the dead man will be forgotten; soon he will be nothing more than 'some small fragment of a song one hears/struck from the heart's erratic old guitar'. Instead of being resurrected in memory, he will undergo a 'second death/by scurvy in our minds' (IV.vi).

Following this final rejection of solace, the poem reaches an ambiguous conclusion. Although, as in much of his war poetry, Butler expresses an agnostic distrust of God (early in the poem he despairs that he is not 'blessed with genuine belief' in 'a Christian or a Pagan Muse', I.iii), in the last stanza he resigns himself to faith as the only possible, distant, source of comfort:

... I have failed, am lost, must blindly grope
through slums and deserts of my heart, and fall
into the shame of impossible hope;

drowning in myself, must cry and call
across the seas and continents and skies
for One who walks the waves of burial.

(IV.vi)

four of 'Bitter Little Ballad', quoted above, and the emphasis in 'Letter from Monte Stanco' on 'the same one weapon, the human will'. This notion seems, in turn, to have been reformulated in the 1950s: elsewhere Malan comments that in *Judith*, "the will" is equated with "self-will", which 'contends with God for the soul of man' – the sensuality so strongly advocated in the pre-war poems instead creates a spiritual dilemma, as 'physical beauty and sexual passion strengthen the hand of "the will"' (p.35).

The poem was, of course, under continual revision until it appeared in its final form in *Collected Poems*. The Christian volte-face of the last three lines may be part of a later amendment and consequently less convincing in contrast to much of the poem's content, but it seems nevertheless to be an honest attempt on the poet's part to locate a pivotal point in his own spiritual journey: the (partly reluctant) submission, not to sense, but to Christ.

(v) The faith-reason opposition

'Christmas 1944: Castiglioni Dei Pepoli' is a poem of deep spiritual despair. Looking across a valley at a hilltop – a Golgotha of rock, 'the summit's skull/seizing the sky with its ragged fangs' – Butler is unable to imagine a victorious resurrection and simply concedes defeat:

harder than these ragged teeth of stone
in me lies faith a scattered skeleton,
Christ's cross burning, Bethlehem in ruin.⁵⁷

If this seems apathetic compared to the will expressed in 'Elegy' to 'cry and call' for God's help, then 'On the Brink' is explicitly defiant. The speaker in the latter poem declares, with the adamant hubris of a rationalised agnosticism, 'I'll set no course for worlds which can't be seen.'

After returning to South Africa from the war and the stint at Oxford, however, 'deeply influenced by the fathers under the leadership of Trevor Huddleston', Butler decided to "set his course" according to the words of the writer to the Hebrews: 'Faith is the evidence of things unseen.'⁵⁸ It was a conscious choice, the "leap of faith" advocated by Kierkegaard, who conceded that in a world of manifest suffering and uncertainty – *angst* – it does not make rational sense to believe in Divine salvation. Indeed, the

⁵⁷ Akal makes the useful point that 'the manner in which [Butler] has arrived at this conclusion of faith lost' is through Christian icons and images 'which almost presuppose a belief in the retention of their mythical power and efficacy'; likewise in 'After an Atrocity', even in 'the act of apostasy', the Crucifixion and other biblical references predominate (*Forms of Community Service*, pp.224-225). Akal thus seems to downplay the profundity of Butler's spiritual crisis in the 1940s. Malan, on the other hand, extends it into the 1950s. If we take Butler at his word, however, his experiences in Johannesburg in the early 1950s led to something of a rejuvenation in his religious convictions.

⁵⁸ *The Prophetic Nun*, p.15. The Biblical reference is to Hebrews 11:1.

existence of God cannot be rationally proven; notwithstanding which, faith in Christ is a reality that changes lives, and is therefore to be grasped irrespective of the dictates of reason.⁵⁹

This conception of faith in opposition to reason drives the action of Butler's first play, *The Dam* (1953), and is the chief motivation of its protagonist, Douglas Long. The play, written in the early 1950s, gave Butler an opportunity to present 'my own interior struggles' on stage.⁶⁰ It is loosely based on the actual construction of a dam at "De Vrede", the Karoo farm on which he spent many childhood holidays. His uncle, Frank Biggs, was determined to build a dam to ensure a constant water supply; the project was written off by many as impossible but, after initial attempts failed, the dam was successfully completed. This narrative is the vehicle for Butler's treatment of various issues: race relations, ecological questions, the place of the white man in Africa and the problem of belonging. Through all this, the central theme is Christian faith as a source of hope, reconciliation and charity.

During the course of the play, we become aware that Long is somehow "unstable". It transpires that he and his wife, Jane, have become estranged. His psychologist brother, Dr Robert Long – who attempts to initiate an affair with Jane – diagnoses Douglas with a pseudo-Freudian complex resulting from unresolved maternal and fraternal trauma, but the root cause of his instability is a spiritual dilemma. He is described by various characters as balancing on a precipice. Kaspar and Katrina, the coloured servants, imagine him stumbling from a 'dizzy height' and worry about 'how close he is to the edge'.⁶¹ Jane laments that life with Douglas is like 'a place of heights/and depths, of dizzy perpendiculars'; she recounts his strange dreams, in which 'he walks a vague abysmal ridge' and sometimes, attacked by a 'faceless figure', 'plunges down the abyss'.⁶² This vertigo, in Sartrean terms, is a confrontation with the possibility that there is no God, no safety-net of belief; this frees the individual to choose his or

⁵⁹ This idea is challenged by the argument that a conception of God as representing or being represented by those things we cannot explain in rational terms means that, as rationally constructed scientific or philosophical models improve, our need to acknowledge God decreases.

⁶⁰ *The Prophetic Nun*, p.95.

⁶¹ Butler, *The Dam*, p.10 and p.23.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp.14-15. It is interesting to note the name, perhaps coincidental, of a farm in the Eastern Cape not far from Grahamstown: "Douglas Heights".

her own course, but also imposes the burden of absolute responsibility for those choices. According to Waynflete, the would-be Mephistophelean villain of the piece, Douglas should not feel too sorry for his personal precipitous fears: all people, in ‘the iron age’ of the twentieth century, ‘twist drunkenly/Upon the edge of the abyss’.⁶³ Waynflete declares that this spiritual doubt is an affliction of both ‘blond and black’. The coloured characters in the play are variously and vaguely associated with Christianity, fate, superstition and even ghosts, so that they too must confront the primitive, uncontrollable force of ‘depths’ which both threaten and comfort. These convoluted images of heights and depths, probably a result of the play’s thematic over-ambition, are not easily disentangled.

It is clear that Butler saw in the precipice a powerful metaphor for religious doubt.⁶⁴ About ten years after *The Dam* was written, the misgivings of the tortured Douglas Long were expressed more lucidly in the poem ‘Mountain’:

standing alone and still
 where the edge of the great escarpment plunged to the plains,
 fearful of further falling in a fallen world,
 I tabled my little problem before the Mountain-maker
 ...
 These are my current vertiginous terrors.
 Am I guilty of vainglory in mentioning them?
 You alone can know if my hunger for poise is just,
 know I am held from falling
 by a tension of forces I can’t pretend to know.

Crucially, this mountain is no Sinai, and God does not manifest Himself in thunder, wind, fire or word – ‘I heard no still small voice; only the mountain silence’ – but the poet is granted fleeting access to an elemental transcendence:

For a moment all concern for myself dissolved.
 ...

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p.43.

⁶⁴ Discussing ‘An Aspect of Tragedy’ (a lecture contemporaneous with *The Dam*), Akal quotes the near-Manichean assertion that great dramatists ‘give us a revelation of evil, evil as against what is merely wrong or socially reprehensible’, because ‘evil exists’; Butler’s choice of imagery is revealing: ‘Evil is real: the abyss is there’ (see *Forms of Community Service*, p.19). As Malan has noted, however, in Butler’s plays evil ‘is usually represented in cosmological, or ontological, or metaphorical terms, but is rarely translated into its dramatic or social manifestations’ – a feature he considers a weakness of the playwright (*Guy Butler: Poet and Dramatist*, p.235).

For a moment, a moment only
I was
on the rock
in the sun.

I came down from the mountain, unweighted
by tablets of law, more giddy than ever.

This non-moment (in which, it seems, he has accepted again a salvation that is neither rational nor methodical – there are no ‘tablets of law’) allows him to make a candid affirmation:

Frequently now I catch myself off balance,
tempted to take the wings of the morning or dive
to the uttermost parts of the sea.
Perhaps that moment which refused so firmly
to be a turning point
should be the only point
round which my life should turn;
perhaps God is neither old nor young;
in depth or in height. He simply is,
and we,
when we accept Him simply,
are.⁶⁵

Douglas Long achieves a similar point of calm acceptance, but his epiphany comes amid thunder and lightning. His dream of the dam has been destroyed by early rain, and he rages like Lear at the tempest. Having rejected God, he is ready to throw himself off the cliff – perhaps Butler also had Gloucester in mind – but his suicide is prevented by the symbolic appearance of Kaspar (the faithful coloured manservant becomes a companion, comfort, guide) and they pray together. Long’s faith is restored and he is strengthened in his resolve to rebuild the dam. Upon his descent from the mountain, the other characters don’t know what to make of his rediscovered faith. It seems, to them, madness – as insane as his plans to rebuild the dam. According to Robert, Douglas’ conviction is, at best, ‘a last-ditch stand, a desperate dream/That God still lives and cares’; at worst, it may be that God is ‘simply a mask for his own will’.⁶⁶ Robert had earlier upheld ‘the sane’, who ‘prefer to wear a mask whose set

⁶⁵ This is a markedly different tone to the post-war disillusionment of ‘Homecoming’, in which the speaker mourns how his ‘relish for heights has gone’.

⁶⁶ *The Dam*, p.57 and p.48.

expressions/Secure the heart from the horrors of surprise'; yet his feelings for Jane force him to question 'the sanity of self-control' even as he alleges that 'human loves/Of any sort are treacherous' and that 'Christian love demands too much of the heart.'⁶⁷ In the midst of Robert's pedantic quibbling, it is Susan, the Longs' daughter, who speaks with the greatest conviction. Susan shares her father's faith and, adapting Robert's distinction, goes so far as to suggest that Christ himself 'is, in fact, insane' because 'He wore no mask, he set no limits to loving.'

The Christian message of redemption, hope and compassion forms the fabric of the play and is necessary to its conclusion, a refutation of the 'all the seeming sane'. Faith is offered as a cure-all, preferable to (or at least compatible with) Existentialist or political freedom. Jane, who had earlier wished to be 'free' but could not 'gag' the 'ceaseless nagging in [her] soul', is reconciled to her husband and to the possibility of religious rejuvenation.⁶⁸ Susan 'rejects a romantic pastoral marriage' in favour of a life of selfless devotion 'to improving the lot of the people living in black urban slums': she will take Christian compassion to the townships of Johannesburg, working as a missionary among the oppressed.⁶⁹

There is some inconsistency, however, in the faith-reason opposition and, given the metaphysical subject matter under discussion, the present author perhaps has a duty to play the devil's advocate. The satanic argument runs as follows. Long-as-Butler in *The Dam* and Butler-as-speaker in 'Mountain' are, finally, secure in their beliefs. Precipitous uncertainties are dissolved: Long's despair is turned to quiet determination; Butler's 'vertiginous terrors' are assuaged, and he can 'accept God simply'. Doesn't this "blessed assurance", as the famous hymn has it, betray the confidence of the rationalist? We may refer, by way of contrast, to one of Hopkins' "terrible sonnets", 'No worst, there is none'. In that poem, the Christian crisis is also set in a landscape of terrifying heights and depths:

O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.34-35.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p.40.

⁶⁹ *The Prophetic Nun*, p.95.

Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap
May who ne'er hung there. Nor does long our small
Durance deal with that steep or deep.⁷⁰

The poem does not, however, reach a comforting resolution; the only relief offered is that 'all/Life death does end and each day dies with sleep.' We have already seen that Butler's own poetry, when he inclines towards "narration" from an authoritative or moralist stance, lacks the "fresh" quality he praised in Hopkins. In this instance, comparing Hopkins' and Butler's treatments of 'vertiginous terrors' – the former remaining deeply embroiled in spiritual crisis, the latter concluding with poise – we see the tendency towards "rational" confidence in the final stanza of 'Mountain' accompanied by a lack of auditory imagination.

(vi) *'The madness of loving' and 'the madness of violence'*

The eponymous hero of *Richard Gush of Salem* (written in 1970 and considered by Butler to be his best play) also maintains a faith that is regarded by his peers as irrational and insane.⁷¹ The mercurial Charlie sums him up in the Epilogue: 'Old Gush was odd; his passion for God/Shows how his wits was weak.'⁷² Gush propagates a teetotal, puritan anti-materialism that makes him seem austere and even morally supercilious, but he is also a loving, forgiving and generous man. His pacifist Quaker convictions are apparently inappropriate to life in a frontier town; when the settler community of Salem is about to be attacked by warriors from a local Xhosa tribe, he refuses to take arms and defend the town or join the laager planned by the townsfolk. Separated from his wife, family and friends, he is forced to question the validity of his beliefs. In justifying them, he resorts to Kierkegaard's argument: it is necessary to follow God's word, to serve Him – to wait for the 'still, small voice' – in spite of his own better judgement.⁷³

Gush is told that the camp in Salem is split between 'those who

⁷⁰ Hopkins, 'No worst, there is none', *Poems and Prose*, p.61.

⁷¹ Butler, letter to Denis Davison, 20th Jan 1990: 'Under plays I rate Richard Gush of Salem as my best.'
NELM.

⁷² Butler, *Richard Gush of Salem*, p.71.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p.61.

think you're holy, and those who think you're mad'.⁷⁴ Some fear 'he's out of his mind', while some maintain 'he's sane enough'.⁷⁵ George Dennison, an alcoholic swindler whose hedonistic bravado undermines Gush's religiosity, accuses him of 'spiritual intoxication': 'take a good swig of God,' he mocks.⁷⁶ In moments of crisis, however, Gush is not cushioned but challenged by his Christian faith. 'The Bible,' he claims, 'leaves me stone cold sober.'⁷⁷ This is because George is as much *doppelganger* to Gush as he is antagonist. Gush is tempted to be unfaithful to his wife, Margaret, but this would be to act like George, who does not demonstrate any responsibility in his marriage to Hannah. Similarly, Gush is so ardent a pacifist precisely because he recognises in himself a latent blood-lust. He tells his son Joseph how, many years ago, he once attacked a man who had 'made a grab' at Margaret:

I wanted to kill him, Joseph. If they hadn't pulled me off, I'd have done it. They locked me in the cellar to cool off – in the stink of my own blood and the sour wine casks. In the early morning they let me out. I went to the well to wash. My shirt was glued to my skin with blood. When I walked away my footprints were red in the snow ... Many can go into the laager thinking they're doing a right and simple thing: but for me – Deliver me from blood-guiltiness, O God!⁷⁸

An awareness of his own sinful nature ('we're fallen creatures, alas') fires Gush's hostility to intemperance and profligacy ('being ourselves regardless').⁷⁹ The strictness of his religious practice helps him to control himself; he will not abandon himself to instinct or follow the young poet Butler's exhortation to 'submit to senses'.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p.59.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p.52.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p.16. Akal considers the portrayal of Dennison's character an instance of 'the liberal-humanists's penchant for seeing Good and Evil as two entirely separate conditions as opposed to the Modernist who sees them rather as two inextricably intertwined states of good-in-evil and evil-in-good' (*Forms of Community Service*, p.118). This does not seem fair. Dennison may not be a likeable character, but he is not an allegorical figure; Gush recognises some of Dennison's less salubrious traits in himself – 'evil-in-good' – but his attempts to suppress them are not modelled on Everyman's resistance to temptation in the morality play tradition. Nevertheless, Akal suggests an interesting reading of the Dennison-Gush opposition: the two characters may be seen to 'represent, symbolically, the two axes, one good, one bad, from which the ESSAs have descended ... the 1820 roots have produced a moral mixture' resulting in (he uses Memmi's terms) 'some colonisers who "accept" and some who "reject" the tenets of a rapine colonialism' (p.120).

⁷⁷ *Richard Gush of Salem*, p.61.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.50-51.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.5-6.

As the play bears out, the “madness” of Gush’s Quakerism (‘that angular and admirable faith’, as Butler describes it in his introduction) in fact allows wisdom and sanity to prevail.⁸⁰ *Richard Gush of Salem* is, after all, a retelling of an actual event: in 1835, Gush went out with white flag to meet the advancing Xhosa chiefs, pleaded for a truce, and achieved a measure of peace and reconciliation. By contrast, the laager mentality of the Salem community, prefiguring white South Africa circa 1970, is shown to be the “mad” response to situations of conflict.

Madness is the key word in Butler’s second play, *The Dove Returns* (1956). Also based on an historical incident, the play is set on a farm in the Free State at the time of the “Anglo-Boer” wars. Butler described it as ‘a tragedy with a hopeful epilogue of reconciliation’: a British officer and the son of an Afrikaner commandant are killed, but the fervour of national hatred and the rancour of bereavement give way to kindness, forgiveness and the recognition of individual dignity – the bodies are buried side by side in a family graveyard. The play is characterised by the madness of grief, maddening crises of conscience, the madness of alcoholism and spiritual thirst and, ultimately, by the balance of ‘the madness of loving’ with ‘the madness of violence’.⁸¹

The word is perhaps over-used in the play, but it does acquire symbolic weight. Karel Van Heerden, the Boer commandant, made desperate by British tactics such as the “scorched earth” campaign and by the phenomenon of the concentration camps, declares that ‘their madness is driving me mad!’⁸² Aletta, his daughter, wants to elope with Jim Shaw, the “colonial” operating as a scout for the British: ‘Is it wrong to desert this madness?’ she asks.⁸³ Yet she also knows that ‘to love an Englishman, an enemy’ would be seen as ‘romantic madness’ by her family.⁸⁴ Aletta is disturbed by the pseudo-biblical, self-righteous nationalism of the Boers – ‘I couldn’t bear it, all/That mad excitement’ – but her misgivings are balanced by the questions raised by Paul, her brother, about the moral

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p.viii.

⁸¹ Butler, *The Dove Returns* (Cape Town: Balkema, 1956), p.27. Akal discusses the opposition of love and violence as it is expressed in the bird symbolism implied in the title and used throughout the play (as, in fact, it is across Butler’s oeuvre). See *Forms of Community Service*, pp.59-62.

⁸² *The Dove Returns*, p.13.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p.23.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p.44.

justification of British imperialism: 'Who but a madman wants the world?'⁸⁵ Gracy, a conscientious British Lieutenant charged with the unenviable task of burning down Boer homesteads, wishes that the world 'would cease to whirl so madly.'⁸⁶ He has seen men dead on both sides, including the son of his General; when he came across the vulture-ridden corpse, 'the old man's face was broken, and cruel, / And slightly mad as he turned from the grave.'⁸⁷ Sarah, the redoubtable matriarch of the Van Heerden farm, as a staunch Boer loyalist with an apparently impassive attitude to the necessities of warfare, is puzzled by Gracy's anguish over his complicity in the suffering of others: 'I think,' she whispers to Aletta, 'this one's a little mad.'⁸⁸ Gracy admits to divided loyalties. On his father's side, he is descended from a line of patriotic military men, but on his mother's side,

... over my left shoulder,
The side of my heart, you will see
A woman reading a madman, William Blake:
A placid face, a nagging conscience.

Militarism and anti-militarism are, it seems, equally mad. In the play's penultimate scene, set four years after the deaths of Paul and Gracy, Shaw (who very likely killed Paul) returns to the farm to make peace with the Van Heerdens. Simon, the coloured servant, tells Shaw he 'must be mad' to visit the farm in the hope of reconciliation.⁸⁹ Sarah assents to meet with Shaw, but his presence is so painful to her that she soon regrets it: 'I was mad to send for you.'⁹⁰ The play concludes, however, with the madness of love and forgiveness triumphing over the madness of resentment and violence.

The exception is Simon, who, Butler stresses in *A Local Habitation*, 'refuses to be a party to the happy white ending'.⁹¹ Simon is left 'drunk, mad and dreaming' – the disillusioned, dislocated victim of an enduring

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p.26 and p.33.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p.46.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p.33.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p.46.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p.61.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.78.

⁹¹ *A Local Habitation*, p.200.

stigma, reminding white audiences of a racial antagonism more extreme than that between English and Afrikaner.⁹² Butler penned the character of Simon in the hope that his predicament would echo the ‘political crisis over the removal of the coloured voters from the common roll’, but (as with the uncertain position of the coloured characters in *The Dam*, Susan’s description of the townships at the end of that play, and indeed the appearance of the Xhosa warriors in *Richard Gush of Salem*) the “non-white issues” remain peripheral.⁹³

Many critics have found the three plays discussed above dissatisfying, lacking dramatic or visual intensity and burdened by a surfeit of material and theme. The proclivity towards metaphysical speculation in the style of Eliot’s verse-drama does not fuse easily with the plays’ vague allusions to contemporary politics, located as they are in specific places in an historical past. Whatever their shortcomings, however, they articulate certain preoccupations expressed by Butler in other literary genres, and in this way complement poetry, autobiography and even academic prose.⁹⁴ We can see, for example, how the two plays written in the ten years following the Second World War draw on the same well of experience as ‘Elegy’ or the wartime *Bursting World*. As *The Dove Returns* opens, Karel Van Heerden, battle-weary, having returned to a wife from whom he is emotionally distant, is inclined to give up on the communicative effort: he realises that ‘words are useless’ in moments of

⁹² *The Dove Returns*, p.64.

⁹³ For further discussion of contentious representations of race in Butler’s plays, see Chapter Four (I), Chapter Five (II) and Chapter Six (II).

⁹⁴ Malan suggests that the leading characters in these plays in fact resemble their creator too closely: they ‘give voice to the feelings and the expressed beliefs of their maker, and so inevitably fail to convince as independent characters’ (*Guy Butler: Poet and Dramatist*, p.235). This is no doubt one cause of the ‘entrenched self-consciousness of the protagonists’ which is often ‘incompatible with their professed quest for selflessness’ (p.37); it also explains why, at times in Butler’s plays, ‘the feelings expressed are in excess of the facts as they appear onstage’ – Eliot’s “objective correlative” is missing, as Christina van Heyningen first noted (see Malan, pp.27-28). Arguably, the chief value of *The Dam* and *The Dove Returns* is as forerunners of formalised indigenous South African theatre (that is to say, drama with South African content specifically written for the stage and performed by professional actors). ‘When Butler began writing his first play’, suggests Akal, ‘he was entering into uncharted literary waters’ for a South African writer (*Forms of Community Service*, pp.16-17). Akal nevertheless maintains that ‘a case could be made for a greater scrutiny of [Butler’s] plays’ insofar as they ‘have much to offer the serious literary critic’ (p.14). Also worth noting is Don Maclennan’s idea that ‘Butler’s best poems always owe a great deal to drama’, in, for example, their psychological penetration or their descriptions of settings as ‘theatres for personal drama’ (‘The Poetry of Guy Butler’, p.203). Furthermore, although whether for better or worse Maclennan does not say, ‘the engagement with drama had a loosening-up effect on poetic discourse by moving it towards the rhythms and diction of living speech’ (p.208).

heightened emotion.⁹⁵ Lieutenant Gracy of 1901 is, in many ways, Captain Butler of 1944. 'If only one could switch off thought/While waiting to act!' complains Gracy; to which Sarah responds, 'You think too much for a soldier.'⁹⁶ These lines remind us of the 'disconnecting reflex' developed by Butler in order to survive the futility and the folly of war. For Gracy, the death of a close friend ended the consolation of 'traditions, sentiments, hopes and dreams' and removed the assurance that

Somewhere, vague and a little removed perhaps
Was a power who cared about everything
At the heart of things a heart was beating.
Quite suddenly that heart has stopped ...

and Gracy has become (like the soldiers in 'Letter from Monte Stanco') an automaton:

One's limbs merely fit together, like parts
Of a machine, they don't belong any more.
Dress, I say to my body. It dresses.
Open, I say to my fist. It opens.
March, I say to my men. They march.⁹⁷

This spiritual vacuum can only be filled by the irrational Christian faith of Douglas Long and Richard Gush, as professed by Butler in 'Why I am a Christian':

When I say the [Nicean] creed, "I believe", I am not only declaring a deep affinity between my heart and mind and a set of incredibly difficult-to-accept propositions, I am saying that I do not *know* those propositions to be true ... In any belief there is a measure of profound doubt, which is overcome by faith.⁹⁸

In Butler's earlier writing, the alternating portrayals of religious conviction as a conscious choice suggest it to be either a reasoned resignation to observe 'tradition' or an unreasonable but passionate leap of faith; in 'Why I am a Christian', speaking as a mature and distinguished

⁹⁵ *The Dove Returns*, p.18. By contrast, in *The Dam*, Dr Robert, the rationalist, mistakenly thinks that 'Words take the edge off pain' (p.37). This psychologist's aphorism is of no comfort to Douglas.

⁹⁶ *The Dove Returns*, p.37.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.47-48.

⁹⁸ 'High Corner (13)', p.42.

church figure, he maintains that Christianity is of the heart and not of the head. Yet despite this association, and notwithstanding the assertion that ‘the great sense-maker of life is not intellect but the heart’, Butler warned that the dictates of the heart can also be dangerous, threatening and violent. Fear, prejudice, nationalism: these are ‘matters of feeling, full of irrationalities’.⁹⁹ This caveat emphasises knowledge and wisdom as necessary companions to faith and feeling. In politically divisive matters, ‘when emotion takes precedence over conscience and reason, the individual or the society goes mad.’ Racial hatred is one extreme of unquestioned and unquestioning emotion:

...to say that my nationalism is more important than my humanity, is to be irrational, to claim a superior racial status, or to deny the universal nature of man. If the final court of appeal is to be feeling, no understanding is possible.

A paradox is presented. We must embrace those attributes of the heart – ‘love, affection, loyalty, faith, hope’ – that allow us to recognise the humanity in others, but we must also use our reason to surmount those emotions – such as fear and hatred – that distance us from “the other”.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Butler, ‘The Development of a South African National Character’, pp.93-94.

¹⁰⁰ This echoes the sentiments expressed by Wordsworth in the 1805 *Prelude*: man can be a ‘creature divine,/In single or in social eminence’ only when ‘reason, which enables him to be,/Is not sequestered’; it is through reason that the necessary balance can be found between youthful ‘passion’ – a solitary, sense-driven experience – and the ‘second love’ – the love for one’s fellow human beings. (*The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth *et al* (New York: Norton, 1979), X:380-394, p.380.)

CHAPTER FOUR

I African and European

(i) Noble savagery

The multivalence of “madness” in *The Dove Returns*, as discussed in the previous chapter, yields one further manifestation of the rational-irrational syndrome: the circumstances of war, we are told, seem ‘bent on changing/Civilised people into savages’.¹ Such self-conscious, sardonic references to the associations on which the Apollo-Dionysus model is often seen to depend have the effect of softening its implicit racial stereotyping – the equation of Europeans with civilisation and Africans with savagery is undermined while the very idea of being ‘civilised’ is manipulated. A similar example is quoted in *A Local Habitation*. Butler, speaking at a symposium on university apartheid organised by the Rhodes SRC, concludes a lengthy speech on the inevitability of a mixed society in South Africa with the provocative statement,

I would prefer my descendents to be coffee-coloured and civilised, rather than to be white and barbaric. It seems to me that the more conscious of our whiteness we become, the easier we find it to pass uncivilised and uncivilising laws.²

In his Introduction to *English and South Africa*, Butler identifies a tradition of ‘two opposed views of the black African – the noble savage, highly romantic and tinged with the primitivism of JJ Rousseau; and the barbarian, pagan victim of witchcraft, treacherous and cruel.’³ In making the above comments on “civilisation”, Butler was clearly distancing himself from the latter view. Elsewhere he invoked the former view with irony, as when, in his 1820 settler play *Take Root or Die* (1970), Scots Lieutenant and would-be explorer of the interior Donald Moodie reflects:

¹ Butler, *The Dove Returns*, p.36. Insofar as the Anglo-Boer conflict in the play echoes Butler’s own war experience, this inversion echoes that in ‘Karoo Town, 1939’ identified by Don MacLennan: Europe’s wartime ‘demand’ to the residents of the (African) town is ‘no longer cultural or civilising, but primitive and dangerous’ (‘The Poetry of Guy Butler’, p.200).

² Butler, *A Local Habitation*, p.165.

There is nothing offensive in the simple manners of the savage. He is never vulgar; his armed figure encircled by his dogs; his graceful motions when in pursuit of game. His frank manner and bold approach, are all noble and in keeping with the surrounding region; the great plains sweeping to an horizon of snow-capped mountains.⁴

Once reminded of the difficulties of frontier life, however, Moodie apologises for his hyperbole: 'I am sorry, I have been ... er ... thoughtless, romantic.'

Moodie is talking to Lucy Stubbs, wife of Coombs Valley settler John Stubbs, and their children at a time of crisis in the Stubbs family. Desperate after numerous agricultural failures, John has joined a party of illegal traders travelling to the Xhosa in the Fish River area; it fails fatally, and his dead body is carried onstage. Butler was quite taken with the drama he had created in this scene – which is not to be found in the original *Reminiscences* of Thomas Stubbs – and it is repeated, almost to the word, in *A Rackety Colt*. In the latter text, the extravagant description is attributed not to Moodie but to Lieutenant Cowper Rose, whose *Four Years in Southern Africa* (1829) was one of the key firsthand accounts to which Butler turned for historical source material.⁵ That he should borrow the extract again after a gap of twenty years suggests a vested interest in Cowper's view, even if it is 'highly romantic' and 'tinged with primitivism'. Both deliberately and inadvertently (one might say, both with and without sarcasm), Butler adopted and applied the idea of the 'noble savage' in his self-constitution and, indeed, in his political attitudes.

A chapter in *Karoo Morning* provides a few vivid glimpses of the six months Butler spent in Natal, attending a Quaker boarding-school at Inchanga. Often in this particular volume of his autobiography, the narrative style blurs the distinction between the impressions of the young, experiencing Butler, aged fourteen, and the informed opinions of the sixty-year-old recollector of events. Thus, when we read about Butler and his

³ Butler, Introduction to *English and South Africa*, ed. Alan Lennox-Short (Cape Town: Nasou, 1972), p.6. The 'highly romantic' version of Rousseau's 'primitivism' is, of course, inconsistent with his rationalist leanings – see the discussion of Zygmunt Bauman's *Legislators and Interpreters* (1987) in Section II below.

⁴ Butler, *Take Root or Die* (Cape Town: Balkema, 1970), p.67.

⁵ See Rose's *Four Years in Southern Africa* (London: Colburn and Bentley, 1829), pp.70-95 for an instance of his "recollections" in this regard.

school companions encountering three young Zulu girls bathing naked in an upland pool ('They look very beautiful ... the sun transforming the wet on their brown skins to quicksilver, highlighting all that is feminine about them') we cannot be sure which Butler it is who reflects: 'They are not embarrassed, as we are. Are they still alive with Eve in Eden, unashamed of their sex?'⁶ There is a similar uncertainty regarding the assertions in the following passage, as Butler and a friend are sitting on a high cliff, looking down over the Valley of a Thousand Hills:

Through the late afternoon air voices reach us, the clear primary vowel sounds of Zulu.
'How their voices carry,' I say.
'They live in the open all their lives – mouths like megaphones,' says Charles.⁷

The conversational style of four men 'in tribal dress' is then described in enthusiastic prose, as is the effect of the midday angelus ringing out from the mission station. Across the valley, those who have been influenced by the Christianity of the West (in this case, Catholicism) stop their activities to pray. The 'musical valley-to-valley conversation' of the Zulu tribesmen continues, however: 'Why should it stop? Why should they hail the Virgin? ... Like the girls in the stream, they seem pre-lapsarian.' Butler – now very clearly commenting in retrospect – concludes:

In my adolescent ignorance and arrogance, the inheritance of the pagan Zulu seemed to me preferable to my own. I had discovered an imprisoned noble savage in myself, and would have liked to liberate him, to go bathing naked with black girls in a brilliant pool. Though I quickly repressed the fantasy, I knew that there was something naked and disobedient deep inside me.

It is significant that Butler distances his (ostensibly wiser and more humble) older self from the 'ignorance and arrogance' of a youthful identification with noble savagery. Was it ignorant and arrogant to uphold an outdated image of a 'pagan Zulu'? Or is Butler suggesting that he had yet to become fully aware of his proud "European" inheritance? The passage is ambiguous. Despite partly dissociating himself from his

⁶ Butler, *Karoo Morning*, p.174.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.175.

adolescence, Butler does not say 'I *thought* I had discovered an imprisoned noble savage within myself' or 'I *imagined* that there was something naked and disobedient deep inside me'; rather, he suggests that the internal glimmerings of the *primaeval* have remained with him throughout his life. These images surface again and again in his writing, powerful but puzzling. The poem 'Whoever-Whatever-You-Are', written when Butler was seventy years old, acknowledges his 'long-term inmates' ('old flames and infantile fears', experiences and memories of the past) but insists that there is much he has yet to discover about his Jungian self:

Beyond the frontiers of my skin
a continent of naked tribes, strange beasts,
sources of hidden rivers.
I know it is there, but how can I explore it?

The same conceit drives the poem 'Livingstone Crosses Africa: 1856', in which the Van der Postian venture to – and through – the interior is both a literal mapping of unfamiliar territory and an exploration of the self.⁸

The noble savage motif is employed by Butler both as a tool of self-speculation, or philosophical investigation, and to configure the confrontation of cultures and races. There is a latent noble savage, he suggests, in everyone. This is to be celebrated, but not with unrestrained atavism; primitivism can be, like nature, red in tooth and claw. Towards the end of *Karoo Morning*, an old beggar in Cradock who may have been alive at the time of the cattle-killing in 1856 becomes a reminder of the 'pagans' who held 'faith in false gods'; he evokes pathos because, although 'his father, no doubt, wore skins of wild beasts, and had no masters except chiefs and headmen of his own colour ... here he was in discarded European clothes, begging from door to door.'⁹ A chain of association links this to young Guy Butler's observation of a butcherbird impaling victims on the thorns of a mimosa – the natural world seeming to endorse the pervasive cruelty and injustice in the human world. Yet at other times this

⁸ Muriel Bradbrook comments that 'the metaphor of a man as a little kingdom' is one of Butler's 'Shakespeareanisms'. ('"A dome of many-coloured glass": The Lyric Poetry of Guy Butler', p.163.) The gesture, however, also has the potential to be complicit in dubious "adventures" of colonisation and spurious racial categorisations invoking the 'savage', the 'naked' and the 'strange'.

⁹ *Karoo Morning*, p.233.

alliance is broken. Primal moments – the terrain of “natural man” – can be peaceful as well as vicious. Nature has the capacity to overcome or belittle human actions; it can therefore offer some respite from human folly.¹⁰ On one occasion, in Italy, amidst the savage violence of the Second World War, Butler found himself not in a cultivated European landscape but in an ‘enchanted forest’,

permitting a primitive escape through the ancestral memories to times when man was a woodland creature; an unconscious slipping of the world of guns and banknotes into the world of growth, sap, sunlight, soil and birdsong.¹¹

Such a ‘primitive escape’ is not always away from ‘the world of guns’, however. While still a university student, Butler joined a group of friends on a night hunt for spring-hares; after some success, but freezing cold, they took cover in an old stone shed and lit a fire. The scene, he writes in *Bursting World*, was one of ‘Glowing young faces round the flame: the simple camaraderie of young primate males tuned into some primordial foraging and hunting instinct.’¹² Butler had his first experience of hunting as a teenager, at “Rooispruit”, his uncle Owen Collett’s farm. He enjoyed the hunting, despite misgivings about ‘nature’s fear and my lordship’, because he found himself following ‘an instinct as old as man’.¹³ On a jackal hunt, he took up a position on an ironstone koppie, interpreting the geology of the Karoo in such a way that it merged with his primordial inclination:

Tafelberg and Doornberg were glowing purple and pink at the far end of the valley, their parallel cliffs in horizontal bands lending them an architectural repose and strength. How different the rock on which I was sitting: not the product of wind and water, but of violence and fire; volcanic; igneous; not built up granule by granule, but injected as smoking liquid from the hot heart of the earth, vertical through the buckling sandstone towards the sun.

I gripped the wedge-like face of the boulder in front of me. This was pure, unspoilt, primitive, original. It has never been compromised. The soils and the sandstones are second- and third-hand, resting on top of

¹⁰ Butler was equivocal about this aspect of nature’s power – see Chapter Six (I).

¹¹ Butler, *Bursting World*, p.226.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.106.

¹³ *Karoo Morning*, p.216.

older rocks; but an ironstone koppie is a nail driven up from the centre of things, piercing layer upon layer of laminated stones.

Hunting to kill: that is letting the dolerite thrust through the crust of custom and sentiments and morals, through layer upon layer.

And to make love must be the same: a shedding of disguises, of custom, of caution, letting the stifled instinct sing.

That was it. Or something like that.¹⁴

The final hesitation – the deferral of ‘or something like that’ – places Butler in the position of critical narrator; but there is no doubt that the childhood perception of a raw, visceral passion suppressed by human ‘custom’ became central to his creative vision. This passage, which depends so heavily on the image of the “savage”, is not about Africa or Europe, black or white. Although it alludes to the restrictions of social habits, it makes no clear social comment. It gives voice to the desire of an individual to understand his own quiddity: something essential and elemental about his biological and spiritual identity.

By way of contrast, we may refer to a different episode in *Karoo Morning*, one which draws a moral conclusion by valorising a “primitive” (or, at least, “pre-modern”) worldview, but which indulges in exoticism and generalisation in the process. When Butler was fifteen, Chrissie, long-serving domestic worker at “The Poplars”, died. At the end of her funeral service, held in the ‘tin temple’ Methodist church for Sotho-speakers, a group of young girls ‘burst into song’:

Suddenly one of them started to sway and move, and her voice rose, wild ... others followed suit, until the building shook with a human cry that was part lament, part exultation, and so uncontrolled as to make the hair on the back of my neck bristle.¹⁵

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.217-218. Butler-as-narrator hedges his adolescent association between hunting and love-making; perhaps he was wary of committing the fallacy of “Man the Hunter”, here exposed by Jared Diamond:

The mystique of Man the Hunter is now so rooted in us that it is hard to abandon our belief in its long standing importance. Today, shooting a big animal is regarded as an ultimate expression of macho masculinity. Trapped in this mystique, male anthropologists like to stress the key role of big-game hunting in evolution ... Even women were supposedly moulded by men’s big-game hunting: women suppressed the external signs of monthly ovulation that are so conspicuous in chimps, so as not to drive men into a frenzy of sexual competition and thereby spoil men’s cooperation at hunting.

(*The Rise and Fall of the Third Chimpanzee*, p.33).

Diamond argues that the development of sophisticated tools and language pre-dated – was, indeed, a prerequisite of – man’s ability to hunt large animals regularly and successfully, and not *vice versa*. His accounts of human evolution and development informed Butler’s own treatment of the topic.

¹⁵ *Karoo Morning*, p.206.

This seems to be the stuff of Rider Haggard or John Buchan, a description that might have come from an explorer peering through the undergrowth at the tribal delirium being enacted in a forest clearing. Again, one is unsure as to whether or not boy-Butler's combined horror and awe are shared by the remembering narrator. At the time, his Aunt Mary derided the excessive show of mourning, but, reflecting on the mourners, Butler comments (to a white readership):

I wish I had known then the little I know now about the African feeling for their dead – their *izinyanya*, their *amadhlhozi* – they do not forget them, lose touch with them, neglect them, as we do. The Communion of the Saints is real to them. I think those wild girls were trying to get through to Chrissie in a way that both Methodists and Quakers had lost.¹⁶

The comparison attempts to affirm elements of African society (although this is perhaps too generic a term) in order to critique contemporary Western society – and, at the same time, most of white South Africa. Having a 'feeling for the dead' has multiple implications for Butler's own brand of humanism, as well as for the challenge he laid down to English-speaking South Africans.¹⁷ Showing respect for the memory of the dead encourages a more caring interest in living individuals and a concern for their human dignity; acknowledging the importance of the past entails sensitivity to tradition and historical inheritance. This in turn helps to provide a sense of both personal and cultural identity, a prerequisite if one is to engage with individuals from other races and cultures.

It is the emphasis on engagement that sets Butler's appropriation of noble savagery – or, more broadly, his interpretation of Apollo/Dionysus – apart from "Nietzschean" predecessors such as Roy Campbell or William Plomer. Malvern van Wyk Smith identifies those two prototypical poems, Campbell's 'Rounding the Cape' and Plomer's 'The Scorpion', as 'projecting a demonized image of the African reality in the European consciousness, making human negotiations impossible' and thus 'absolving the European

¹⁶ This passage resonates with 'Notes on Seeing and Hearing Shakespeare's Plays in South Africa', in which it is regretted that Westerners, 'the products of industrial secularisation', are shut off from tangible access to an intangible, magical world (p.224).

¹⁷ Butler's position was that ESSAs needed to acknowledge and understand their settler "ancestors", their history and their (albeit limited) tradition in order to define their own cultural identity – which would in turn facilitate their engagement with other cultures in South Africa. See Chapter Six (II).

from responsibility for the consequences of the attempt to occupy Africa'.¹⁸ The latter accusation is only partly valid against Plomer's *Turbott Wolfe*, which pours vitriol on most white settlers in Africa and, as we noted earlier, does dabble with the idea of 'compromise' between Europe and Africa in dealing with the (for its time) scandalous subject of miscegenation. Nevertheless, within the narrative of the novel, the project of compromise fails.

Although *Turbott Wolfe* greatly impressed Butler as a young reader, its depiction of noble savage blacks and almost uniformly grotesque whites – a depiction lacking in sympathy for individuals – is very different to his own vision. Atheist clergyman-cum-social activist Friston echoes, in a drug-induced stupor, Kurtz's vision of 'HORROR' in *Heart of Darkness*, and the declaration is sufficiently ambiguous to express both a fear of primal Africa and a disgust at the colonisation process.¹⁹ The criticism of the West, and the white population in (an unspecified part of) Africa in particular, depends on a patronising and crude vision of black people. This is Nhliziyombi, with whom Wolfe fell in love 'against his conscience':

She was a fine rare savage, of a type you will find nowhere now ... She was an ambadress of all that beauty (it might be called loneliness), that intensity of the old wonderful unknown primitive African life – outside history, outside time, outside science ... It has always seemed to me to be the chief mistake of our age that we take it for granted that science is a panacea. The chief tendency of modern science has been to produce noise.²⁰

Elsewhere, Wolfe claims:

I felt ready to sacrifice a very great deal in order to preserve for the natives a little of the quality that had been almost lost to them before the combined ruthlessness of the poor white and the missionary and the official. The unfortunate natives ... had had their bodies and souls exploited for too long. Frankness, innocence, dignity, *quality*.²¹

¹⁸ Van Wyk Smith, *Grounds of Contest*, p.62.

¹⁹ Plomer, *Turbott Wolfe*, p.168. Butler himself was not immune to making throwaway references to *Heart of Darkness*. In the elephant-hunting episode in *A Rackety Colt*, Thomas Stubbs' friend Ronnie Thackwray is trampled. Blink Corduroy, one of the "hottentot" (coloured) gunbearers, brings the news: 'Mr Ronnie ... he's dead!' (p.129).

²⁰ *Turbott Wolfe*, pp.87-89.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.111.

If this sounds condescending, it is also naïve – harking back to an idealised, fabricated African past in order to validate a Eurocentric political protest. Butler was more pragmatic: Europeans have come to Africa, for better or worse, and there remains hope for reconciliation if the message of ‘the missionary’ is heeded by ‘the official’.

Lest we should think, however, that the noble savage motif was simply a by-product of pre-colonial or colonial encounters between Europe and Africa and that it has been dispensed with in post-apartheid South Africa, it is instructive to find that “noble savagery” continues to inform the efforts of some white South African writers to establish their own African identity: Apollo and Dionysus are rejuvenated to wrestle once more. In *The Wonder Safaris* (2003), Adam Levine explains that in his journeys through Africa he desired to seek out those who,

for all the conveniences and technologies they lack, in the simple quietude of their lives ... have remembered how to listen with open ears: how to tune their eardrums to the great primaevial wireless broadcasting from the belly of the earth – neither missing a sound, nor distinguishing one from another. They hear the whole planet, I am told. And their palms are chafed with earth songs. And magic turns their eyes to lightbulbs.²²

Levine was driven by a desire to escape the urban ‘jungle’ with its ‘savage hunting for money and things’ – a wry acknowledgement, perhaps, that he was following the same Romantic urge that first beatified the noble savage – because he ‘wanted more’: ‘More ancient. More remote. Deeper.’²³

Brett Bailey’s Africa is similarly “wonderful”, but remains threatening. *The Plays of Miracle and Wonder* (2003) is a collection of scripts, notes and photographs from his three productions, *Ipi Zombi?*, *iMumbo Jumbo* and *The Prophet*, carrying the subtitle ‘Bewitching Visions and Primal High-Jinx from the South African Stage’. They are plays that foreground non-rational Africa; the book quotes reviews describing ‘an intoxicating whiff of the pointedly irrational’ and blatantly pitches Africa in opposition to ‘Euromerican modes and models’.²⁴ The plays toured successfully around South Africa, and found audiences receptive to their

²² Adam Levine, *The Wonder Safaris* (Cape Town: Struik, 2003), p.11.

²³ *Ibid.*, p.10 and p.13.

²⁴ Brett Bailey, *The Plays of Miracle and Wonder* (Cape Town: Double Storey, 2003), p.93 and p.10.

subject matter of witchcraft, ghosts and prophecies. Nevertheless, even when asserting his own immersion in “tribal” African cultures and mysticism, and while claiming to liberate South Africa from ‘that valium called political correctness’ and ‘Western bigotry which denies the validity of other world-views’, Bailey cannot help using – even if ironically – Western paradigms. He describes his plays as stories of ‘liberating Dionysian powers which grip and transport us beyond the uncertainties and concerns of mundane survival in South Africa’. A section relating his research into the source material for *Ipi Zombi*, the witch-killings in KwaZulu-Natal in 1994, is headlined ‘The horror! The horror!’, yet another reference to that ur-(post)colonial work from a European pen, *Heart of Darkness*.

If this analysis of elements of noble savagery in Bailey’s work seems somewhat harsh, consider what a critic like Martin Orkin would make of the subject. In volumes such as *Shakespeare against Apartheid* (1987) and *Drama and the South African State* (1991), Orkin established himself as an “anti-reactionary” reviewer of South African stage productions.²⁵ In Orkin’s critical work, published thirty years after Butler’s first two forays into professional theatre were written and performed, the plays receive both hesitant commendation and stern reproach. Orkin does acknowledge that, simply by referring to the labourers hired to construct the dam and, at the end of the play, the poor living conditions in the slums of Johannesburg, Butler is contesting a long tradition of white literature that entirely ignores the presence of black people. Moreover, moving speeches by Douglas and Susan Long seem to express a deeply felt empathy with rural and urban blacks respectively. Unfortunately, Orkin argues, Butler ends up reproducing the discourse of oppression, not least because he ‘persists in talking of “primitivism” to describe the black mode of life and

²⁵ The wide effect of Orkin’s post-colonial Shakespearean criticism is indicated in a letter to Butler from Malvern van Wyk Smith (26th June 1988), expressing concerns about the state – and fate – of the 1820 Foundation and the Shakespeare Society of Southern Africa:

While no Marxist, I do believe in a sort of historical imperative, or, rather, a historical moment, and my feeling all along has been that, just at the moment in SA’s educational, intellectual and ideological history, Shakespeare is not the burning issue. Either you “Orkinise” him, which I suspect you and other responsible Shakespearians are not willing to do, or he is seen by the comrades (and many who should know better) as part of a past colonial moment.

Orkin has since edited a volume on *Post-Colonial Shakespeares* with Ania Loomba (London: Routledge, 1998).

civilisation'.²⁶ Orkin refers to Douglas' lines that describe 'a motley tribe of ragged blacks' or, elsewhere, 'semi-savage things that sweat for me,/ Half-warriors without a chief' that are 'still held/To the tribal womb by a tattered cord' – 'migrant muscles in rags'.²⁷ Even Susan cannot avoid the stereotype of savagery. When the black labourers are celebrating the completion of the dam, she sees 'grotesque heads thrown back, their mouths/Wide and moaning'; her compassionate depiction of the conditions in the Johannesburg townships (with their 'smells', 'degradation' and 'lurid colours') also centres on 'the dark/Of the primitive human storm'.²⁸ For Orkin,

The emphasis on a 'half-savage' condition, together with admission of the contentious issues of land and migrant labour only in the alliterative side-glance of the balanced phrase 'migrant muscles', reflects what Alvarez Peyreyre [sic] has noted as 'Butler's constant predilection elsewhere, at least during this period, for the term "tribesman" to designate the African'.²⁹

Two points need to be made in mitigation of the "savage" language. Firstly, although the play is loosely based on Butler's familiarity with a real farm and a real dam, although Douglas Long's spiritual angst is associated with Butler's own Christian struggle, and although Susan's description of the township comes from Butler's personal experience in Sophiatown, we must still allow some distance between the playwright and his characters. (Orkin neglects to do so on at least one other occasion, supposing that Dr Robert is 'disturbingly a spokesman ... for "common sense"' – he may be just that, but Butler and Dr Robert clearly do not hold the same opinions.³⁰) Secondly, and more importantly, we have seen that

²⁶ Martin Orkin, 'Contesting and Reproducing Apartheid and Colonialist Discourse in *The Dam* and *The Dove Returns*' (Pamphlet. Johannesburg: Wits University, 1990), p.6. See also *Drama and the South African State* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), pp.58-70.

²⁷ Butler, *The Dam*, p.35 and p.26.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.67 and p.65.

²⁹ Orkin is referring to Jacques Alvarez-Pereyre's *The Poetry of Commitment in South Africa* (1979), a work that – largely on the basis of *The Dam*, the Introduction to *A Book of South African Verse* and a BBC interview Butler gave in 1956 – dismisses Butler's responses to race relations in South Africa as both poet-playwright and critic: 'Although there is no aggressive racialism ... prejudices and stereotyped attitudes towards the black community as a whole, and not only towards the Africans, abound.' (Jacques Alvarez-Pereyre, *The Poetry of Commitment in South Africa* (1979), trans. Clive Wake (London: Heinemann, 1984), p.24.) Alvarez-Pereyre's criticism of Butler is not convincing: it focuses on his early work, which is removed from context and misinterpreted (for instance, Butler is made an unlikely bedfellow with Philip Segal and Roy Campbell – both of whom, for very different reasons, he distanced himself from).

³⁰ 'Contesting and Reproducing Apartheid', p.5.

Butler continually manipulated the connotations of words like “civilised”, “primitive” and “savage”, and their use in *The Dam* should be assessed with this in mind.³¹

Orkin also takes Butler to task for ignoring the reality of the farm labourers’ plight by having them sing and work offstage, obedient and apparently contented. As for the slum-dwellers, the impact of Susan’s monologue is limited because ‘the effort to be poetic, to find the apt image – hatred that “rises like steam” – itself contributes to a certain beatification of the suffering it presents.’³² This is perhaps an exaggeration on Orkin’s part, but it does underline a perennial problem: the difficulty of merging poetics (‘the apt image’) with politics (responses to the ‘suffering’ imposed by history). I will return to this challenge in Chapter Five.

(ii) Africa, old and new

Butler’s essay on ‘Poetry, Drama and Public Taste’ (1956, delivered at the seminal conference of writers, publishers, editors and university teachers of English held at Wits University)³³ explores the dilemma of the English South African artist at a time when European objects and vocabulary seemed to carry a broader symbolic value – to be of greater poetic merit – than their African counterparts. It stresses the need to focus on African subjects and to employ African names for those subjects. Over time and with use, Butler suggests, these words will acquire symbolic resonance, but currently they are ‘semantic savages’:

³¹ Along with this semantic ambiguity, it is also worth mentioning the symbolic ambiguity of drums in *The Dam*. They are associated in various stage directions with the ‘chorus of natives at work’ which ‘rises slow and menacing’ – the threat of the irrational – but elsewhere they represent ‘the pendulum of time’, delimiting a rational prison from which Long desires to escape (p.49).

³² ‘Contesting and Reproducing Apartheid’, p.8. There is some inconsistency in Orkin’s criticism here; he also complains that Susan’s speech presents the townships only as sites of dereliction and suffering, not as sites of protest or urban black cultural development. This is nevertheless a pertinent comment, especially as – if Susan’s point of reference in the speech is indeed the Sophiatown that Butler knew – *The Prophetic Nun* offers a far more balanced (and celebratory) portrait: ‘a huge slum, crowded, rusty, ramshackle and vibrant, with human variety, with vice, despair, courage, dignity and gaiety – a flagrant, full human spectrum.’ Of course, *The Prophetic Nun* was written more than forty years after *The Dam* (Sophiatown had by then long disappeared) and Butler admitted, ‘It is indeed quite possible to glamorise Sophiatown.’ In the 1950s, Butler wanted to shock his white audiences with the pain and poverty of urban black people; after apartheid ended, the forced removals having left a scar on the public memory, Butler could affirm that ‘it is right to give [Sophiatown] special status, because it was special’ (*The Prophetic Nun*, p.93 and p.95).

³³ See A.C. Partridge (ed.), *Proceedings of a Conference of Writers, Publishers, Editors and University Teachers of English, Johannesburg, 1956* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1957).

Some people find it odd that Europeans in Africa should feel a tension between these continents, or that a six-thousand-mile dislocation in space, to an utterly different world of the senses, should raise artistic problems ... roses, oaks, ivy, cypress and poplar *will* grow in your garden. Take over the European symbols, transplant the old iconography, and don't, please don't disturb the hieratic decorum by introducing semantic savages, utterly naked African objects ... Quite frankly, I want to introduce semantic savages, the isipingo, the marula, the baobab, when and if I need them. I believe that it is part of our job to turn Africa into art. Culture is surely that which tries to name and give significance and value to the objects among which we move and have our being.³⁴

While thus satirising the myopic 'decorum' of Eurocentric white suburbia and challenging its occupants to "plant themselves" in South Africa, Butler admits to being 'a mistaken, though honest, barbarian struggling to say what moves him'.³⁵ A university professor characterising himself as a noble savage may seem to be projecting a false humility, but read in light of those deliberately oxymoronic associations identified previously, the provocative intimation is clear.

Nevertheless, there are aspects of the above extract that are problematic to the present-day reader. Despite the sibilant felicity of 'semantic savages', the phrase – like Butler's desire to turn 'Africa into art' – ignores the pre-existing artistic traditions of cultures that have been developing in Africa over centuries and millennia. The isipingo, the marula and the baobab might have little figurative or iconic weight to Europeans or white South Africans, but it is inaccurate to label them as 'utterly naked' (the implication of this term is that they have not collected 'symbolical charge' through 'friction in countless contexts' for either Europeans or Africans – Butler's argument holds true for the former but he does not make reference to the latter).³⁶

This ambiguity is at the heart of his claim to be 'frankly more concerned with the new thing that might come out of Africa than with the

³⁴ Butler, 'Poetry, Drama and Public Taste', *Essays and Lectures*, p.54.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.57.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.60. There are other awkward political issues raised by the expressions Butler uses; these deserve mention in this context. Firstly, some might say that to 'turn Africa into art' – the Africa of 'the isipingo, the marula, the baobab' – is to make an idealised, edenic Africa into a 'hieratic' frieze, thus threatening to reduce political struggles or to undermine the immediacy of the pain and suffering caused by racial oppression (an argument that would reinforce Orkin's line). Secondly, although it is important that a culture 'tries to name and give significance and value' to its environment, there is a hostile side to the "culture of naming": it is part of the colonisation process. See Chapter Six (I).

old masterpieces of Europe'.³⁷ *Ex Africa semper aliquid novi* is, after all, a European dictum; and as he came to regard himself less as a European-in-Africa and more as an African-in-Africa, Butler developed a paradoxical position. How can Africa, primal and primaeval, also be 'new' – while Europe is 'old' although, on an archaeological timescale, humans only settled there relatively recently? It is a conflict that Butler only resolved, if he resolved it at all, towards the end of his life.

The Karoo, so central to Butler's world view, bears witness to the truly ancient. Mountains and fossils are evidence of the palaeontological past, a natural history outside the realm of our conceptions of time and history. Cave paintings and stone tools are manifestations of occupation by the earliest humans. This formed Butler's early understanding of Africa as being "outside time", or timeless. Later, he was undoubtedly influenced by Laurens van der Post's portrait of that supposedly timeless race, the 'golden San'; the mythical 'Bushman' is seen to maintain an eternal connection to an eternal landscape.³⁸ We noted in the previous chapter that time, like language, imposes a rational framework on experience – a limitation from which Butler often yearned to escape. In 'On Seeing a Rock Drawing in 1941', the speaker studies 'the surface of the stone' and, discerning the patterns carved out by natural processes long before the drawing itself was made, he begins to feel burdened by the heavy weight of time:

It bears the sensuous ripple marks
left by a falling wave, the wind's caress
on some indelible, undated day
in a definite, numberless year,
in staggering cataracts of years.

This is the geological extreme of what, misquoting Joyce's *Ulysses*, we might call the 'ineluctable modality of time'.³⁹ Crucially, however, though 'wind and wave with an unalterable die/stamp Time and Physics into every

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.55.

³⁸ See *A Local Habitation*, p.182 and p.191.

³⁹ James Joyce, *Ulysses* (London: Penguin, 1992), p.45. Protagonist Stephen Dedalus is actually contemplating the 'ineluctable modality of the visible' and 'the audible'.

rock', the longevity of the primitive artist's creation 'places our being a little beyond/the neat co-ordinates of Time and Space'.

The Second World War exacerbated Butler's awareness of being in the bondage of time. In 'Giotto's Campanile', the bell of the clocktower rings 'to rivet us all to a pointless point in time', forcing the soldiers to be complicit in the horrible historical moment of the war, and dashing the poet's wish to escape time and history.⁴⁰ Similarly, in Section XII of the 'Florence Ode', the speaker accepts with reluctance that he 'must walk/arm in arm with a tart/called Human History' – and that, ultimately, his participation in the war may cost him his life.

Yet despite expressing resentment at the subjugating imposition of history, Butler also acknowledged that the war had enriched him immeasurably. It allowed him to experience "another Africa" during the Egyptian campaign. He first encountered the ancient Mediterranean world in northern Africa ('Among great ghosts', as one of the chapter titles in *Bursting World* has it): 'Jacob and Moses ... Alexander the Great, Caesar and Pompey, Antony and Cleopatra, Joseph and Mary, Saladin, St Louis of France, Napoleon and Lawrence of Arabia.'⁴¹ The incorporeal presence of personalities from antiquity and the abundance of well-preserved ruins made this a timeless land of a different sort, steeped in the pathos of passing glory. As Information Officer, he gave lectures to soldiers from various companies and regiments on topics ranging from South African politics to local sightseeing spots, but it was 'the *sic transit gloria mundi* theme' that made him most 'fluent ... even eloquent and dramatic':

I had not yet reached sufficient insight to ask myself whether this pre-occupation with the manifest evidence of human non-success did not disqualify me from being a successful propagandist for the gospel of progress and social hope. I acted in good faith, trusting my intuitions. I had seen a crusader castle, with its dungeons and treble-plated doors inhabited by wild goats and lizards, and nettles rustling in its courts.⁴²

⁴⁰ One may compare the rhythmical insistence of the drums in *The Dam*, beating out 'the meaningless pulse of time, time, time' (p.49); or the dictation, in 'Aubade', of 'the mantle clock', which 'shall soon despatch on jack-boot feet/indifferent thugs to force me back'.

⁴¹ *Bursting World*, p.174.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.183.

Bursting World and the poems Butler wrote during this period give voice as much to disillusionment as to inspiration in response to the ancient towns and landscapes of Egypt, Syria and Palestine: it is 'god-haunted terrain' but, heavy with history, terrain that seems tired of human traffic.

In Italy, however, it was precisely the complexity of recorded and tangible history that so excited Butler. Here were Caesar's Rome, Dante's Florence, the Medici's Tuscan countryside – under serious threat from modernity, battered by the war, but somehow enduring. The contrast with the environs of his youth was marked:

The Karoo climate is primitive, violent, dramatic; Italy's climate is sophisticated, subtle and elegaic. So it is with the scenery too. Man has moulded these hills, terraced them; controlled the streams for centuries; every acre of ground is watched, studied, cared for, personally, like a child. In SA it's a case of "Laat God se water oor God se akker loop" and "Kneuk maar op!"⁴³

These observations were recorded in a letter home to his family, written shortly after Jan Smuts visited and addressed Butler's division. His thoughts turned to politics:

Well, SA's future is going to be like the Karoo climate, I'm afraid – violent and dramatic. We are very primitive and improvident. When I study the efforts of our backvelders in Parliament, particularly on the colour question, I get into a right fit of the blues.⁴⁴

At that time, when he compared Europe as he knew it (developed, 'old') to Africa as he knew it (undeveloped, 'new'), he was thinking primarily of white South Africans – the 'we' who are 'primitive'. In Sienna, he was shown a number of paintings that had been removed from the town's churches and placed for safekeeping in a mansion abandoned by its count. This stimulated an 'intellectual and artistic ferment' within him; after his 'secondhand groping' in 'almost art-less South Africa', he was thrilled to be 'in the presence of the actual works' (forgetting, in his fervour, that most of the paintings he saw were not originals but copies of 'the great masters' by their pupils).⁴⁵

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.223.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.224.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.226.

Yet the self-denigrating ‘we’, insecure ex-colonists who have grown up on the periphery, are not always enamoured with what they discover at the centre. If Butler felt he was an ‘inheritor’ of all things European, he also knew that he was ‘coming to an ancestral home on fire’.⁴⁶ The speaker in ‘Elegy’ is disoriented because the centre has not held:

We, from the outposts, meeting you half-blind
and lost among your ruins, we must call
on ancient, common ancestry to find

a voice to match our young worlds, walking tall –
and not the bitter, witty, weary strain
of greatness haunted by decline and fall.

(I.i)

He is ‘in the position of many Westerners, secularised, deprived of the cosmic consolations of nature or religion, encapsulated in time, reduced to the routines of industrialised cities’ but, because he is a European who comes from Africa, he can call on both his ‘ancient ancestry’ in Europe and his experiences (or imagined memories) of non-industrial, timeless Africa.⁴⁷ If Rome is the “eternal city”, Africa is eternal because it is “outside of time”.

Butler’s letters home left his wife Jean feeling that, by comparison to Italy, ‘Johannesburg seems very colourless ... no traditions, no secrets, no romance.’⁴⁸ Butler’s response to her complaint is riddled with impulses that contradict his previous enthusiasm for history-rich Europe:

Sometimes my mind reacts against these old, storied lands, whose soil has been criss-crossed by great men and saints; out of whose ruinous stones history runs as water from a rock. I long for the simple barbaric lines of a land with almost no known history; where the sun asserts its authority in the wastes, simplifying issues; where man must respond simply and boldly among the elements.

One assumes that by writing about ‘the wastes’ he has expanded the sphere of reference beyond Johannesburg to ‘the simple barbaric lines’ of South Africa outside the industrialised cities (in which, after all, the

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.196.

⁴⁷ *A Local Habitation*, p.49.

⁴⁸ *Bursting World*, p.225.

Romantic urge to 'respond simply and boldly among the elements' would be as difficult to fulfill as in Rome or Paris or London). In *Bursting World* Butler suggests that this letter was his first articulation of ideas that would recur in poems like 'Home Thoughts'. One imagines that he has in mind such lines as

I have not found myself on Europe's maps,
a world of things, deep things I know endure
but not the context for my one perhaps.
I must go back with my five simple slaves
to soil still savage, in a sense still pure:
my loveless, shallow land of artless shapes
where no ghosts glamorise the recent graves.

The declaration that 'barbaric', 'savage' (South) Africa has 'almost no known history' is barely redeemed by the buffering of 'almost' and 'known', but it is a significant softening. A semi-comical exchange in *The Dove Returns* couches the sentiment in similarly hesitant language. Paul van Heerden is quizzing tommy Victor Maycock and his superior Sergeant Hime about their attitudes to South Africa; Hime comments that they have found in Africa 'no tradition,/Or almost none. A clean slate,/Or almost clean'.⁴⁹ Victor is more outspoken in suggesting that he would like to settle with his family in South Africa after the war, because his son will have better opportunities than in England:

London is too packed to allow a man
To expand; and in London you walk
Up to your ruddy eyebrows in the glories
Of our history, and then you feel,
What's the point of making any more?
But here the past don't wet the uppers
Of your boots. It's a nice, free,
Frightening feeling.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ *The Dove Returns*, p.41.

⁵⁰ Again, we may consider Butler's appropriation of and elaboration on the enthusiastic recollections of Cowper Rose for the twin texts of *Take Root or Die* and *A Rackety Colt*. In the latter, as both historian and author-collator, Butler seems to affirm the viewpoint of the narrator, the (fictionalised) young Tom Stubbs, who esteems Rose for the effect of his celebratory "version" of Africa: 'He'd brought home to us that there were other ways of thinking and feeling' (*A Rackety Colt*, pp.66-67). Those ways are intimate with local geography, and Africa is not seen as foreign or threatening ('Your children will have no regrets ... They already accept this landscape'). Yet the appeal of Africa to young Europeans is, once again, seen to be in its vacuity and passivity; it is unmarked territory, 'a landscape with no scars or historical embellishments. It has a

One imagines Butler responding in like fashion. It suited the young poet of 'Home Thoughts' that Africa should be 'artless'. He wished to create a unique African identity for himself and, although there is a hint of regret in the lines 'I have not found myself on Europe's maps ... I must go back', in the new 'context' of South Africa Butler could be a fresh and significant presence – an original and substantial figure, a "Roy Campbell" (but one who would remain on African soil). The prospect must have enthused his artistic ego. It was a daunting task, but an intoxicating one: a 'free,/Frightening feeling'.⁵¹

For Butler, however, returning to explore South Africa with the 'five simple slaves' of his senses would not be sufficient. The soil was not 'still pure', but bloodied, damaged and enriched by both pre- and postcolonial histories. There were many 'ghosts' to 'glamorise' the 'graves', and not all of them were 'recent'. *A Local Habitation* acknowledges 'how wrong it was to call the land loveless, shallow, artless or without ghosts: it had merely seemed to lack these dimensions because one had been encapsulated in a language, a literature and a religion insensitive to them.'⁵² Increasingly, the poet of the new accommodated the scholar of the old and, ultimately, the two were fused in a sequence like *Pilgrimage to Dias Cross*, which enacts a literary resurrection of various historical ghosts. Over the years, Butler's project of revivifying South African history and culture would extend Hime's self-correction ('almost') into a direct negation – that is, an affirmation of South African 'tradition'.

This was by no means an exclusively white or English-speaking tradition. Butler's primary historical research interest was, of course, the 1820 English settlers, but he actively sought out and studied more "indigenous" Africana. During the last two decades of his life in particular, the breadth of his research stretched from the importance of nose-bleeds in some African shamanistic rituals, to the mysterious presence of zebras, to the association between star constellations and certain African creation

certain innocence. It is easier to breathe, to hope, here; to shake off *ennui*, to think fresh thoughts' (*Take Root or Die*, p.67).

⁵¹ This also helps to explain Butler's (1956) assertion that, 'until recently, our poets looked at Africa geographically' – but that, 'although this excitement has not died, they are now trying to make sense of it, to put it into some perspective of time, to fill, or abolish, or redeem, the culturally empty centuries behind us.' (*Panorama*, 5th November 1956, quoting an interview on the BBC's *The Listener*, May 24th.)

⁵² *A Local Habitation*, pp.243-244.

myths, to the location of cairns or gravestones in various parts of southern Africa (such as the *isivivane* of the Xhosa or the *Heitsi Eibib* graves of the Khoi). The latter subject, like many of his minor pursuits, he eventually had to put aside, but not because he considered it obscure or trivial; 'Stocktaking 1995' records that he passed the project on 'with regret because it is a fascinating topic, needs writing up, and has very wide implications for history and culture, possibly leading all the way to Egypt.'

During his war service on both sides of the Mediterranean rim, Butler had associated Egypt with Europe – steeped in human history, unlike most of Africa. Fifty years later, he recognised a trans-continental unity: South Africa and north Africa share a common African inheritance. Thus he embraced, albeit with a hint of "Afro-jingoism", the principle of an African Renaissance. His article on 'The African Renaissance – A Long View' (1999) is introduced as 'an amateur's reaction to the knee-jerk response of many to the idea that Africa could have a renaissance at all':

What is there to be reborn? Where is its counterpart of Greco-Roman civilisation?

Well, for a start, the Greeks themselves acknowledged their debt to Africa, to Egypt. The pyramids, huge, monumental proof of advanced mathematics and engineering, were two millennia old before Euclid wrote his *Elements* in Alexandria.⁵³

He expands from this emphasis on African civilisation to an explication of human history in evolutionary terms, based on the then-recent discovery of a complete hominid skeleton at the Sterkfontein caves. Reason and the irrational come to the fore once again:

The Sterkfontein hominids were dwellers on the fringes of the forest and the plain. The assumption seems to be that their adoption of an upright posture preceded by many millennia the crucial increase in their skull and brain size. This increase made possible the development of reason.

Three and a half million years after Sterkfontein, reason has empowered us with such might that we are turning into an evolutionary disaster. We are a threat to every other form of life and to ourselves. We know this, but are too incapacitated by greed and conceit to take effective action against ourselves.

Can we not reason? 'I think,' says Descartes, 'therefore I am.' *Cogito ergo sum.*

⁵³ Butler, 'The African Renaissance – A Long View', p.1.

Put like that, it is simply nonsense. No man or animal comes into existence by thinking ... Biologically and psychologically, 'we love therefore we are'. It takes two to create one thinking ego. *Amamus ergo sumus*.

As we noted in Chapter Two, Butler's discussion of sex in this article places love and loyalty above sexual pleasure: it was in the early hominids that 'self-gratifying erotic desire' was first 'qualified by communal familial affection', and the female hominid 'succeeded in adding the sober responsibilities of parenthood to the intoxication of courting and mating, [turning] a male in rut into a man who ... cares for her and her offspring'.⁵⁴ To "love" can mean a conscious, rational decision to overcome the unconscious, irrational sexual drive; but the argument of the article necessarily aligns love with care and affection, in opposition to reason. It takes more than instinct to evolve – or perhaps we should say that evolution requires the selfless nurturing instinct to accompany the selfish pleasure instinct – but, on the other extreme, the misuse of reason can threaten the survival of the species:

What the world needs is not more thinking but a renaissance of caring. The left hand portion of the brain, which contains the thinking computer, must, once again, make a major adjustment and listen to the right hand, the intuitive, mothering/emotional half.⁵⁵

The article goes on to make a bold claim. It was in sub-Saharan Africa that, imitating the ostrich, hominids first walked on two legs, then danced. Likewise, they were the only primates to learn from the birds how to sing. One typescript of 'The African Renaissance – A Long View' gives particular (if unconvincing) emphasis to this point. At the end of the paragraph on hominids singing and dancing, Butler makes an extravagant handwritten amendment: 'We gave song and dance to the world.' Far from being 'artless', Africa is now seen to be the very source of all art.

He concludes with a humanist and ecological thrust that turns South Africa into the inheritor of Africa's greatest abiding civilisation:

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.2. This summative version of evolutionary biology is largely corroborated by contemporary views; see Diamond's *Rise and Fall of the Third Chimpanzee*, p.58.

⁵⁵ Butler's conception of a "pleasure drive" in this context owes something to his hesitant interest in Freud. Elsewhere, he used the "pleasure principle" (and the need to overcome it) in order to chastise white South Africans for not acknowledging the "reality" of a multi-racial country. Both of these instances seem to gloss over Freud's later work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920).

To revert to ancient Egypt. Most of their gods were half animal therianthropes. The walls of the tombs of pharaohs [sic] and others are painted with African animals and birds which no longer exist in Egypt. In Southern Africa, many of them are still alive, although some are under threat.

Part of the African Renaissance – of which there are encouraging signs – may be to preserve and make available to the media-mesmerised, digitalised flat-dwellers of the so-called First World glimpses of what their own first real world may have been like.

We have a mission to remind the First World of the marvellous continent which contributed humanity itself to the world: and to remind humanity that the enlarged brain comprised not only a computer on the left side, but a right-handed home for the senses and the emotions and the capacity to care.⁵⁶

This may seem trite. It may, indeed, stem from the same crude conception of Dionysian Africa, in opposition to an Apollonian Europe, that has already been questioned. If so, it stumbles at the same hurdle as other, more popular, Africanist philosophies that have been espoused (typically for political purposes – a necessary “conscientising”) and that have since lost credibility in some quarters as fallacious attempts to define and promote the “essential” qualities of Africa or Africans.⁵⁷ ‘The problem,’ as Dirk Klopper has noted, ‘is to articulate difference without invoking dualism and hierarchy.’⁵⁸ Butler’s own endeavours in this regard may be more accurately assessed through comparison with one or two outstanding examples.

(iii) ‘*A monopoly of a god*’?

The concluding sentiments of ‘The African Renaissance – A Long View’ stand in unlikely allegiance with these words from Steve Biko:

We reject the power-based society of the Westerner that seems to be ever concerned with perfecting their technological know-how while losing out on their spiritual dimension. We believe that in the long run the special

⁵⁶ ‘The African Renaissance – A Long View’, p.3.

⁵⁷ Butler was aware that the evocation of an “essential” Africa by some black writers was born out of a particular politico-literary protest, a direct response to (white) European domination: in 1975, he suggested that South African black poets such as Mtshali, Serote and Sephamla have more in common with black American poets such as Langston Hughes than with the British poetic tradition because they share not only ‘black grief and aspiration’ but ‘also, perhaps, a visionary continent called Africa, which did not exist in anyone’s mind until Europe polarised it into existence.’ (‘The Language of the Conqueror on the Lips of the Conquered is the Language of Slaves’, *Essays and Lectures*, p.151.)

⁵⁸ Dirk Klopper, ‘Soliciting the Other’: 146. I refer below to Biko and Kaunda; Klopper cites equivalent examples from Fanon.

contribution to the world by Africa will be in this field of human relationships. The great powers of the world may have done wonders in giving the world an industrial and military look, but the great gift still has to come from Africa – giving the world a more human face.⁵⁹

Insofar as ‘The African Renaissance – A Long View’ is more accessible to an African (or “Africanist”) audience than Apollo-Dionysus, it seems that the liberation of South Africa from apartheid allowed Butler to escape the limitations of that model and to express in simple terms the crux of his “Eurafrican” synthesis: ‘giving the world a more human face’. Still, it is salutary to note that the qualities ascribed by Butler to Apollo and Dionysus – bitterly contested over the years by white critics who considered themselves to hold radical positions – find concurrence in the distinctions drawn by prominent black intellectuals between African and Western attitudes or ideas.

Biko’s project of heightening black political consciousness was also one of enlivening black cultural self-awareness. The lines quoted above are taken from an address on ‘Some African Cultural Concepts’, first delivered in 1971. Some of the concepts communicated in this commentary are remarkably similar to Butler’s depiction of African characteristics – but, crucially, the subjects in their respective characterisations change. “Us and them” terms, which have typically been pejorative when employed by white South Africans, may make the politically sensitive reader uncomfortable: for example, as we read earlier, Butler affirming the aptness of Shakespeare’s ghosts in Africa (‘Africans are generally more aware than Europeans that death is not a dead-end ...they are altogether more aware of the numinous’); or describing the mourning at Chrissie’s funeral (‘the African feeling for their dead’ – ‘they do not forget them ... as we do’); or quoting his childhood friend Charles’ explanation of rural tribesmen ignoring the peal of a mission bell (‘they’ve got consciences, just like you and me; but they don’t believe in original sin’). When Biko gives an account of precisely these cultural features, however, there is less awkwardness in reader-response because he celebrates in the first person:

⁵⁹ Steven Biko, ‘Some African Cultural Concepts’ (1971), *I Write What I Like* (1978), ed. Aelred Stubbs (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1996), p.47.

All people are agreed that Africans are a deeply religious race ... We all accepted without any doubt the existence of a God. We had our own community of saints. We believed – and this was consistent with our views of life – that all people who died had a special place next to God ... We never knew anything about hell – we do not believe that God can create people only to punish them eternally after a short period on earth.⁶⁰

Similarly, it is Biko's prerogative to proclaim that Africans prefer 'marching to the same tune' or to applaud those 'black bodies in gyration' dancing to soul music (because 'in the area of music the [detrified] African still expresses himself with conviction'). Yet, earlier in this chapter, Butler's evocative descriptions of song, drum and dance at two African funerals were mildly censured because of a reflexive political correctness on the current author's part. Biko, in offering examples of African 'joint community oriented action rather than the individualism which is the hallmark of the capitalist approach', states that

nothing dramatises the eagerness of Africans to communicate with each other more than their love for song and rhythm ... The major thing to note about our songs is that they never were songs for individuals. All African songs are group songs ...[having] the wonderful effect of making everybody read the same things from the common experience.

This African self-definition (with its implied definition-by-opposition to the West) is not at all dissimilar to Butler's characterisation of Dionysus and Apollo in 'The Republic and the Arts': 'Dionysus, with his drums, his ecstatic message of self-forgetfulness in the group' and Apollo, 'the god of a very different music, of the harp and the single voice'.⁶¹ Elsewhere, Biko emphasises how 'in its entirety African culture spells us out as people particularly close to nature'; Butler highlights Dionysus' 'rapport with woods and the fields'.

Why, then, is Butler's model considered so problematic? Perhaps the answer lies not only in the construction of the subject (first- or third-person, 'we' as opposed to 'they') but in another syntactical distinction: tense. Biko, speaking in 1971, employs a combination of past and present tense to lay out the continuity between 'modern black culture' and 'the African heritage'. He looks back at the "tribal" past and identifies elements

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p.43.

⁶¹ Butler, 'The Republic and the Arts', p.104.

that, 'in spite of the superficial cultural similarities between the detribalised and the Westerner', show 'a number of cultural characteristics that mark out the detribalised as an African':

I am not here making a case for separation on the basis of cultural differences. I am sufficiently proud to believe that under a normal situation, Africans can comfortably stay with people of other cultures and be able to contribute to the joint cultures of the communities they have joined. However, what I want to illustrate here is that even in a pluralistic society like ours, there are still some cultural traits that we can boast of which have been able to withstand the process of deliberate bastardisation. These are aspects of the modern African culture – a culture that has used concepts from the white world to expand on inherent cultural characteristics.

An address aimed at heightening black consciousness remains apposite in post-apartheid South Africa when we consider the implications of a global 'pluralistic society'. Reading Butler's essays from the 1950s and 1960s, however, we must bear in mind the apartheid government's early emphasis on "separate development" and its justification of racist laws under the guise of cultural partition. There was no sense of 'joint cultures', and 'deliberate bastardisation' was more subtle. Thus, although 'The Republic and the Arts' affirms that 'the urbanised, Westernised African is here to stay', in much of Butler's writing about black South Africa we do not see Biko's 'culture that has used concepts from the white world to expand on inherent cultural characteristics', which would imply a completed process, or an ongoing process already underway; rather, it promotes a largely unheard-of multiculturalism and can, at best, only encourage the initial steps towards engagement (the predominant tenses are future and conditional).

This does not, however, excuse the occasionally patronising or condescending tone of the early essays. 'The Development of a South African National Character' is particularly guilty in this regard. Although we can appreciate that Butler's words were originally addressed to an audience of apartheid apologists, and that he used their terms of reference satirically in order to map out a sharp critique of segregation, it is difficult to swallow his anticipation of black African culture using 'concepts from the white world':

We shall not be doing violence to the soul of Africa by offering civilisation to other Africans. They will, of course, make their own synthesis ... No great body of people accepts a civilisation and does nothing with it. The stage of imitation is followed by new forms.⁶²

Here Butler presents black (South) Africans as only beginning to emerge from a tribal way of life. He quotes a black acquaintance:

The tribe only has one line ... the circle. We have danced in that circle for centuries. Now we've seen other lines: the tangents and triangles of Euclid, the Cross of Christendom. The circle of the kraal can't contain us any longer.' Instead of shouting 'Eureka' and 'Hallelujah' at this man's hunger for a different form of society, we throw up our hands and say: 'What a pity, such a nice unspoilt tribesman wanting to become a black Englishman.' Those who handed our civilisation on to us believed in its universal validity, and that they were given the task to spread it, to give it to all men.⁶³

Butler mocked others' attitudes to "the noble savage", but he was not exempt from over-simplification, even caricature, in his own version of the Europe-Africa encounter. Moreover, it is disconcerting that the final sentence in the above extract seems to be collusive in the false generosity – the hypocrisy – of colonisation. This was not, it must be said, a view consistently held by Butler. Despite his faith in the 'democratic habit' of the British settlers, for instance, he questioned the assumption that the practices and institutions of the coloniser are always valid for the colonised.⁶⁴ He saw in the derivative parliamentary processes of newly-independent African countries 'a rather endearing air of generous paternalism' on the part of the ex-colonists, such as Britain in Nigeria:

I suffered from a hunch that the effectiveness of constitutions and administrations is closely related to the societies from which they evolved

⁶² Butler, 'The Development of a South African National Character', p.95.

⁶³ By contrast, in the unpublished play *Two Timers* a "westernised" black character, Abdiel Sebenyani, bemoans how the 'straight lines', 'triangles' and 'cross' of the coloniser have 'broken the charm of the circle./And nothing, nothing can mend it!' (quoted by Akal, *Forms of Community Service*, p.82). The geometrical metonymy is repeated in the same play by one Father Jervis, who discerns 'the moral ambiguity of the Christian mission in colonial Africa': the continent has been 'cut into triangles' by roads and laid 'open and nude on ... aerial maps', while the church has signed the 'Pax Britannica with a cross'. This latter statement has implications for the British role in "opening up" Southern Africa – the 'moral ambiguity' of which Butler seemed at other times to overlook. See Chapter Six (II).

⁶⁴ Butler, 'English is a National Possession', article in *The Star* newspaper, 12th June 1974 (n.p.).

... 'Here, Africa, is the best we have, as a coming-out gift. We've produced this by trial and error over the centuries and we know that it works.'⁶⁵

Butler's visit to Nigeria and Ghana in 1955 formed a deep impression on him: it is referred to in his essays, provides subject matter for his poetry and is foregrounded in *A Local Habitation* (a chapter is dedicated to the month-long trip). Although he was 'quite bewildered by West Africa' because its people were 'totally unlike' South Africans, his experiences there nevertheless informed his views on Apollo-Dionysus in the South African context.

The geometric cultural comparisons made by Butler's anonymous black acquaintance (the circle of the tribe as opposed to the 'tangents and triangles of Euclid' or the 'cross of Christendom') concur with the paradigm he first conceived in Ibadan, Nigeria, with its 'lack of straight lines' – apart from the university campus buildings, which 'employed the best insights of Western architecture ... elegant, clean, bright shapes against the surrounding forest' – and developed further during his trip:

Somewhere in me is an elementary mathematician which panics when deprived for too long of straight lines, of recognisable triangles and quadrilaterals and of simple crystalline shapes ... tropical Africa is composed of squiggles, curves, roots and leaves. Most of its towns, markets and villages seemed to be gyrating happily rather than moving in purposive lines.⁶⁶

The rational, progressive European had to adjust to the irrational, shapeless 'squiggles' of Africa. Yet the epithet 'elemental mathematician' implies instinct, not logic. Butler goes on to relate how he purchased a white carpet weaved with a red rectangular design precisely because its 'clarity' was so unlike the 'natural' design of all the other fabrics he had seen, as if it were a talisman to protect him from the 'spirals and whirls' of West Africa: 'The starved primitive Euclid in me demanded possession of it.'⁶⁷ Again, 'primitive Euclid' presents a (self-mocking) contradiction-in-

⁶⁵ *A Local Habitation*, p.229.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.219 and p.223. The element of self-parody here is similar to Butler's wry depiction of Stanton Wade in *Two Timers*. When his attempts at colonial administration are frustrated, Wade intones Pythagorus' theorem as both a calming mantra and a talisman, boasting to the Tanga Urangans of his Apollonian control (see Akal, *Forms of Community Service*, p.74) – there is clearly an ironic distance between author and character here. Wade's monologue is published in Butler's *Collected Poems* as 'Surveyor'.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p.224.

terms. Surely Euclid, as a founding figure in the study of mathematics, is associated with intellectual sophistication and logic, not with primitivism? Is Butler suggesting that the instinct for ‘clarity’ or certainty – the failure of negative capability – is a European weakness? Or is he simply referring to his own fascination with shape, form and geometric design?⁶⁸

Of course, what we read in ‘The African Renaissance – A Long View’ (that the pyramids are ‘huge, monumental proof of advanced mathematics and engineering’ predating Euclid by two millennia, and that even his *Elements* was written in an African city, Alexandria) amounts to at least a partial recanting of the idea that geometry is the preserve of Europe, while Africa has had to make do with ‘squiggles’. Almost forty years separate ‘The African Renaissance’ from ‘The Republic and the Arts’, however, and in 1961 Butler offered extreme characterisations of Europe and Africa, Apollo and Dionysus – notwithstanding the disclaimer that neither continent ‘has a monopoly of a god’ – both ‘for purposes of simplification’ and in order to demonstrate their creative power when combined.⁶⁹ Long before finding its way into *A Local Habitation*, the anecdote about the white carpet with the red rectangles was recounted in ‘The Republic and the Arts’ to demonstrate Butler’s sympathy with Apollo, ‘the god of measurement and rule, of light and line, of the eye, and of the “I”, the individual consciousness’. Set in opposition to this individuality are the participants in the funeral procession in Ghana, at which, ‘The Republic and the Arts’ suggests, ‘there was no individual present’. Even Butler, as observer, was almost lured into this state by the hypnotic drumbeat that ‘washed away all the cultivated ground around my ego, and started gnawing at its always shaky foundations’.

Butler claimed that he was uncomfortable with these two extremes; he ‘needed something between rigid abstraction and submergence in primitive animism’. This need is, some advocates of Africanist philosophy

⁶⁸ For Butler, this was a near-obsession that found gratification in the neat precision of his woodworking and also, curiously, resulted in hundreds of hours spent “doodling” patterns onto any piece of paper to hand. He was a compulsive doodler. The archives at NELM contain hundreds of diagrams and drawings – on university committee minutes, envelopes, academic files, lecture notes, exam papers, graduation programmes – that Butler studiously kept, initialled and dated. He clearly wanted these to be viewed and, at one stage, even tried unsuccessfully to have some of them mounted and sold.

would argue, an indication of a (flawed) Western mindset. Biko quotes Kenneth Kaunda:

The Westerner has an aggressive mentality. When he sees a problem he will not rest until he has formulated some solution to it. *He cannot live with contradictory ideas in his mind; he must settle for one or the other or else evolve a third idea in his mind which harmonizes or reconciles the other two.* And he is vigorously scientific in rejecting solutions for which there is no basis in logic. He draws a sharp line between the natural and the supernatural, the rational and non-rational, and more often than not, he dismisses the supernatural and non-rational as superstition ...

Africans being a pre-scientific people do not recognize any conceptual cleavage between the natural and the supernatural. They experience a situation rather than face a problem. By this I mean that *they allow both the rational and non-rational elements to make an impact upon them*, and any action they may take could be described more as a response of the total personality to the situation than the result of some mental exercise.⁷⁰

Although it is tempting, however, to review Butler's emphasis on synthesis in light of the derided Westerner's urge to 'evolve a third idea ... which harmonizes or reconciles' any two 'contradictory ideas', this passage can be read as an endorsement of the distinctions drawn by Butler.⁷¹ If it is an extreme characterisation, and one that many 'Africans' would reject, this is at least mitigated in Butler's case – for whereas Kaunda saw only conflicting opposites, Butler saw complementary opposites. Furthermore, as this chapter has demonstrated, Butler often consciously sought to place himself, or instinctively found himself, in the position of Kaunda's generalised 'Africans'. On some occasions this entailed an experiential rather than an intellectual approach to events or phenomena ('submit to senses, not to sense'); on others it meant discovering 'the numinous in the matter-of-fact', an acknowledgement that the supernatural is not cleaved from the natural – which is, after all, a precept of the Christian faith.

If Butler's trip to West Africa forced him to 'allow both the rational and irrational elements to make an impact upon him', then the defining

⁶⁹ 'The Republic and the Arts', p.106. Once again, Wade's experience in *Two Timers* ironises Butler's formally recorded response: the ill-constructed 'Apollonian order within [Wade's] psyche' capitulates when he is 'forced to listen to the drums of Africa beat in the distance' (Akal, *Forms of Community Service*, p.79).

⁷⁰ Kenneth Kaunda, quoted in 'Some African Cultural Concepts', p.44.

⁷¹ Moreover, Butler's "synthesis" was as much an artistic project as a socio-political solution. Czeslaw Milosz interprets the drive to reconcile opposites as a function, not of a Western mindset, but of 'the mind of an artist', which 'advance[s] from negation to negation and actually delight[s] in the contradictions it attempt[s] to resolve' (*Native Realm*, p.117).

moment of this impact is expressed in the poem 'Bronze Heads, Ife, Nigeria, 1954'. *A Local Habitation* spares only a few lines to describe the visit to a museum in the town of Ife (with the 'higgledy-piggledy street plan that fazes many Westerners') housing a collection of bronze busts that are 'among the most beautiful objects in the world ... splendid uncrowned royal heads, each a triumphantly self-contained individual. What a handsome dignified dynasty!⁷² The encounter proved to be a seminal moment in Butler's career; it spawned the poem that formed the basis of Mike Kirkwood's attack on "Butlerism" at the poetry conference in 1974. 'Bronze Heads' is a complex poem: viewing the heads as metonyms of an apparently lost African civilisation, Butler meditates on his own "African history" (the English settlers) and his role in the regeneration of an African, or at least South African, civilisation. Kirkwood's wrath was focused on the second and third sections of the poem, but it is the first and fourth sections that are of interest here because they combine 'rational and non-rational elements'.

The poem opens with an image corroborating the 'lack of straight lines' Butler associated with Africa: the villages near Ife are 'like childish sums/all wrong on a slate'. This is followed by that ubiquitous non-rational African element, the beating of 'happy-go-lucky' drums; their effect is pervasive as, 'soft-mandibled', they work 'like termites at the pit-props of the mind', collapsing the poet's carefully structured consciousness (an image echoed in the above description of a drumbeat 'gnawing' at the 'always shaky foundations' of Butler's ego).

The 'kingly bronzes', however, are exquisitely rational: 'imperturbable' and 'noble', their faces marked by 'authority', their eyes showing 'timely wisdom'. In a formidable conclusion, Butler calls on the 'brazen heads' to preside over his own efforts, as a descendent from this line of African kings, to rebuild their civilisation:

stare at me, you bronzes, stare, persist
till, having caught your straight, incisive gaze,
I cut the scrub with calculated glances:
stare, as I replant, on dazzling days,
ancestral trees; stare on my sweating fist

⁷² *A Local Habitation*, p.221.

in which, this moment, your bloodstream dances, dances.

The image of 'my sweating fist' and the visceral rhythm of 'your bloodstream dances, dances' imbues both the poet and the heads with the primal power of the drums that have been beating since the poem's opening stanza. Both are thus able to achieve the oxymoronic state of being 'passionately passive' as they observe and analyse the Africa around them.

It is instructive to compare Butler's balanced interpretation of these African visages to a near-contemporary, but very different, account. Kenneth Clark's weighty tome *Civilisation* (1969) blurbs its subject as 'Western Europe ... the ideas, books, buildings, works of art and great individuals that make up a Civilisation', and is therefore interested in non-Western elements only insofar as they demonstrate the lack of such a 'civilisation'. The first chapter of Clark's book introduces this opposition by comparing an African mask to the head of the Apollo of the Belvedere:

Whatever its merits as a work of art, I don't think there is any doubt that the Apollo embodies a higher state of civilisation than the mask. They both represent spirits, messengers from another world – that is to say, from a world of our own imagining. To the Negro imagination it is a world of fear and darkness, ready to inflict horrible punishment for the smallest infringement of a taboo. To the Hellenistic imagination it is a world of light and confidence, in which the gods are like ourselves, only more beautiful, and descend to earth in order to teach men reason and the laws of harmony.⁷³

Quite apart from the unfortunate diction, this passage makes the assumption that Africa 'has a monopoly' of Dionysus, god of 'darkness', and Europe 'has a monopoly' of Apollo, god of 'light'. By contrast, in 'Bronze Heads' Butler ascribes the qualities of both gods to the African kings.

For a similarly balanced ascription in an altogether different context, we may turn to the 'Ode: On First Seeing Florence'. The combined rational and non-rational characteristics identified in the bronze heads are interwoven throughout this poem and, climactically, are attributed to its supremely Western icon – Hamlet. Section X of the 'Ode' achieves the

⁷³ Kenneth Clark, *Civilisation* (London: BBC/John Murray, 1974), p.2.

memorable effect of harnessing Hamlet's 'special providence in the fall of a sparrow' and 'the readiness is all' with the instinctive obedience of a migrating bird:

What tiny, pulsing ball
of instinct, blood and feathers
flying ten thousand miles
after the flying sun
...
ever stops to question
what directs its ways?

In Hamlet, 'intellect and blood' are 'commingled well'. The moment of vision expressed in the poem allows Butler to emulate Hamlet's response, 'with poise and grace accepting/the determined end'.

This brings us back to Kaunda, and offers a final refutation of the apparently impassable separation drawn by him between European and African approaches. The Florence Ode, as Butler explains in an author's note, is 'an attempt to do justice' to a Wordsworthian 'renovating spot of time' in which, as the Second World War raged around him, the sight of Florence in the peace of the early morning inspired Butler with a near-mystical insight. In the poem, his response to the violence of the war is not that of Kaunda's Westerner, who, 'when he sees a problem ... will not rest until he has formulated some solution to it'; he demonstrates a 'response of the total personality to the situation' rather than simply following 'the result of some mental exercise'.

II Educator and academic

(i) Didacticism

If Section X of the Florence Ode represents a soldier-poet's resignation to an indeterminate fate, it can also be read as a product of postmodernity, which, as described by Zygmunt Bauman in *Legislators and Interpreters* (1987), 'tries to reconcile itself to a life under conditions of permanent and incurable uncertainty'.¹ This 'uncertainty' is a result of the 'failure' of the centuries-long project of modernity, a loss of confidence in the perfective possibilities of, as Octavio Paz lists, 'progress, evolution, revolution, freedom, democracy, science, technology' – the rationalist position that is the essence of the modern age. In Bauman's book, however, the image of *les philosophes*, the celebrated *hommes des idées et des lettres* of the Enlightenment – an image copied by the "intellectuals" of the early twentieth century when they coined that self-assignation – is tarnished by their complicity (both by association and by instigation) in the somewhat less celebrated affairs of state in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Western Europe.

According to Bauman's narrative, the non-systematised mechanisms of social surveillance and control that had served geographically localised and self-contained European communities throughout the middle ages could not cope with increasingly unfixed, mobile populations. This threatened the established feudal relationships between rural and urban, landowner and peasant farmer, monarchy and nobility. A wider network of state surveillance and control developed under the aegis first of absolute monarchy and, later, of bureaucratized central government; this in turn precipitated legislation aimed at preserving the division between "the elite" and "the mass". Politicians, moral philosophers, clergymen and scientists set about justifying the distinction by emphasising a 'new perception of the relationship between (man-made) social order and nature – including the nature of man', one that 'found its expression in the notorious opposition between reason and passions':

¹ Zygmunt Bauman, *Legislators and Interpreters* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), p.120.

The latter was seen increasingly as the “natural equipment” of men, something men acquire with their birth, with no effort on their part and no assistance from other men. The former, reason, comes with knowledge, must be “passed over” by other people, who know the difference between good and evil, truth and falsity. Thus the difference between reason and passion was from the very start more than a moral opposition; it contained, implicitly but intrinsically, a theory of society, articulating the opposition between the “natural”, and also individual, roots of anti-social phenomena, and the organized, hierarchized mechanism of social order.²

This was the beginning of the semantic pejoration suffered by the term “natural man” – a term debased so effectively by Hobbes’ trenchant summary of the ‘natural state’ of mankind, in which life is ‘nasty, brutish and short’.³ On the other hand, reason (and thus the “reasonable man”) would overcome these natural predilections, the design flaws of *homo sapiens*, and behave according to an imposed model. In France, ‘the discourse of the Enlightenment reached its full maturity in the practice of the [French] Revolution’, during an age in which ‘a managed society, a society consciously designed, planned and supervised by the centralized power’ was an implementable reality.⁴ Who would design the model? *Les philosophes*, of course – the intellectuals. Who would transfer it to the people? *Les professeurs* – the educators.

Bauman does not overtly condemn the perversion of the high ideals of universal freedom and justice that followed the early years of the Revolution (under the Reign of Terror or through the legislative Convention), but he does make a clear case that our sympathetic understanding of the rationalist drive for individual autonomy must be tempered; *les philosophes*, from Rousseau to Voltaire, held a low opinion of “the people” in their vulgar, natural masses. The multitude had to be controlled, to be educated, the purpose of which was not to enlighten but ‘to teach obedience’:

Instinct and willingness to conform, to follow command, to do what the public interest, as defined by the superiors, demands to be done, was the skill most needed by citizens of a planned, designed, thoroughly and completely rationalised society.⁵

² *Ibid.*, pp.54-55.

³ *Ibid.*, p.53.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.70.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.72. Rousseau, by unfavourable contrast, ‘drew sharp boundaries for educational ambitions, leaving the peasants and the artisans on the other side ... “Do not teach the child of a villager, as it does not fit them to

Far from *liberté, égalité* and *fraternité*, this sounds like the beginnings of a fascist dystopia. It provided the foundation for an educational ethos that, in more recent years, as exposed by Bourdieu and Passeron's seminal *La Reproduction* (1970), has served to reinforce and reproduce unequal social power structures.

Moreover, the effects of this attitude of superiority extended far beyond the class confines of a few countries in one continent:

The self-confidence of the enlightened elite of Europe was projected on adjacent categories of mankind, in measures strictly proportional to the perceived closeness of kinship. Thus the group distinguished by an enlightened way of life was seen as decidedly superior in relation to their own ignorant and superstitious working classes or villagers. Together, educated and uneducated Europeans constituted a race which had already situated itself on the side of history that other races were – at best – only struggling to reach ... The many competing conceptualisations of modernity, invariably associated with a theory of history, agreed on one point: they all took the form of life developed in parts of the Western world as the “given”.⁶

In short, the rational project of modernity encouraged colonial expansion – was, indeed, apart from the alternative accounts of missionary zeal and exploitative greed, the primary motivation behind the altogether uncivilised “civilising” process of colonisation.

Butler was an intellectual and an educator, but we cannot easily identify him with the ‘new certainty’ of rationality and modernity that was ‘grounded in the alliance of power and knowledge’.⁷ We read in Chapter One of his ‘misgivings about human nature’ – an attitude that, although it may seem to fall in line with the denigration of the “natural man”, is in fact at odds with what Bauman calls the ‘declared profession of faith’ of the modern project: replacing ‘the church-based certainty of the Middle Ages’ with confidence in the ‘self-sufficiency and perfectability of man’. Rather, Butler’s creed (which Bauman would perhaps rank in the sceptical tradition of Montaigne) was one of “church-based *uncertainty*”.

be taught”, *La Nouvelle Heloise*; “The poor does not need education; one attached to his state is forced, and he would not have any other”, *Emile*’ (p.79). This is disturbingly similar to Verwoerd’s justification for the policies of Bantu Education: what good is reading and writing to a black population limited to being “hewers of wood and drawers of water”?

⁶ *Legislators and Interpreters*, pp.110-111.

This paradoxical position is neither modern, that is, belonging to 'the era of certainty', nor is it postmodern – experience defined by a 'lack of self-confidence'.⁸ Butler rejected any commitment to ideology, that great abettor of modernity (whether in the original conception of "ideology" as the 'generation of ideas' to 'merge with political power', or in the Marxist critique of ideology as 'philosophical idealism' removed from 'the level where material conditions of life are produced').⁹ Yet he had his own particular faith. Proclamations such as those quoted earlier from 'South African Literature' show that he was not a relativist; he believed in one God, one 'super-racial reference point', and that 'fixed point' is 'the City of God' into which all are called and entitled to be citizens.

Bauman's study admittedly hinges on a European-American axis; nevertheless, it acknowledges that one of the key contributing factors to the collapse of self-confidence and certainty in the postmodern West has been "the empire striking back", a growing awareness of other world views than that held by modern Western Europe, each of which must be granted some validity precisely because it is, or has been, extant. This gives rise to pluralism which, in contrast to 'a shared commitment to one nation and one God',

assumes no such overarching unity or loyalty. Pluralism is the existence of multiple frames of reference, each with its own scheme of understanding and criteria of rationality. Pluralism is the coexistence of comparable and competing positions which are not to be reconciled. Pluralism is the recognition that different persons and different groups quite literally dwell in irreducibly different worlds.¹⁰

By this definition, Butler was no pluralist either. South Africa's current multi-racial and multi-cultural society is often referred to as "pluralist", but the above understanding of pluralism tends towards an apology for racial and other forms of segregation. Butler, on the contrary, argued consistently that 'competing positions' could and should be 'reconciled', that Europe and Africa were not 'irreducibly different worlds' and that they might be fused in a new South African nation.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.95.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.119.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 99 and p.106.

Here, however, we confront a contradiction in Butler's "anti-rational" stance. His insistence that Apollo and Dionysus meet to forge an understanding became a proselytising message, one expressed in his writing and in his public pronouncements – and it is exactly this kind of proselytising mission that Bauman demonstrates to be part of the rationalist project. Butler cut a rare figure in a world of increasing specialisation; he was one of the 'general intellectuals, still bent on performing a role which inevitably brought them in touch, or in conflict, with the political powers of the state'.¹¹ To use Bauman's nomenclature, while Butler offered himself as an "interpreter" between the different groups in South Africa, he also acted as a moral "legislator", making authoritative pronouncements, trying to change the hearts and minds of his listeners and readers.

I have noted that Butler, despite his teaching prowess, could be most self-effacing about his role as an educator. Each volume of his autobiography separately suggests that academia was a kind of default career. The university environment presented him with a context in which to practice his vocation, but his first calling had been that of mage: poet, dramatist, artist. Despite his passion for research and his intellectual pride, he eschewed cultural elitism and academic pretension or self-reproduction. As early as 1950, he described the 'light (not necessarily bad) novel' as one of various media, such as film, radio or the popular press, which,

it would seem, are the forms of literature which determine our emotional and imaginative responses more than any other, and it strikes me as unreal and precious to dismiss them as culturally insignificant and only fit for hacks.¹²

Towards the end of his life, Butler found himself inclined to dispense with the formalities of the academy: the Foreword to *The Prophetic Nun* declares as much. In 1998, Angus Rose wrote to him to compliment him on an article he had written on Laurens van der Post that was '(dare I say it?) couched in such refreshingly unacademic terms. ... You have many gifts

¹⁰ Lonnie Kliever, quoted in *Legislators and Interpreters*, pp.128-129.

¹¹ *Legislators and Interpreters*, p.171.

which you share so generously but none so valuable as your clear, direct diction.¹³

Nevertheless, to the adjectives ‘clear’ and ‘direct’ we must also add “didactic”. Butler’s writing was rarely without *telos*; his was a purposive, if not altogether pedagogical, literary output. Even his poetry, which Muriel Bradbrook finds ‘free from any desire to argue, to descend into rhetoric or polemic’, occasionally exhibits a tendency towards sermonising – having fallen from the transcendent perch that Butler so determinedly fought to occupy.¹⁴ This study has already suggested a few instances of the clash. He may have reacted against the ‘cool, sweet Quaker reasonableness’ of his upbringing with an irrationalism that came to the fore in bursts throughout his life, but the same ‘reasonableness’ was made manifest in his own rational position of intellectual-educator.

It may be remarked that, if Butler occasionally fell between the two stools of Rationalism and Romanticism, a brief survey of major English Romantic poets would show the same inconsistency. The sublime is not indefinitely sustainable. Blake’s mythologies, Wordsworth’s spots of time, Coleridge’s pleasure-dome, Keats’ oblivious nightingale, Shelley’s outstripping West Wind, Byron’s elegies: all these transcendent modes of being gave way, at some point, to the poets’ own rationalist tendencies – support for and criticism of the French revolution, endorsement of independence wars, participation in English political and social issues. Poets are, after all, according to Shelley’s famous line, ‘the unacknowledged legislators of the world’.¹⁵ Shelley used the word “legislator” in a different context to Bauman (his *Defence of Poetry* asserting, against Peacock’s mocking *Four Ages of Poetry*, ‘the electric life’ of his contemporaries ‘which burns within their words’). Yet that other memorably climactic proclamation of the *Defence*, that poets are ‘the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present’,

¹² Butler, ‘South African Literature’, p.30.

¹³ Angus Rose, letter to Guy Butler, 24th January 1998. NELM.

¹⁴ Bradbrook, ““A dome of many-coloured glass”: The Lyric Poetry of Guy Butler’, p.159. Compare Tony Voss’s comment that, in *Songs and Ballads*, ‘sometimes a poem progresses too readily to a moral summation or interpretation’ – although he does balance this with a justification, as if on Butler’s behalf: ‘Explicit “moralising” can be the defect of a poet’s virtues and there is no reason for a poet not to espouse ancient pieties; to raise again and again the fundamental question of the spirit and the polis, as Guy Butler does.’ (‘Review of Guy Butler, *Songs and Ballads*’: 73.)

can also be read as a progressive affirmation – and the impetus of progress, always emphasising the future-present, lies at the heart of the rationalists’ modernity.

(ii) Positivism

Despite these often unconscious “rationalist” streaks, the Romantics subjected the ‘Enlightenment tendency not to accept any authority and to decide everything before the judgement seat of reason’ to a forceful critique.¹⁶ Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the consequences of this judicial process still permeate our (globalised) way of thinking and our (increasingly generic) way of life. We would do well, therefore, to revisit the eloquent words of William Hazlitt:

It is easy indeed, to call names, or to separate the word *prejudice* from the word *reason*; but not so easy to separate the two things.

The best way to prevent our running into the wildest excesses of prejudice and the most dangerous aberrations from reason, is, not to represent the two things as having a great gulph between them, which it is impossible to pass without a violent effort, but to show that we are constantly (even when we think ourselves most secure) treading on the brink of a precipice; that custom, passion, imagination, insinuate themselves into and influence almost every judgement we pass or sentiment we indulge, and are a necessary help (as well as hindrance) to the human understanding; and that, to attempt to refer every question to abstract truth and precise definition, without allowing for the frailty of prejudice, which is the unavoidable consequence of the frailty and imperfection of reason, would be to unravel the whole web and texture of human understanding and society.¹⁷

Over a hundred years later, in *Truth and Method* (1960), Hans-Georg Gadamer elaborated on the proposition that prejudice – in Hazlitt’s terms, ‘custom, passion, imagination’; in Gadamer’s terms, ‘authority’, ‘tradition’ and ‘history’, or historical moment – informs our every interaction with the world around us and our every engagement with the world of ideas. In doing so, Gadamer differed not only with Enlightenment views, but also, according to Georgia Warnke, with the academic positivism of the mid-twentieth century. During Butler’s tenure at Rhodes, that university

¹⁵ ‘Defence of Poetry’, p.59.

¹⁶ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd Ed (1965) trans. William Glen-Doepel (London: Sheed and Ward, 1979), p.241.

¹⁷ William Hazlitt, *The Atlas*, 18th April 1830.

largely preserved the “liberal arts” tradition from positivist attacks, but the dominance of positivism at universities in South Africa and internationally suggests that a brief investigation of the merits and demerits of positivism in education is necessary before we assess the implications of Gadamer’s response to it, and the way in which this offers useful insights into Butler’s own project.¹⁸

Wilhelm Dilthey’s attempts to establish the *Geisteswissenschaften* (what we would term the humanities or social sciences) as independent from the physical or biological sciences nevertheless delineated both sets of disciplines as objective and neutral inquiries into human or natural phenomena. The positivists differed from Dilthey ‘only in denying any distinction’ between the natural and human sciences: ‘if both were to be objective sciences, this meant that the latter had to emulate the former’ in its methods and rational rigorousness.¹⁹ According to the positivists, however, disciplines ‘in which the influence of talent, imagination and perspective could not be minimized, such as literary studies and art appreciation, were no longer to be viewed as cognitive disciplines at all’.

While this was an extreme position, its impact on literary studies remains a substantial one. The emphasis that has been placed on theory (to which Butler was largely averse) since the 1960s and 1970s attests to the influence of positivism. Debates over distinctions between academic disciplines also affect the fraught matter of funding, whether in private sector- or state-sponsored research. Those who can demonstrate the outcome of “method” applied in research – a list of publications – are advantaged, while funding policies typically fail to recognise ‘the intellectual and social importance of a wider range of intellectual activities than can fall under the research banner’.²⁰ Academics can, however, be

¹⁸ It is also, in this context, worth pointing to Butler’s complaint in 1962 about the priority given by the state (and therefore, because of subsidy implications, by universities) to the sciences over the arts (see ‘The Republic and the Arts’, p.99). The debate over subsidies and student intake has come to the fore again recently with Education Minister Naledi Pandor introducing ‘strict new enrolment and performance targets for higher education institutions to produce more job-ready graduates’ – stressing the need for ‘more students in science’ and calling on institutions ‘to limit their intake in the humanities ... in favour of fields such as business, engineering and technology’. See Prega Govender, ‘Universities Told to Cut Back on Arts’, *Sunday Times*, 29th July 2007 (online: <http://www.thetimes.co.za/printedition>, accessed 3rd August 2007).

¹⁹ Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), p.2.

²⁰ See Laurence Wright and Sarah Murray, ‘The Principle of a Rating System for the Humanities and Social Sciences: Ameliorating the Judgement of Paris’ (2001). Available at <http://www.ru.ac.za/institutes/isea> (July 2005). Wright and Murray query the incorporation of the natural sciences, the social sciences and “non-

productively engaged in pursuits that do not necessarily lead to publication and cannot be “rated”, but do contribute to the intellectual life and social commitment of a university.

Guy Butler was widely published, but the career of “Professor Butler” represents a case in support of the above point. His contribution to the vitality of Rhodes University and to the members of its broader community was often in areas that cannot easily be measured or weighed. He was a tireless committee-sitter, and his participation in university matters was described, in 1996, as ‘unequaled’ – this from ex-Vice Chancellor Derek Henderson, following Butler’s decision to stand down from the university’s Council after nearly forty years.²¹ The praise was offered not simply because of his public profile as ‘one of Rhodes’ most illustrious sons’, but because of his work in the often thankless spheres of finance (he was a ‘workhorse’ when it came to cutting costs) and campus aesthetics (his ‘concern for the architectural integrity’ of the grounds and gardens led to numerous innovations).²²

Butler was directly responsible for the establishment at Rhodes of the departments of Speech and Drama, Linguistics and Journalism, all offshoots of the English Department that grew to independence. Yet he would have disapproved of the current bias toward specialisation – specialised researchers, specialised practitioners, specialised administrators – that demeans the value of time invested outside “areas of expertise”. It was not strange to him that the Chair of the English Department should direct student plays (seven in total) and combine with the Music and Fine Art departments in stage productions. “Inter-disciplinary collaboration”, whether in a research context or not, is not a new phenomenon; the label itself is merely a function of the generification of higher education. The twenty-first century university environment, corporate and bureaucratic, is altogether different to that in which Professor Butler took up and held

scientific” disciplines in the humanities into a unified research body under recent South African National Research Foundation (NRF) policies. While they welcome the introduction of a peer-reviewed rating system for all academics, they query the value of a generic NRF assessment scale.

²¹ Henderson, notes for speech honouring Guy Butler, AUETSA conference, 1996. NELM.

²² *Ibid.* Butler sat on the so-called ‘Three Wise Men’s Committee’ (Professors Butler, Baart and Brooks) that was often consulted on matters of campus aesthetics and introduced such features as the fountain in what is now the central administrative block, the flowers and gardens below the university clock tower, the acquisition

his Chair;²³ but the wide range of his activities at Rhodes suggests the need for a broader definition of academic credibility than publication alone.

Butler seemed to discover in the latter part of his life that of all his talents, literary and otherwise, the one he was able to exercise with the greatest gratification was scholarly research. No doubt part of his enthusiasm for researching 1820 settler history was the abundance of untouched primary material in this field. His chief literary interest, Shakespeare studies, remains a sphere in which literary ‘scholarship’ is more widely appreciated, as literary ‘research’ on Shakespeare often tends towards the obscure or the arcane. He struggled with this imbalance while on sabbatical in 1980, dissecting source materials for *King Lear* at Oxford’s Bodleian Library. Butler himself was not immune to “publication pressure” – although his was largely internal – and he was torn between, on the one hand, involvement in university affairs and national cultural politics, and on the other, his enthusiasm for research:

Sometimes I say to myself: you silly bugger, you could really have done something in this field if you’d concentrated on it. And at others I say: all very well to be happily absorbed in *King Lear*, but shouldn’t you be putting these energies into the mad land that bred you, and its readers and writers? I suppose all SA’s [sic] are shadowed by guilt; even when they feel fulfilled within the present, they feel guilty because they don’t feel guilty! Ah well. Stupid to plague myself.²⁴

This ‘guilt’ stems not just from the conflict between “research” and “activity” but, more broadly, from the burden of “relevance” in literary or artistic pursuits (I will discuss this dilemma further in Chapter Five). It is significant that, in the Epilogue to *A Local Habitation*, Butler should mention his ‘unhurried research’ as a semi-retired academic – since 1987

of the St Peter’s property after the Training College closed and the garden parties held there that traditionally follow graduation ceremonies.

²³ Jonathan Jansen describes the commodification of education as follows:

You may recognise [a] university in which the entire place has been transformed into a commercial centre, the departments called “cost-centres” and the students called “clients”; in which every “management” meeting is consumed with balancing the budget in the light of impending subsidy cuts; in which the response to external intervention is one of compliance and consent; in which the accumulation of larger and larger *numbers* of accredited publications is pursued with relentless vigour; in which teaching is equated with technology, and the mechanics of research confused with the elegance of scholarship. Just about everyone in such a place is in the business of (ac)counting. Here, too, the university has long ceased to exist.

(‘Accounting for Autonomy’, 41st TB Davie Memorial Lecture, University of Cape Town, 26th August 2004, p.16. UCT Libraries.)

he had been Professor Emeritus and Honorary Research Fellow at Rhodes – in terms of its conflict with poetry and other “creative” pursuits: ‘as nearly always with me, I have little scruple in shelving the completion of a learned article if anything vaguely resembling a fresh idea or rhyme enters my mind.’²⁵

(iii) Dialogue between prejudices

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer’s response to the legacy of the Enlightenment offers a refutation not only of positivism in education but, more broadly, of any science’s claim to a reasoned objectivity. Scientific method, Gadamer argues, is historically conditioned and therefore also subject to prejudice: ‘The history of mathematics or of the natural sciences is also a part of the history of the human spirit and reflects its destinies.’²⁶ Objectivity is unattainable; there is no place for ‘pretentious knowing’, or the false confidence of the scientist.²⁷ To paraphrase Hazlitt, what we understand to be our “reason” is nothing more than the sum of all our prejudices.

Gadamer goes further, however, and suggests that prejudice – insofar as prejudice is merely a reflection of the identity created by tradition, culture, habit and historical circumstance, ‘the historicity of our thinking and knowing’ – is not in itself undesirable.²⁸ Rather,

what is necessary is a fundamental rehabilitation of the concept of prejudice and a recognition of the fact that there are legitimate prejudices, if we want to do justice to man’s finite, historical mode of being.²⁹

This is, primarily, to admit to subjectivity, to the impossibility of being (as Kant would have it) ‘disinterested’.³⁰ The important question then becomes, ‘where is the ground of the legitimacy of prejudices?’³¹ The answer lies in the resuscitation of ‘a dialogic conception of knowledge’. For

²⁴ Butler, letter to Malvern van Wyk Smith, 2nd November 1980.

²⁵ Butler, *A Local Habitation*, p.309.

²⁶ *Truth and Method*, p.251.

²⁷ Gadamer, *Philosophical Apprenticeships*, trans. Robert Sullivan (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1985), p.185.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.187.

²⁹ *Truth and Method*, p.246.

³⁰ See *Legislators and Interpreters*, p.140.

³¹ *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason*, p.4.

Gadamer, 'there is no higher principle than holding oneself open in a conversation.'³²

This Platonic notion of dialogue (its philosophical ancestor is *thesis-antithesis-synthesis*) suggests that ultimately Gadamer's position is not diametrically opposed to the Enlightenment emphasis on reason. Instead, it seeks a new understanding of reason-as-engagement with others: 'the universe of the reasonable' is 'anything and everything about which human beings can seek to reach agreement.' Dialogue must be pre-eminent because it 'lets us be certain of possible assent, even in the wreckage of agreement, in misunderstanding, and in the admission of ignorance'.³³

The challenge of Gadamer's "dialogue" is essentially the challenge laid down by Butler to South Africa's disparate racial and cultural groups, and to the English-speaking South African (ESSA) in particular. 'We find out who we are,' wrote Butler, 'through our encounters with other people, through taking part in their stories as we live our own.'³⁴ The dual meaning of 'prejudice' – for Gadamer, it was a matter of identity and inheritance, but it is almost inseparable in our current vocabulary from "bigotry" or "discrimination" – offers a useful paradigm for the dual shortcoming that Butler saw in ESSAs: ignorance of their own historical roots and cultural heritage, and submission to the apartheid government's racial theories.

Butler's brand of "liberal humanism" has been criticised for a politically naïve foregrounding of the individual: placing value on relationships between individuals over and above broad socio-historical movements. Gadamer's defence of 'dialogue', however, advocates a similar emphasis:

Historical distance and even the placing of one's conversation partner in a historically surveyable course remain subordinate moments of our attempt at reaching understanding. In truth these go to form the self-reassurance with which we close ourselves off from the conversation partner. In

³² *Philosophical Apprenticeships*, p.189. This point is emphasised by Bauman in his summary of Ernest Gellner: 'with pluralism irreversible', there is an urgent need for 'specialists in translation between cultural traditions ... the proposed specialism boils down to the art of civilised conversation' (*Legislators and Interpreters*, p.143).

³³ *Philosophical Apprenticeships*, p.180.

³⁴ Butler, *The Prophetic Nun*, p.61.

conversation, however, we attempt to open ourselves to him, and this means holding fast to our common ground.³⁵

One final point of concurrence between Gadamer and Butler in our consideration of “the realm of reason” is the question of language. Insofar as ‘conversation’ and ‘dialogue’ are central to Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics, it is not surprising that he admitted to a deep struggle with words and expression. While he found himself ‘rooted in a fundamental linguisticality or language-relatedness’, he also affirmed that

the fundamental linguisticality of understanding cannot possibly mean that all experiencing of the world takes place only as language and in language. All too well known are those prelinguistic and metalinguistic dawns, dumbnesses, and silences in which the immediate meeting with the world expresses itself.³⁶

This uncertain balance between words and the spaces between words instilled in Gadamer a great respect for the role of the poet. Poetry, saturated with multiple meanings, riddled with well-phrased questions rather than neat answers, is ‘a corrective for the ideal of objective determination and for the hubris of concepts’.³⁷ This echoes Butler’s aversion to certainty and his distrust of intellectual or political absolutism. Indeed, his own poetic output (of which the major motif is ‘in all of us two continents collide’) evinces Gadamer’s opinion that ‘the reception and interpretation of poetry seems to imply a dialogical relationship of a unique kind.’³⁸

(iv) From rationalism to consumerism

For Gadamer, then, reason *as reason* accepts its own limitations: as a first principle, the conceptual scheme of any particular culture or tradition must be accepted as limited. This is ‘practical reason’ – what it means to act “rationally”. As Warnke notes, Gadamer ‘points to the increase in social irrationality which accompanies the hegemony of technical reason over

³⁵ *Philosophical Apprenticeships*, p.188.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.179.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.190.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.192.

practical deliberation.³⁹ If this echoes Butler's criticism of the irrational nature (the 'madness') of hard-headed ideology, it also resonates with the thinking of British philosopher and near-contemporary of Gadamer and Butler, Michael Oakeshott.⁴⁰ The question of "reason" – and 'technical reason' in particular – is central to Oakeshott's analyses.

"Rationalism", because of the power-knowledge alliance in which *les philosophes* entrenched themselves, can never be an abstract stance on the role of reason; it carries heavy political overtones. In his essay on 'Rationalism in Politics', Oakeshott suggests the following definition of a rationalist:

At bottom he stands (he always *stands*) for independence of mind on all occasions, for thought free from obligation to any authority save the authority of 'reason'. His circumstances in the modern world have made him contentious: he is the *enemy* of authority, of prejudice, of the merely traditional, customary or habitual. His mental attitude is at once sceptical and optimistic: sceptical, because there is no opinion, no habit, no belief, nothing so firmly rooted or so widely held that he hesitates to question it and to judge it by what he calls his 'reason'; optimistic, because the Rationalist never doubts the power of his 'reason' (when properly applied) to determine the worth of a thing, the truth of an opinion or the propriety of an action.⁴¹

On one level, rationalism appears to be crucial to progress – to liberation. South Africans celebrate the "freedom struggle" for its challenge to authority and its attempts to overcome prejudice. Furthermore, when we consider Butler's inclination towards doubt and uncertainty in light of Oakeshott's characterisation, the apparent scepticism of the rationalist seems to complement this caution. Yet Oakeshott is troubled by rationalism's essential optimism. He draws a distinction between technical knowledge, which is based on 'rules, principles, directions, maxims', and practical or traditional knowledge, which is more intuitive and 'cannot be formulated in rules ... the method by which it may be shared and becomes common knowledge is not the method of the formulated doctrine.'⁴²

³⁹ Gadamer: *Hermeneutics. Tradition and Reason*, p.174.

⁴⁰ Like Gadamer, Oakeshott emphasises the (often unconscious or unacknowledged) influence and importance of tradition, although he does so in a very different context and draws very different conclusions regarding historical "progress". The contrast between their views is a useful one to this study, as Butler's understanding of history can be located somewhere between the two. See Chapter Five (II).

⁴¹ Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and other essays* (London: Methuen, 1981), pp.1-2.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.8.

Oakeshott believes that these two are inseparable 'in every concrete human activity', but that rationalists only value technical knowledge.⁴³ Rationalists, he argues, are concerned with certainty: having none of Keats' negative capability, they are always searching after fact and reason. Technique, therefore, is sovereign to them because it is self-contained and certain. This is where rationalism ceases to be sceptical: 'The rationalist's belief in the sovereignty of technique translates in politics into the belief in the superiority of an ideology over a tradition or habit of behaviour.'⁴⁴

It is not easy for South Africans to accept this conservative approach to history and tradition. Elements in its critique of rationalism may be seen to jar with the ambitions of a nation only now emerging from wrong and generations-long 'habits of behaviour'. The pathological nature of South African history prevents us from regretting that 'to the Rationalist, nothing is of value merely because it exists (and certainly not because it has existed for many generations), familiarity has no worth, and nothing is to be left standing for want of scrutiny.'⁴⁵ Much that has existed in South Africa for generations should not be credited with 'value merely because it exists'. Nevertheless, there is much that can be salvaged and preserved, much that remains for us 'to patch up, to repair' (as Oakeshott puts it) rather than destroy. This is the kind of salvage-job undertaken by Butler in, for example, *Karoo Morning*; it is conservative, but not reactionary.

If the rationalist exhibits a tendency to shy away from the past ('He has no sense of the cumulation of experience ... the past is significant to him only as an encumbrance'), Bauman's account of the rise of Reason shows how this attitude in fact grew out of the centralising of power in Western European states; the "civilising" mission of the "enlightened" few would have the many 'stripped of the shoddy vestments of tradition'.⁴⁶ Popular culture was thus suppressed: 'rural and urban festivals,

⁴³ See 'The Republic and the Arts': 'we are neglecting ... education in values, which is more important than education in techniques' (Butler, *Essays and Lectures*, p.100). In the current educational climate, outcomes-based education (OBE), focusing as it does on the acquisition of specified skills and seeking to concretise that abstract entity we call "knowledge", seems to succumb to a rationalist mindset.

⁴⁴ Paul Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), p.112.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.4.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.2. and *Legislators and Interpreters*, p.68.

processions, games and plays were declared guilty of unleashing passions and stifling the voice of reason.⁴⁷ This suppression was furthered by the Church and, for more sinister reasons, by the wealthy upper classes – popular activities facilitated social mixing, a sharing of public space by those from all ranks and stations. They were sites of foment, not of state control, and thus

no longer was there any tolerance for localised, nation-bound ways of life. The new order was not to be safeguarded by collective experience grounded in historically developed customs. Those, on the contrary, had to be broken. Tradition had to be denied authority.⁴⁸

Popular culture, 'local customs invoking ancient laws', did not fit into the 'universality' of the 'behavioural pattern' that the enlightened powers wished to impose; the totalitarian implications of this imposition, one of the worst features of modernity, have the effect of vindicating popular culture and its value to the *populus*.⁴⁹ It would seem, then, that a postmodern age of burgeoning "pop culture" has resurrected popular culture after years of oppression in the name of reason: the cultural elitism of modernity has been reversed, and culture returned to the masses. Unfortunately, however, what we understand by (and refer to as) popular culture today is altogether different to pre-modern popular culture or "folk culture". The latter part of Bauman's book investigates the consumer society, in which values are no longer 'articulated by the state' – or by religious leaders, or by a legislative intelligentsia – but 'have been turned into attributes of commodities': 'It is therefore the mechanism of the market which now takes upon itself the role of the judge, the opinion-maker, the verifier of values.'⁵⁰

We are constantly being persuaded that postmodern popular culture is created through consensus (and this is corroborated by the perceived association of capitalism with democracy). Yet consumerism is really a form of dictatorship; it is the marketers, the advertisers, the promoters, the brand managers, who have become the dictators. If, under this regime,

⁴⁷ *Legislators and Interpreters*, p.61.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.92.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.60.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.124.

‘intellectuals have been expropriated’ from their positions of authority, then according to Bauman they still have the opportunity – indeed, the responsibility – to bring about

the separation of the paramount values of autonomy, self-perfection and authenticity from the renderings forced upon them by the domination of the market in the current, consumer version of modern society.⁵¹

It is the intellectuals who are able to restore ‘person-oriented values’ and, in so doing, to ‘redeem the promise of modernity’ – redeemed from beginnings in the oppressive alliance between knowledge and power, and redeemed from an inconclusive end in the postmodern morass.

Legislators and Interpreters was published two years before the fall of the Berlin wall, its intended audience primarily those Euromericans still engaged in debating the binary opposition of Soviet-style communism and Washington-style capitalism. Nevertheless, Bauman’s depiction of the consumer society remains accurate nearly twenty years on. In South Africa, the first of our country’s “two economies” has typically followed the patterns of the wealthy West. This tendency is stronger in post-apartheid South Africa than it has ever been, and its sophisticated consumer machinery is shown to be monstrous when compared to the widespread poverty of the “second economy”. Butler’s half-century long campaign to divert South Africans away from consumerism towards a more economically modest, ‘person-oriented’ lifestyle continues to challenge us to ‘redeem the promise of modernity’. His ‘liberal strand’ – for he was an hereditary rationalist, despite his anti-rational leanings – did not bear, as Stephen Watson has observed, ‘those values which would mark (and mar) the advent of the affluent society and consumerism in South Africa’.⁵²

Bauman’s reproach of the ways in which consumer culture undermines individual autonomy follows directly from his analysis of the rationalist rejection of history; this is the node at which his critique intersects both with Oakeshott’s focus on the value of tradition and his warnings against ideological whitewashing, and with Gadamer’s rejuvenation of prejudice-as-the-past and his emphasis on dialogue

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.191.

between prejudiced individuals. It is at this point that we can locate the crux of Butler's response to rationalism, demonstrating the intellectual substance behind what was, at times, a deliberately non-intellectual embrace of "the irrational". It is also at this point that Part Three of the present study may be introduced: Butler's views on the individual in relation to history and tradition, both European and African.

⁵² Watson, Introduction to *Guy Butler: Essays and Lectures*, p.2.

PART THREE

Preamble: history

Along with English, History was Butler's major undergraduate subject. His Professor, Michael Roberts, wrote a testimonial for him noting that young Butler showed 'a marked aptitude for the subject' and observing: '[Butler's] view of history is that catholic and liberal one which deems nothing human alien to it.'¹ In order to ascertain what exactly Professor Roberts was describing, we may turn again to the work of Oakeshott – and in particular to his disagreement with historian EH Carr. In *What is History?* (1961), Carr argues that historical enquiry entails the selection of significant facts that can be seen to contribute to a pattern of historical direction – facts that are part of chains of causation in historical movements or events. The significance of facts, he asserts, can only be determined after the historian has established his or her own standards and criteria, which in turn are based on the present society in which the historian lives. In response, Oakeshott accuses Carr of an 'antiquated positivism' which holds that 'historical enquiry is impossible without a belief in a "progressive" direction'.² Oakeshott makes a similar point elsewhere, when he censures the kind of historian who

commits himself to a simple linear view of the course of events, and regards himself as under a discipline to elucidate that exclusive stream of actions and happenings in the past which seems to hold within itself the seeds of what he thinks important in the present. His heroes are those who belong to this lineage, men whose lives seem to foretell the present and who are singled out on account of their 'modernity': the rest are non-contributors or are recognised to have a place in the story only as obstructionists.³

These interpretations of history, which are determined entirely by the considerations of the present and essentially represent history as a success-story – the story of the victor – are useful foils for our understanding of Butler's contrasting 'catholic' approach to history. In the

¹ Michael Roberts, testimonial for Guy Butler, 18th November 1938. NELM.

² Oakeshott, 'What is history?', *What is History? and other essays*, ed. Luke O'Sullivan (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2004), p.322.

following chapters, we will investigate his 'long view of history': one that is not easily reconciled with a (neo-Marxist) vision of human "progress", but rather shares something with Yeats' gyres, and does not focus on present considerations at the expense of past or future concerns. We will also take into account those who seem to be excluded by 'a simple linear view of the course of events': individuals who, although they may appear to be insignificant within the vast movements of politics and history, were of abiding interest to Butler.

A Local Habitation emphasises 'history with a small *h*' – that is to say, not 'generalities about economics or class or race', but 'named individuals living in particular times'; a history that is 'not made or experienced by Man, but by men, women and children'.⁴ Yet, if Butler admitted to being 'probably more influenced by Marx, Fraser and Toynbee than I am aware', he nevertheless stood (and, to an extent, still stands) accused – by more conscious acolytes of *H*istory – of willful ignorance. The history of South Africa in the twentieth century has typically been seen as a game of numbers, played on a massive scale: majority vs. minority; the people vs. the regime; the struggle of the masses vs. the privilege of the few.

Butler was, of course, concerned with the broader processes of history, even in the act of trying to "escape" them. Moreover, as his Preface to *Karoo Morning* acknowledges, the liberal-humanist prioritisation of the individual can be dangerous when mixed with liberal-consumerism: 'much goodness is starved to death in the name of individual freedom'.⁵ The Preface, though brief, is a provocative assertion of the author's life both as one lived 'on the marches of a great empire in its decline' and as one spent in 'a great continent in the century of its awakening'. It also contains a frank admission that 'I grew up inside the settler myth', with all that this entails. An early draft of the Preface begins with a passage in which one senses that the "lunatic left" had sufficiently nagged at Butler's conscience to rejuvenate the nascent white guilt of his youth:

³ Oakeshott, 'The Whig Interpretation of History', *ibid.*, p.220.

⁴ Butler, *A Local Habitation*, p.243.

⁵ Butler, *Karoo Morning*, p.ix.

It may well be asked how late in 1976 ... a White South African academic should have the brass to prepare his reminiscences for publication. Surely there are more relevant and important tasks. It is a good question, and deserves an answer ... It is possible – in spite of the almost total politicisation of modern thought – that the mere humanity of my parents and others may outwit the prejudices, slogans and disasters of our generation.⁶

There is a thinly veiled irony in the hedging of ‘it is possible’, for the proof that it *is* possible lies in the permanence of the published book, *Karoo Morning* itself; it is Butler’s recorded recollection of ‘mere humanity’, set down and surviving beyond ‘our generation’.

The autobiographies do not ignore ‘the prejudices, slogans and disasters’ of the South African and world histories through which Butler lived, nor do they ignore the historical processes that shaped the author and those around him. Rather, they reconstruct the identity of these individuals precisely by looking to the past, declaring: ‘I will never imitate those who rub out their traces, disown the past and the dead, although they pretend they are alive with mental acrobatics.’⁷ These are not Butler’s words; they come from Czeslaw Milosz’s essay in autobiography, *Native Realm* (1981). The respective projects of Butler and Milosz, elder statesmen of ostensibly divergent national literatures in South Africa and Poland, share a vision that seeks to affirm the value of the individual without yielding to individualism. Milosz’s assertion that ‘our real moral duty is toward the person of another human being’ is balanced with an understanding of the individual’s mode of being-in-history.⁸ Thus, every life story holds inherent worth because

unless we can relate it to ourselves personally, history will always be more or less of an abstraction, and its content the clash of impersonal forces and ideas. Although generalizations are necessary to order its vast, chaotic material, they kill the individual detail that tends to stray from the schema. Doubtless every family archive that perishes, every account book that is burned, every effacement of the past reinforces classifications at the expense of reality. Afterward, all that remains of entire centuries is a kind of popular digest. And not one of us today is immune to that contagion.⁹

⁶ Butler, ‘Preface’ (to *Karoo Morning*), draft typescript, p.1. NELM.

⁷ Milosz, *Native Realm*, p.2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.84.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.20.

Milosz also bemoaned that in ‘the twentieth century, panic-stricken in the face of nationalist and racist ravings,’ people strained ‘to fill up the chasm of time with production figures or the names of a few political-economic systems’, thus renouncing ‘investigations of the fine tissue of becoming, where no thread should be overlooked’.¹⁰ We may apply this to Butler’s enthusiastic research into settler history – where ‘the fine tissue of becoming’ was embodied in the documentation he was so careful to study and preserve, letters and diaries and miscellanea – and into the records of pre-colonial Africa: songs, stories, stones, any human or natural ‘thread’ woven into the fabric of the continent’s history.¹¹

In at least one respect, however, it is inappropriate to yoke Butler and Milosz together. The ‘clash of forces’ in and around Milosz was of a multicultural and multilingual milieu, of a history of conquest and domination, of bitter national and racial rivalries – but these belong to Poland, Germany and Russia. Despite certain similarities between the conflict in South Africa and the path from Czarism to Nazism to Communism in Eastern Europe, the key difference between the two men is that Milosz (albeit idealising his Lithuanian ancestry) could declare his conscience ‘unburdened with the sufferings of black slaves’.¹² Butler’s ancestors, whatever their merits, shared some complicity in the history of colonial oppression. If Njabulo Ndebele warned against ‘a blind progeny/that acts without indebtedness to the past’, Butler’s critics accused him of presenting a blinkered view of the past – and even of turning a blind eye to the present.¹³

In apartheid-era South Africa, there was no evading racial politics. Butler may have emphasised the ‘biological accident of skin colour’ to ridicule racial theorising, but he could not deny, as Milosz puts it, ‘how much the accident of our birthplace can separate us from the set of opinions held elsewhere’.¹⁴ Being born in South Africa meant, and still means, being born into a race group, a language group, a “class”. Yet

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.146.

¹¹ Marge Clouts, widow of Sydney, praised Butler because he ‘told South African things ... which would have become lost, or at best dusty footnotes.’ (Letter to Guy and Jean Butler, 3rd March, 1999. NELM.)

¹² *Native Realm*, p.14.

¹³ Njabulo Ndebele, ‘The Revolution of the Aged’, *Staffrider* 3:4 (1980), p.2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.9.

Butler resisted the peculiar emphasis that South Africans have placed on these categorisations. In a 1978 letter to Nadine Gordimer, responding to and praising an article Gordimer wrote anticipating a shift 'From Apartheid to Afrocentrism', Butler probed the implications of her article for "defining" individuals:

Clearly class, power and economics are vital, and you are right to emphasise them; but they are not the only factors which determine a writer's vision of himself or his people. A profoundly simple question: Has a black Christian ceased to be truly African? Has a black Marxist? Has a black Mohammedan? [sic] None of these great missionary faiths is African in origin.¹⁵

The general tone of the letter reflects Butler's consistent line: a rejection of the capital-letter words produced by *H*istory. In 1952, he publicly insisted that the future of South Africa depended on 'more hard work, and less talk and fuss about abstract ideas and big words'.¹⁶ Over forty years later, in the personal 'Stocktaking, 1995', he returned to and accentuated this claim in light of the new democracy: 'I come more and more to believe that literature is about people, persons, not isms'.

Historians should be wary, however, of claiming the moral high ground over *H*istorians, particularly if they are not merely recounting history, but re-telling stories in order to create literature. Butler professed: 'I don't – or very rarely – invent a story. I listen what stories [sic] are alive in people's mouths and memories.'¹⁷ Indeed, few of Butler's published works demonstrate a gift for fiction; his passion was life-writing, biography and history transmuted into poetry and drama and, occasionally, prose "fiction" (the *Tales from the Old Karoo*, for example, inhabit a generations-old borderland of fiction and fable in which Butler's talents as raconteur – and as connoisseur of other raconteurs – are best displayed). It must be granted, of course, that this transmutation can be recognised in almost all "creators" and "creations". Consider the salutary words of painter Jack

¹⁵ Butler, letter to Nadine Gordimer, 13th March 1978. Gordimer's article was first published in *SA Outlook* (December 1977). NELM.

¹⁶ Butler, quoted in *The Rand Daily Mail*, 22nd May 1952. NELM.

¹⁷ Butler, letter to Keith Cremer, 27th July 1994. NELM.

Yeats (brother of WB), who claimed, ‘No-one creates ... the artist assembles memories.’¹⁸

Even if it is taken as a postmodern truism that completely “authentic” or original creation is impossible – that recycling is really the best one can hope for – Yeats’ words remain of interest for two reasons. Firstly, Butler’s conviction to share his own and others’ stories in many ways anticipated the current favour shown to “real life” people and places.¹⁹ Secondly, in Yeats’ configuration of artistic practice, ‘assembling memories’ is a vital function, not only preserving collective identity, but also enshrining individual dignity. The Christian artist, in particular, has an obligation to share the stories of others – for as a quirky doctor insists in one of the *Tales*, ‘The Case of the Immortal Mackintosh’, ‘ “All lives are precious and interesting to someone.” And then he added, slowly, “Some One”, pointing a shaking finger at the ceiling.’²⁰

Nevertheless, the writer’s interest in others’ stories often falls short of such a sacred calling. *Thirst*, that “final confession” of sorts, addresses this issue directly. Although Butler suggests that ‘the emphasis which my religious faith, weak as it is, places on the individual soul, has something to do with my concern for individual stories’, he is also forced to confront a more malicious, self-interested motivation.²¹ Butler’s attitude towards Plessis Foster is multifaceted: he feels, alternately (and sometimes simultaneously), fascination, repulsion, pity, envy, reluctant respect and utter contempt for the alcoholic painter-cum-vagabond. Through their chance encounters, Butler becomes a strangely consistent figure in Foster’s life – precisely the kind of figure that the lonely man has always lacked – and, in turn, Foster begins to hold a talismanic significance for Butler. When Foster is being held at Fort England mental hospital, he sends a message to Butler requesting an interview. In this, their first planned meeting, the symbiotic (or, rather, mutually parasitic) relationship between the two is evident. Plessis needs an audience; Butler has a keen

¹⁸ Jack Yeats, quoted by Anthony Cronin in *Samuel Beckett: The Last Modernist* (London: Flamingo, 1997), p.140.

¹⁹ See the author’s ‘The Trouble with Life Writing: A New “Cult of Personality”’, *Scrutiny* 2 11/12 (2006/7 – forthcoming).

²⁰ Butler, ‘The Case of the Immortal Mackintosh’, *Tales from the Old Karoo*, p.140.

²¹ Butler, *Thirst*, p.209.

interest in drama. The narrative is building to a climax when Plessis begins to digress:

‘You see, a liar gets so good at it that he can’t believe himself. Even now – well – do you believe me?’

He suddenly gripped my forearm and stared at me with a pleading desperation in his eyes. I pulled my arm free. Belief or non-belief in his volatile feelings about particular incidents did not interest me. I wanted to know the events.

So I said, ‘Carry on with your story.’

‘Story?!’

He winced and swallowed, then took a long look at the buildings and the sky. Then he stuck his chin out and I knew he’d come to a decision. He got up and looked down at me.

‘You’d better bugger off. I’m not a story, I’m a person.’²²

The unedited text continues:

I returned home and grabbed the jottings book, pressing the pen heavily: *Plessis Foster has a stronger sense of identity than I have. He wanted my help. Instead I insulted him. The next day I noted: I’ve always made a point of the importance of the person. I have also always liked stories and anecdotes. I have been writing about Plessis as a source for the latter. An arranged meeting takes place on utterly different moral ground from an accidental “bumping-into”.*

The chapter following this encounter is incoherently structured and has largely been edited out, but it does contain some interesting reflections on identity – particularly the identities constructed by authors for their characters:

Damn Plessis, and damn me ... He needed to be recognised, to be acknowledged, and I was chosen. How many others had been invited and turned the invitation down, it never occurred to my vanity to inquire. My response had not been a success ... Interest in people, in individuals, has determined the nature of my best poetry. The fact is that I had to invent nothing. I was using story material ... [Plessis] certainly provided me with story material. It was his stories that I first committed to paper. His character existed only as a carrier of the incidents ... I might have had glimpses of Foster as the victim of his parents, of racism, but for the first time I saw him as a man carrying a cross unfortunately heavier than mine.²³

²² *Ibid.*, pp.205-206.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp.207-210. A contemporary example of a similar acknowledgement – that the poet’s ‘interest in people, in individuals’ can extend to an abuse of their ‘story material’, and that the poet does well to remember his or her subject ‘carrying a cross unfortunately heavier than mine’ – can be found in Ingrid de Kok’s poems based on her experiences at the TRC: see Section II of *Terrestrial Things* (Cape Town: Kwela/Snailpress, 2002).

Penitent, Butler asks for another chance to meet with Foster, and insists apologetically: 'It is you that I want to see ... I've come to listen to Plessis Foster.'²⁴ Following this, their interview is a great success, facilitating a kind of talking cure; later, with Butler's encouragement, Foster joins AA and pays off all his debts.

If *Thirst* foregrounds a writer's abuse, albeit a fairly common one – curiosity about the *stories* of individuals, rather than attention to the individual *people* for their own sake – then the somewhat tainted marriage of liberal humanism and literary effect is not without other offspring in Butler's work. One may read, for example, the war poem 'Before a Dawn Attack' in light of the partly guilty admission that 'interest in people, in individuals, has determined the nature of my best poetry'. The poem's 'he' (we cannot be sure that it is Captain Butler, Sapper Information Officer, but the association is clear) wakes up ahead of the soldiers under his command, whom he will soon send 'forward, to kill, or to be killed' on the battlefields of Italy. In the quiet dark hours of the morning, he imagines himself back in the familiar landscape of the Karoo, and then turns his attention to his compatriots and fellow soldiers:

He stretched, and then deliberately stalked
from sleeping form to form, and paused by each;
felt closer now than when they moved and talked;
his still inspection said far more than speech:
what could he do for his allotted men,
but name each man by name, again, again.

One is reminded, briefly, of Yeats in 'Easter, 1916', remembering and listing ('I write it out in a verse') the names of those who 'dreamed and are dead', but 'MacDonagh and MacBride/And Connolly and Pearse' have little in common with the anonymous South African troops.²⁵ There is, however, a more sustained allusion in 'Before a Dawn Attack'. With minor variations in setting and tone – for Butler's soldiers are sleeping – the poem is a close re-enactment of the scene described by Shakespeare's

²⁴ *Thirst*, p.211.

²⁵ WB Yeats, 'Easter, 1916', *The Poems*, p.228.

expect to be the fruit of such study'.²⁸ As for Butler, even though the word 'moral' has often been used to describe his work, he was himself

highly suspicious of people who try to turn the study of literature into a surrogate for the teaching of morality – like Leavis, you know, you study the great works, you become a good person – my experience of Leavisites persuaded me that this was not so; that they could be just as vicious and bitchy as anybody else. There's no correlation between studying good works of literature and becoming a good man, not observable to me.²⁹

Writers – *historians* – can be just as culpable as *H*istorians when their concern for artistry causes them to disregard their responsibility to real, living individuals.

²⁸ Alan Hughes, Introduction to William Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*, The New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p.37.

²⁹ Butler, audiotape interview with Malvern van Wyk Smith and Don Maclennan (1986). NELM.

CHAPTER FIVE

I Artist/activist

(i) Art talk, politics talk¹

I have suggested in the preamble above that the consciously literary gestures of 'Before a Dawn Attack' might be seen to undermine personal tribute for the sake of poetic effect. There is one further comment to be made on the potential pitfalls of Butler's list-making in that poem: naming individuals is a necessarily selective process. The men for whom Butler rehearsed 'farm ... town ... trade,/the dull, civilian, sacred particulars', formed a largely homogeneous group of white South African males fighting in Italy. The racially hyper-sensitive reader could point out that, while most of the white soldiers with whom Butler was closely acquainted during the war are carefully named in *Bursting World*, coloured batmen and drivers are simply 'Seedman' or 'Van Niekerk'; elsewhere in his autobiographies, both major and minor white characters are given full names while a large number of black characters remain anonymous, or are at best given only first names. This may be ahistorical nit-picking of the worst kind, but it is not far removed from the criticism Butler received for those individuals he chose to tell stories about – 1820 English settlers, Afrikaans Karoo farmers, rural or "traditional" amaXhosa, hunter-gatherer archetypes. Such altercations often occur on the frontier between Politics and Art.

If the reader despairs at the prospect of yet another attempt to analyse the obscure chemistry involved in this meeting (even, applying laboratory jargon, to decide if the substance under examination – very clearly two elements combined – is a mixture or a compound); if it is taken for granted that André Brink's injunction to avoid 'facile distinctions between politics and art' is nowadays widely adhered to; then we may nonetheless make some salient comments about the sea-change in the constitution of both politics and art, and in the relationship between the

¹ I am borrowing this subtitle from Michael Chapman's recent *Art Talk, Politics Talk: A Consideration of Categories* (Pietermaritzburg: UKZN Press, 2006).

two, over the course of the last few decades.² Brink's warning is sounded in a paper he delivered at a conference on human rights in 1988, arguing that there was no contradiction between the arts being 'tuned in' to 'the promotion of a specific political cause or the fight against the social injustices of apartheid' and to 'the greater human concerns of freedom, justice and truth' (indeed, Brink emphasised that both were necessary in 'South Africa's struggle for liberation and in the preparation for a more just and free society').

Few writers during the apartheid years saw these as mutually exclusive activities, yet many of the debates raging under that regime seemed to acknowledge only two polarised camps: those artists who were "political", and those who were not.³ We have seen that Butler engaged directly with the politics of the day in public lectures, in newspaper articles, in institutional policy-making. Insofar as he strove to protect his self-circumscribed territory as an artist from the invasion of politics, this protection had a double motivation. The first was his anti-Leavisite stance:

I have always felt uneasy about attempts to turn literature into politics or ethics or a substitute for religion. Literature is literature, a major human activity which should be studied in its own right, rather as we study music or painting. Of course it has moral and political dimensions, as have all human activities, but these are not its main concern.⁴

² André Brink, 'The Arts: Strategies for Freedom and Rights' (Draft of paper given at *Human Rights Conference*, Port Elizabeth, 1st-3rd December 1988), p.8. NELM.

³ Just how fraught the issue was – how difficult it became to comment on South African literature without "taking sides" – is demonstrated by correspondence published in early issues of *The Bloody Horse*, a literary journal edited by Patrick Cullinan aiming to incorporate both writing of 'outright protest' with 'an overt political stance' and writing that, though 'equally cogent', does not necessarily make an 'ideological commitment or demand contexts of violence' (1, September/October 1980: 5). Michael Chapman, in an open letter in the first edition (100-103), expresses what, on the surface, seems a fair and sensible hope: that *The Bloody Horse* will take on 'the important task of bridging the artificial gap in South Africa today between "art" and "relevance", finding a balance between contemporary journals such as *Staffrider* (which 'legitimately elevates the sociological above the literary') and *Contrast* (or the 'SA Literary Establishment' and its 'rearguard actions' as 'an arbiter of outmoded tastes' attempting to 'reverse or ignore contemporary tides of feeling'). As Don Maclennan points out in a reply, however, Chapman's position is based implicitly on a claim to 'know in some hieratic way what "the South African reality" is', and could be read as an attempt 'to bluff the ignorant that "relevance" is strictly an invention of our times' (2, November/December 1980: 94-95). Butler is a central – if passive – figure in the Chapman-Maclennan debate: Chapman's letter makes an unfair example of Butler's 'calm, moral discourse (implying a misplaced confidence in the value of traditional structures)' and, Maclennan argues, the critique of Butler ignores how he 'stuck his neck out for all South African literature ... and got people to consider its relevance at a time when there was a strong prejudice against anything merely local'.

⁴ Butler, *A Local Habitation*, p.239.

The second stemmed from a perceived threat to aesthetic standards – a fear that the “poem as petrol bomb” often ignored ‘the need for writers to practice a craft as well as exercise their consciences’.⁵

This insistence was expressed in his response to an edition of *The New Classic* literary magazine (‘an all-black venture from an all-black publishing house’). Despite noting evidence of ‘sensible grappling’ with poetic form, Butler was disappointed to find ‘the expected Anger and Anguish, the inadequate English, the dubious history, the Marxist catch-phrases’. Taken out of context, this might suggest an alignment of poetic standards with race, which would be both unfortunate and inaccurate, given that Butler applied the same criteria in criticising white poets. Moreover, such privately expressed frustrations should not be taken as an indication that he was anything less than an encouraging mentor to the novice poets (both black and white) who wrote to him by the dozen, asking for advice and comments on their poetry. Still, some might argue that Butler’s complaint displays more than a hint of racial condescension – to which a necessary counter-argument is offered by Lionel Abrahams in his essay on ‘Black Experience into English Verse’. The founder of Renoster Books and editor-publisher of *Mtshali* and *Serote* is one of few who could remain above reproach in deriding the practice of ‘cultivating “Black literature” for the sake of its blackness’ as ‘repellant insofar as it depends on inverting the order of values’:

To make the empty category [“Black”] primary is to approach matters in nothing but a racialistic spirit and to incur the (incidentally anti-poetic) penalty of the racialistic vision: alienation, the thinning, blurring and cheapening of existence.⁶

Abrahams’ own response to the first issue of *The Classic* was to query Nat Nakasa’s editorial invitation to ‘writers with causes to fight for, committed men and women’:

Mr Nakasa speaks of being old-fashioned enough to believe in involvement. Well, I am old-fashioned too ... I believe in literature. I believe that a

⁵ Butler, letter to David Butler, 19th December 1983. NELM.

⁶ Lionel Abrahams, ‘Black Experience into English verse’ in *Lionel Abrahams: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Cullinan (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1988), pp.193-194.

concern with literature is a matter of involvement with life at large (as well as of detachment), and that involvement is a different, a more complex, subtle, embracing thing, than commitment, which is what politics requires of one.⁷

The distinction between commitment and involvement is a useful one, but was not widely accepted amongst writers under apartheid. In 1984, the Ravan Press boasted (paraphrasing Nadine Gordimer) that one of its poets, Jeremy Cronin – whose involvement in the banned ANC/SACP had resulted in his arrest – ‘through going to prison, had gone to the heart of South African life’, and that Cronin’s experience of prison ‘linked him to the experience of the broad majority of South Africans’.⁸ This assertion was a response to the question, ‘Is the writing of poetry that explores subjective emotions and feelings not an indulgence in South Africa?’ One could hardly suggest that those poets who endured no greater suffering than, say, the ubiquitous censorship of the apartheid era were not ethically licensed to “indulge” in lyrical or introspective poems; yet the urge to justify the writing of poetry by pointing to the poet’s track record of political action is significant.

In *Bursting World* Butler quotes a letter, written to his wife Jean towards the end of the war, in which he weighed his career options: further study, with a view to an academic career; a return to the high-school classroom; or, he proposed, ‘I think I ought to go into politics, and try to change society.’⁹ In *A Local Habitation*, almost fifty years after that conjecturing letter, he worries that he has been ‘dangling from the academic lamppost ... my feet not quite as firmly in touch with reality as they might otherwise have been’.¹⁰ There is a mild irony behind this ostensible expression of regret – for although he did not ‘go into politics’ as such, his role as a cultural politician was driven by, and enacted, the same imperative to ‘try to change society’ – and in the very same chapter Butler affirms the value of protecting the academic profession’s separation: ‘since [taking up the Chair at Rhodes] the university processions I have

⁷ Abrahams, ‘Commitment or Involvement: *The Classic No.1*’, *ibid.*, p.140.

⁸ Taken from *First Impressions: A Record of the Ravan Press Book Launch Dialogues* (1:1, 1984).

⁹ Butler, *Bursting World*, p.196.

¹⁰ *A Local Habitation*, p.131.

taken part in have all been protests against an apartheid regime's interferences with academic freedom.¹¹

The "autonomy" demanded by a scholar can be translated into the 'detachment' required of a poet: consider Tennyson's artist-figures, observing events in the world of action from their position of intellectual and aesthetic isolation. Yet for Butler, the desire for seclusion was matched by an urge to participate. Even during the war, 'writing and reading poetry while others were going on patrol or being shot at made me feel acutely my irrelevance to that particular struggle.'¹² During the course of a writing life lived under apartheid this anxiety was heightened, although Butler found respite in Arthur Nortje's lines, 'some of us must storm the castles/some define the happening':

It really is very difficult to marry the two activities. Most poets try, and quarrel among themselves and with the critics about the exact location of the castles, and the priorities to be given to the many happenings. Not all castles and happenings are political.¹³

This was not, however, a consistently held position. Discussing the poetry of Mtshali, Serote and Sepamla, Butler noted that 'up and down Africa, poets are struggling to break away from the Western image of the poet as a lonely social exile, suffering, and articulating his or her highly individualised intuitions in individualised and complex speech.' Rather, these poets and their poems assert that poetry 'must be functional, collective, and committing ... a public ritual act, significant only when the writer's self-expression and the community's interests and aspirations meet'.¹⁴ Similarly, Malvern van Wyk Smith has identified a shift in the approach of the "District Six" writers (Peter Abrahams, James Matthews, Alex La Guma, Dennis Brutus, Richard Rive) from a 'humane individualism' to a 'communal aesthetic', a voice of 'outrage and solidarity' similar to the *Drum* generation of the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁵

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.123.

¹² *Bursting World*, p.141.

¹³ See Nortje's 'Native's Letter' in *Anatomy of Dark: Collected Poems*, ed. Dirk Klopffer (Pretoria: UNISA Press, 2000), p.361.

¹⁴ Butler, 'The Language of the Conqueror', p.150.

¹⁵ Van Wyk Smith, *Grounds of Contest*, pp.100-102.

What, then, about the white writer? Butler's challenge to English-speaking South Africans to bridge the divide between heightening Afrikaner and African nationalisms was based on the premise that '[being] in possession of a world language should give us a degree of wisdom and necessary detachment, at times, from a too-local view of things.'¹⁶ The white ESSA author, avatar of that language, is thus best placed to achieve a 'detachment from the present'; but, Butler asks, 'how is it possible to be detached from an African present while we are emotionally and mentally intimidated by it?'¹⁷ We have seen that his answer, in 'South African Literature' (1950), is to point the artist in the direction of 'the City of God' – the supposedly neutral and non-racial Church, the all-embracing Christian faith.¹⁸ This assertion is less than convincing given the examples he provides of more 'objective' writers with a 'non-racial point of view' (even if we ignore the impossibility of such a position): out of Alan Paton, Olive Schreiner, Doris Lessing and Antony Delius, only Paton could be said to write as a Christian. Nevertheless, the implied emphasis on Christian virtues of compassion and pacifism serves to remind the reader that to be disinterested is not to be indifferent: Butler praises Delius' 'Time in Africa' because it 'looks at the South African scene with a deep understanding and a sympathy with all concerned'.

In similar vein, Butler's essay on 'Poetry, Drama and Public Taste' (1956) quotes Delius in support, not of Olympian equanimity, but of earth-bound humility. Describing the predominance of 'strips and twists of road' in his poetry – roads that seem to come from nowhere specific and lead to no clear destination – Delius notes:

¹⁶ Butler, 'The Language of the Land', p.85.

¹⁷ Butler, 'South African Literature', p.42.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.43. Even this spiritual solution must face the question of engagement or withdrawal. Consider the correspondence between Butler and Colin Gardner about the composition of Butler's *Pilgrimage to Dias Cross*, in which Butler explained (11th April 1989):

I excised a longish debate between the ghosts on the question: "What is to be done?" All six of them had their say, and more or less cancelled each other out ... But I cut them all out, except Dias, because I had come to think that indaba, important as it is en route, is not the endpoint of a pilgrimage. The end point is prayer, and prayer within the tradition or mode which each supplicant knows. The answers to prayers are equally individual, ad hominem. So the action which the poem "recommends" is not as hopeless as it might seem, but continued exploration ... This sort of religious action will mean little to most practical politicians and social engineers – but they are also His children!

Gardner's reply (24th April 1989) differs with Butler 'on political tactics but also on spiritual tactics', asking: 'are prayer and action separate movements of the soul?' NELM.

The kindest of my critics has called my work non-committal. I often feel uneasy at this, as if I had shirked an obligation or dodged an issue. But perhaps my being accused of a sort of poetic neutralism is really a reflection of my failure to translate this hieroglyphic, this cipher, this bit of Linear B of a road. Where the road comes from, or goes to, or what eschatologically it signifies, I haven't clearly figured out: I do not know. But that is not to say I do not care.¹⁹

This 'refusal to force or impose a meaning' is once again linked to Keats' negative capability, the 'preparedness to dwell in uncertainties' being central to Butler's philosophy. Perhaps one of the most important literary-theatrical icons to emerge in the latter half of the twentieth century was the anonymous "country road" beside which Vladimir and Estragon wile away the hours while waiting for Godot. The stark setting, the indeterminate road itself, is vital to the bleak prospect (or the lack of a prospect) faced by the characters in the play; it reinforces the constant frustration of expectation and deferral of concrete meaning depicted in *Waiting for Godot*. Anthony Cronin suggests that Beckett, who would avow neither belief nor disbelief, thought 'it was better to live, and to admit to living, in uncertainty: better because more honest.'²⁰

From such a position we can understand why it is dangerous for the artist to commit too strongly to any particular political ideology or struggle. The problem is an epistemological one. One cannot be certain in one's knowledge of moral "right" or "truth" and therefore cannot assert it in, or apply it absolutely to, any artistic endeavour. Moral convictions can and should and do govern what writers try to communicate; but, even without taking the view that the author does not dictate the meaning of an ultimately autonomous text, one needs to be wary of unwavering conviction. Certainty is rarely useful to art. Consider these lines from Robert Graves, elevating 'broken images':

He continues quick and dull in his clear images;
I continue slow and sharp in my broken images.

He in a new confusion of his understanding;
I in a new understanding of my confusion.²¹

¹⁹ Butler, 'Poetry, Drama and Public Taste', p.55.

²⁰ Cronin, *Samuel Beckett: The Last Modernist*, p.592.

Whilst we should not demean Nakasa's 'committed men and women', we may at least caution the writer who wishes, as young Captain Butler did, 'to change society'. Polemical artists, even at the very moment of challenging an oppressive system or state, risk being lulled into a dream of their own power – from which, as Douglas Livingstone feared, they may 'wake behind wire, holstered/with authority, jackboots on'.²²

(ii) *Transcending the present*

Butler's displeasure at unmitigated expressions of ideology-in-literature (I mean ideology, here, in a broader sense than Althusser's) was matched by a resentment of what he considered merely 'fashionable' literary theories and critical schools. He was not opposed to "radical" theory *per se*, but he was not persuaded that it is germane to literary scholarship: 'bright intellectuals' who are 'more concerned with the latest post-structural reformulations than actual works of fiction ... should, in my view, more appropriately teach in departments of linguistics and philosophy.'²³

Elsewhere he complained,

We have to face the desolate truth that departments of literature have allowed their minds to be colonised by the linguistic, psychological, and sociological theorists, to whom they pay grovelling wordy tribute, by proving that some poem or play or novel displays moral and intellectual relevance and integrity, never that it gives profound pleasure or joy. The old theory that poetry delights and teaches – in that order – is altogether too simple for them. Poetry provides footnotes for doctrines fanatically fashionable.²⁴

This is in a letter from Butler to Patrick Cullinan, thanking him for the "lost" and unpublished review Cullinan produced of *Poetry South Africa: Selected Papers from Poetry '74*. Much has been written about this conference since Lionel Abrahams first wondered, a month after the event, if it would prove to be 'a turning point for the arts in South Africa'.²⁵ This may be overstating the case, but – whether the event was a watershed or

²¹ Robert Graves, 'In Broken Images', *Collected Poems: 1975* (London: Cassell, 1975), p.62.

²² Douglas Livingstone, 'The Explainer', *Eyes Closed Against the Sun* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p.38.

²³ Butler, testimonial letter supporting Tim Couzens for an *Ad Hominem* Professorship in the Wits African Studies Institute, 23rd June 1993. NELM.

²⁴ Butler, letter to Patrick Cullinan, 2nd April 1996. NELM.

²⁵ Abrahams, 'Poetry '74 – A Turning Point for the Arts in South Africa?', *op. cit.*, p.203.

not – Cullinan’s review makes clear the lines along which discussion was divided. Various papers describe the conflict between ‘introspectives’ and ‘protest writers’ (Peter Wilhelm); between ‘intensely private, mystical verse ...poetry *in utero*’ and unsuccessful attempts by white poets to adopt ‘black masks’ (Chris Hope); between those who declare ‘the Joycean motto of *Non Serviam* ... art is its own end’ and those who seek to ‘further the interests of particular groups or causes’ (Geoffrey Haresnape).²⁶ These may seem, in retrospect, false dichotomies, and again it requires an effort of the imagination for a later generation to see why “synthesis”, which Butler advocated so unremittingly, was not an obvious or self-evident solution. Cullinan takes a strong line against Mike Kirkwood’s paper because it commits the argumentational fallacy of “the straw man”: ‘straining’ to ‘set up a bogeyman, a white Tokolosh called Butlerism or The Coloniser’, which can then be knocked down. Indeed, Kirkwood’s theme pivots on yet another opposition, criticising Butler’s ‘separation of cultural and political reality’.²⁷ The accusation deserves some attention.

The first half of ‘The Colonizer’ caricatures Butler’s version and vision of ESSA history and heritage, making some valid criticisms of his somewhat idealised depiction of the 1820 settlers, and repudiates the Apollo-Dionysus model. Significantly, the second half of the paper does not refer to Butler at all. Rather, it expounds Kirkwood’s theory that white South Africans are still colonisers – a sound enough “post”-colonial critique with heavy tones of white guilt (the advisedly self-reflexive guilt of a white academic on his own particular piece of moral high ground), but one that is not linked to literature in South Africa until the final lines, which affirm that the output of the white (coloniser) writer should have ‘a practical dimension’:

“Art for liberation” should indeed be the theme of the colonizer writer, in our view: the liberation of the colonized is the liberation of the colonizer also. The attempt to realise such a programme in the arts will demand, we contend, a self-transcendence in the colonizer writer, just as it will in the colonized writer. We stop short of advocating the techniques of that

²⁶ Patrick Cullinan, unpublished review of *Poetry South Africa: Selected Papers from Poetry '74*. NELM.

²⁷ Kirkwood, ‘The Colonizer’, p.110.

transcendence, *but we point out that a life-technique, as well as an art-technique, will be required.*²⁸

The weakness (and the academic laxity) in Kirkwood's paper thus lies in the disjunction between his criticism of "Butlerism" and his criticism of the 'colonizer' writer who does not exist in 'a practical dimension'. Few would deny that Butler's 'life-technique' was one of constant action in the causes of racial amity and charity. He may have advocated 'detachment', but this was balanced by the social conscience of his Quaker background such that he found himself in the position described by Milosz:

If it were possible to withdraw from politics, then the values of truth and ethics would hold. But it is not possible to withdraw, so all one can do is try to save these values or embody them in politics ... [one is] stretched, therefore, between two poles: the contemplation of a motionless point and the command to participate actively in history; in other words, between transcendence and becoming.²⁹

We are left with two versions of 'transcendence'. Kirkwood urges a 'self-transcendence' for white English-speaking South Africans: a rejection of the coloniser role that is presumably a prerequisite to 'becoming', to following 'the command to participate actively in history'.³⁰ Butler's experience and understanding of 'transcendence' is more mystical: the Wordsworthian "spot of time", Eliot's "unattended moment", fleeting and restorative, only occasionally attained in a life otherwise limited to the realm of 'history'.

Although Butler 'went to that conference totally, perhaps culpably, unaware of any pending assault', the paper that he prepared for and

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.131-132.

²⁹ Milosz, *Native Realm*, pp.120-125.

³⁰ Kirkwood's 'self-transcendence' is posited specifically in opposition to 'self-consciousness'. The latter, which Kirkwood claims is the false achievement of "Butlerism", cultivates an English South African cultural identity through a validation of ESSA history (specifically the 1820 settlers); the former is more self-chastising, rejecting both the settler past and the subsequent economic advantages of ESSAs for their colonising/apartheid-era complicity. It is worth noting that current advocates of a new version of "white consciousness" can be located between Butler and Kirkwood's respective positions. Scott Burnett, for instance, argues that – while 'being white [in post-apartheid South Africa] should not be a shameful thing' – whites must nevertheless recognise that the apartheid state created among them a collective 'false consciousness of superiority and inferiority' and 'accept that the psychosis of superiority is still rampant'; because 'the process of healing is not facilitated by ignoring the sickness ... followers of white consciousness' must 'disavow denial'. ('Towards a White Consciousness Movement?', *Business Day*, 29th April 2006. Available: <http://www.businessday.co.za/Articles>, accessed May 2006.)

delivered at 'Poetry '74' did, tangentially, address some of these issues.³¹ 'On Being Present Where You Are: Some Observations on South African Poetry, 1930-1960' begins with a nod to "historicism", if not to *H*istory:

We – and the world – derive our present meaning from the past which has brought us here, and the future into which we are moving, and which we are, in some measure, making. We can, therefore, only know where we are by knowing what process we are part of. Man knows who he is and where he is by reference to his origins and history, as well as by looking out of the window, or at his watch and the calendar. No man can escape geography or history, time and space, for very long.³²

That 'for very long' is an important codicil. In his critical writing, Butler acknowledged candidly the unavoidable parameters of time and space, and the ways in which our coordinates along their respective axes dictate the terms of our existence. 'The English Poet in South Africa', discussing changes in poetic diction, reminds the reader that 'language feels the strain of space as well as time'; a lecture on Shakespearean tragedy maintains that 'the movements on the stage are through space that is charged, and under the pressure of relentless time.'³³ Yet Butler also yearned to escape these limitations, constantly finding himself

driven to re-read that Job's comforter, TS Eliot, who does say good things about time before and time after: see particularly the last section of the Dry Salvages. Hints and guesses of something beyond Time are all that most of us have to go on

But

The hint half guessed, the gift half understood is Incarnation. He makes the point, again and again, that there is more to time than history; and so do ... all poets of any depth.³⁴

Stephen Watson, in his Introduction to the *Essays and Lectures*, quotes from one of Butler's early poems 'To a Statue of the Virgin (seen near Les Baux, Provence, July 1947)':

³¹ *A Local Habitation*, p.247.

³² Butler, 'On Being Present Where You Are: Some Observations on South African Poetry, 1930-1960', *Essays and Lectures*, p.157 and *Poetry South Africa*, p.82.

³³ Butler, 'The English Poet in South Africa', *Essays and Lectures*, p.46 and draft notes for a lecture on 'Shakespeare, Myth and Archetypal Pattern'; see also Butler's 'Sound and Space in *Macbeth*'. NELM.

³⁴ Butler, letter to Patrick Cullinan, 7th December 1994. In the 'Ode to Dead Friends: All Saints Day, South Africa 1987', Butler attributes this phrasing to Monica Wilson: 'you said: "Those folk are free/who walk as though there's more to time than history".'

Girl, give us what we need:
no, not Time at all
nor all Eternity,
but simply one split-second,
outside, beyond the Fall:
one static moment, freed
from the drum-beat of the sea:
a pause between two pulses,
a moment unlit by the sun
where nothing has ever been
or ever been left undone.

The desire expressed in this poem, Watson suggests, explains Butler's 'devotion to the poetry of Sydney Clouts' – for the latter pertains to an 'absolute present' (outside South Africa and outside history), but does not conceive of 'the sense of the sacred ... as something separate from society' (thus allowing a "rootedness" in South Africa and in history).³⁵ The hope of 'On Being Present Where You Are' is to achieve 'a non-anxious trust in the cosmos', 'to surmount anger and absurdity by contemplating the astounding, the miraculous present rather than the irretrievable past or the problematic future'.³⁶

Watson correctly calls this a 'long-held ambition' of Butler's. The characters in *The Dam* struggle through three acts to try and affirm an Eliot-like point of stillness in the Karoo veld ('This is the place') whereas, in three lines, Clouts simply tells how

amongst bushes and lizard stones I found
a little further than I had thought
to go, a stream with a singing sound.³⁷

In terms of Butler's critical writing, we may go back as far as 1950 and 'South African Literature': the creative artist must combine detachment with an imaginative sympathy, but 'must not sentimentalise his friends or his enemies. Anger is so easy, and so is pity. He must, of course, be capable of both, but must rise above them, above his own anxiety, his own history, his own race.'³⁸ Indeed, the tone – the very syntactical pattern – of the extract from 'On Being Present Where You Are' quoted above ('No man

³⁵ Watson, Introduction to *Essays and Lectures*, p.13.

³⁶ 'On Being Present Where You Are', *Essays and Lectures*, p.169 and *Poetry South Africa*, p.96.

³⁷ Sydney Clouts, 'Poetry is Death Cast Out', *One Life* (Cape Town: Purnell & sons, 1966), p.28.

³⁸ 'South African Literature', p.40.

can escape geography or history, time and space, *for very long*) echoes an even earlier sentiment: 'If art escapes time and place, history and geography, we certainly cannot, *except for the briefest moments*.'³⁹

This is in Butler's 1949 lecture on 'The Difficulties of Teaching a Non-Indigenous Literature', part of an introduction to his contentions that, although poetry may be universal, it springs from a particular geographical and historical context; that it is read by people who live in a particular geographical and historical context; and that, therefore, the two should be more closely allied. A true appreciation of poetry requires a familiarity on the reader's part with the "sense data", the fauna and flora, or the social conditions surrounding the poet. Reciprocally, the poetry read and taught in a certain area or country should include the works of poets from that area or country.

The lecture also touches on an aspect of Butler's life and writing that is not consistent with his idea of 'contemplating ... the miraculous present rather than the irretrievable past'. Assertions that there is no escaping either geography or history may be read as admonishments to those who are reluctant to accept their "belonging" in a fixed time and place. There is a sense, however, in which they express a personal regret that this should be the case: an underlying, almost unconscious resistance to and dissatisfaction with that time and that place. Discussing the typical introduction to literature for a young white English-speaking South African of the time, Butler notes that by the early teens 'he or she will have assimilated a little or a great deal of those essential stories and images which are the groundwork of European culture' – Hebrew, Graeco-Roman, Medieval. These are easy to absorb and accept, because a young child 'has this ability to live in the world of his imagination; his ideas of time and space, history and geography, are vague. David, Galahad and Hercules, although utterly different, are contemporaries for him.'⁴⁰ This 'completeness of the child' is, however,

fated to be broken: shades of the prison have begun to close upon the growing boy. Time and place start to assert themselves. He becomes

³⁹ Butler, 'The Difficulties of Teaching a Non-Indigenous Literature', p.25. My italics.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.30.

Thirst is a text fundamentally concerned with childhood development, and the ways in which ‘the Child is the father of the Man’. Chapter Three is entitled “The Midwife’s Lament”: an account by ‘Aunt Margaret’ (a fictionalised version of Butler’s Aunt Mary) of the many babies she has delivered and watched grow to adulthood. She discusses the effect of inherited traits, and sometimes of ‘bad nurture’ – Butler adds, ‘it took me some time to discover that the word “nurture” had a special meaning for her.’⁴³ This has specific implications for the chief characters in *Thirst*. We discover that the mother of Uncle David Blasket (whom others find ‘a complete puzzle ... cool, self-contained ... kindly, generous in fact, but he’s not warm’) died in childbirth, and that he was looked after for a while by his father’s sister Rosa (she ‘paid very little attention to the baby’) until the father remarried (for his new wife, ‘David hardly existed’): “The child, the child.” Aunt Margaret beat her knees with old fists. “They starved sides of his soul to death, or near enough to it.”⁴⁴

If Uncle David Blasket spent his early years ‘in a loveless home which was really not a home at all’, then Plessis Foster had it far worse.⁴⁵ His childhood, too, framed the life he was to lead. The narrative of *Thirst* is constructed such that, when we read about Plessis’ torrid youth, we have already heard Aunt Margaret’s warning (common sense, but endorsed by Jesuit doctrine and a newspaper article) that ‘the soul receives its essential shape and potential’ during childhood. Aunt Margaret underlines in Butler’s copy of *The Prelude* that Wordsworthian purple patch declaring, ‘Blest the infant Babe’:

blest the Babe
Nursed in his mother’s arms, who sinks to sleep
Rocked on his mother’s breast; who with his soul
Drinks in the feelings of his Mother’s eye!⁴⁶

We may surmise what becomes of the babe who does not have these comforts. The passage quoted ends with the sombre loss of those ‘clouds of glory’ trailing the young:

⁴³ Butler, *Thirst*, p.44.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.46-47.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.48.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.51; see Wordsworth, Book II, *The Prelude*, pp.78-79.

I was left alone
Seeking the visible world, nor knowing why
The props of my affections were removed,
And yet the building stood, as if sustained
By its own spirit.

Unlike Plessis or Uncle David, young Guy Butler had been ‘abundantly blessed, born into a millionaire’s inheritance of affection’.⁴⁷ As we have seen, there are moments of wry hindsight in *Karoo Morning* and *Bursting World* in which Butler reviews his “innocence” with the wisdom of “experience”; but the depiction of the pre-war years remains chiefly a celebration of childhood ingenuousness, and of the ambition and idealism of youth.⁴⁸

The ‘Ode: On First Seeing Florence’ quotes in its Author’s Note the celebrated ‘spots of time’ passage from *The Prelude* (Book XII), and explains: ‘This poem is an attempt to do justice to one such renovating spot of time ... an early-morning view of Florence before the units of the 6th SA Armoured Division advanced to the southern bank of the Arno on 4 August 1944.’ The seminal ‘spots of time’ to which Wordsworth refers in *The Prelude* are, however, the luminous moments of his childhood; by Section V of the Florence Ode, Butler has moved away from his adult experience of Florence to address the ‘child I was’:

Child, unaware your universe was ending,
you still could be the thing you saw or heard;
had no vision of yourself, here, standing
sundered, hungry for miracles, and absurd;
...
Don’t hear the broken stutter of my throat.
No cliffs or lips would echo should you call.
Once they responded with a long, cool note.

In *Wordsworth, Freud and the Spots of Time* (1985), David Ellis questions how convincing or sustained the optimism of the ‘spots of time’ actually is – whether their presence in the poem does in fact ‘with distinct

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.208.

⁴⁸ Akal notes that in *Judith* it is Holofernes’ recollection of a childhood anecdote (a simple episode, such as one might find in *Karoo Morning* – skipping school, eating peaches, being stung by bees) that shows Judith the ‘humanity behind the public image ... the nostalgia of the lost paradise of childhood contrasting vividly with the arid battleground of military campaigns’ (*Forms of Community Service*, p.45).

pre-eminence maintain/A renovating virtue'. He suggests that *The Prelude's* 'deepest emotional source lies in distressing contacts with the outside world, especially the world of public events' (in Wordsworth's case, the events of the French Revolution) and that 'these contacts proved such a challenge to Wordsworth's sense of self that they enforced the creation of a new self-hood in an autobiography of which the appeal to childhood is a vital part.'⁴⁹ Ellis goes further: 'it is precisely when the difficulties of adult life have become most acute that it is telling to record a triumph (however dubious) over the most disturbing experiences of one's childhood.'⁵⁰ These two versions of the child-in-*The Prelude* are not quite consistent, but as alternatives they present a useful means of elucidating the child-in-the-*'Ode: On First Seeing Florence'*.

Section V of the Ode does indeed portray a 'triumph' over 'disturbing' childhood experiences: the crucial moment (more memorably depicted in 'Myths') of 'seeing a cobra squirm, crushed by a boulder'; the sound of a jackal barking; and, when human society mirrors the violence of the natural world, 'watching a black face wince'. Yet, for Butler, it was precisely with these disturbing moments that 'the knowledge came/of stark exposure and raggedness of heart'. The child, though 'unaware your universe was ending', was being ushered into the adult 'world of public events', as Ellis calls it.⁵¹

The child-adult rupture emerges again and again in Butler's poetry. 'Keeping a Distance' mourns a 'lost Eden,/childhood before the deluge rose,/before the exile'. The dead soldier in 'Elegy: For a South African Tank Commander' played with black friends when he was a boy, and the poem idealises 'a childhood memory of bright content/when skin meant

⁴⁹ David Ellis, *Wordsworth, Freud and the Spots of Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p.154.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.155.

⁵¹ Two further points made by Ellis are of interest. The first is a reminder that the ostensible spur to Wordsworth's intent in commencing *The Prelude* was in fact his inability to produce the anticipated philosophical poem, *The Excursion* – causing him to doubt his vocation as a poet and to wonder if in fact his youthful experiences had prepared him and equipped him for that vocation. This is a precursor to Butler's confident declaration, as recorded at the end of *Karoo Morning*, that he was going to be a poet; and to his subsequent – and more than occasional – sense of having failed as a poet. Secondly, Ellis argues that Wordsworth's lack of confidence on this score resulted in an 'habitual tentativeness': 'one is never far in Wordsworth from some form of qualifying gesture', which is why the optimism of the conclusion to *The Prelude* is not convincing (p.161). We have already seen that, despite Butler's doubts and hesitations, his poetry is less successful when it tends towards the self-assured or didactic.

nothing' (II.iv) – whereas for grown men, inter-race relations are like 'wine gone sour'.

We now start to understand the source of *Karoo Morning*'s evocative power: as the experiencing "hero" of his autobiography, young Butler gradually comes to an awareness of the geographical, racial and social divides that, as an experienced narrator, he can no longer escape. This is perhaps another reason why Butler tended to exaggerate – or so it seems to the post-apartheid reader – the racial unity and integration of the Cradock in which he grew up (although one must remember that his insistence on the "informality" of rural race relations between the wars was, of course, intended to contrast with the systematised extremes of separation under apartheid).⁵² There was a time, a time that was pre-apartheid and pre-adulthood, when the harsh realities of the South African political scene and the incongruity of Europe in Africa were not problematic to Butler. That time had, inevitably, ended.⁵³

⁵² In 'My Lousy Education', Butler does document the suffering he witnessed as a child, visiting his Aunt Mary's dispensary in the "location". There was, waiting for water, 'a patient queue of black women and children with buckets or four gallon paraffin tins, standing in the blinding sun, the August dust clouds, or the bitter wind of June. Many were ragged. Nearly all barefoot. No trees in the streets. No pavements. And at intervals, communal latrines.' Yet, he continues, though it may seem 'curious ... indeed almost incredible, we were hardly aware of the oddness, the difference, the injustice. How should we be? We grew up into it, almost unquestioning. It was all we knew – we had no standard of comparison.'

⁵³ Compare the evocation (in the Introduction to *Tales from the Old Karoo*) of a time 'when Karoo towns were racially easy-going places, without buffer strips and barbed wire fences patrolled by conscript-filled Casspirs' to the grotesque apartheid-era nightmare in the poem 'Dream of a Buffer Strip'.

II Historian-mythologist

(i) 'A long view'

Insofar as Butler's contribution to 'Poetry '74' offers an apolitical alternative to the version of 'transcendence' set out in 'The Colonizer', it also hints at a convincing vindication of Butler's work – if not quite of "Butlerism" according to Kirkwood's conception – an element sustained throughout his writing life: the insistence that we can only hope to address our current predicaments 'by knowing what process we are part of ... [man's] origins and his history'.

'The Colonizer' accuses Butler of 'bad faith' in trying to reconcile 'the contradiction between the long view of history and a romantic, nostalgic identification with a partial aspect', that 'aspect' being, presumably, the adverse conditions under which the English settlers "made a home" in Africa.¹ What do we understand a 'long view of history' to mean? It is worth emphasising Butler's deliberate use of the phrase in 'The African Renaissance – A Long View': we need not strain our ears to hear in the echo a final riposte to Kirkwood, a reappropriation of the phrase and of the concept (Kirkwood ostensibly uses it in Marx and Engels' sense²).

The 1999 article does, in effect, concede some ground to 'The Colonizer'. 'Bronze Heads' – from which poem Kirkwood launched his attack – expresses a regret that the African landscape seems to remain largely unmarked by the events of an unwritten history:

How can Zimbabwe's walls and these bronzes sum
our continent's long tale of joys and tears?

...

Sixteen centuries since the Cross, and none
have paved a highway, keyed a bridge, or arch
through which victorious regiments might march

...

vague ghosts in footloose air, since no scribe came
to pen their deeds in palisades of words.

¹ Kirkwood, 'The Colonizer', p.104.

² As Klopper points out, however, Kirkwood does not in fact clearly define his own understanding of 'the long view of history' (see *The Poetry of Pringle, Scully, Slater and Butler*, pp.240-241).

By contrast, 'The African Renaissance – A Long View' claims for Africa the pyramids, signifiers of a cultural commodity absent from the 'Bronze Heads' poem; moreover, the pre-human forests, plains and caves of Africa are awarded a prestigious place as the birthplace of humankind. This represents a subtle back-peddalling from Butler's earlier view of Africa as 'a land with almost no known history', a continent of 'simple barbaric lines'. The retrospective leaps of thousands or millions of years in fact serve to challenge Kirkwood's 'long view of history'. Butler's 'long view' takes him back beyond Marx and Engels to trace patterns in social and political phenomena (and, equally, in human behaviour) that have their foundations in distant human history, ancient mythology and, ultimately, evolutionary biology.

Patrick Cullinan once described Butler's cultural-political vision as 'idealism, bordering as it does on the incredible' – an idealism, considering its apartheid context, which was 'nonetheless inspiring' – the hope and expectation that South Africa could be made 'the showpiece of a new African culture'.³ Some would argue that this has been achieved in post-apartheid South Africa. A more sober assessment would have to acknowledge that the 'search for synthesis' continues, and that often those signs of hybridity pushed into public view are superficial – instances of commercial advertisers and parastatal marketing campaigns blowing their own *uvuzela*. Yet despair is an equally myopic response; a decade is not a very long time.

'The Republic and the Arts', despite referring to over three hundred years of interaction between Africa and Europe, is only able to make the minimal affirmation: 'We are at the beginning of something.'⁴ The paradigm Butler lays out in this lecture stretches back thousands of years to ancient Athens; three centuries of colonial encounter can thus be seen as a relatively brief gestation period, for 'the spiritual and emotional complex from which our culture will grow is something still in the making, awaiting articulation.' Butler asserts that 'in the very difficulty of the

³ One should note, of course, that as "culture" and "race" are not self-contained, static objects, any project hoping to achieve and perpetuate a particular kind of hybrid is fatally flawed. Butler's notion of synthesis is more organic.

⁴ Butler, 'The Republic and the Arts', p.102.

situation lies a certain hope' – 'short answers are short lived', and what lasts is 'measured in terms of difficulties mastered with grace, of complexities organised into satisfying unities'.⁵

In *A Local Habitation*, Butler recalls being taken to task by a fellow-student at Oxford, an Australian who was studying economics and could not abide the South African 'romantic liberal':

'You want both the comforting reassurance of traditions and the material benefits of capitalism. Can they be reconciled with any show of justice? ... is the wealth of the mines being used to provide material benefits for all on an equitable basis? Whose traditions are being preserved, the whites' or the blacks?''⁶

Butler 'had no answer' to these questions. All he could do was 'to say that new civilisations which resulted from the clash and blending of two or more existing cultures were slow in coming into being ... it would be a long time before the shape of SA culture emerged.'

The "long view" should not, however, be used to justify slow political change or social inertia. This is Butler's sardonic recollection of the apathetic response of many whites to the appalling conditions in the townships when he was growing up:

It had always been so. It would change for the better, of course, gradually, particularly for the Blacks and Coloureds, who would, slowly and at a pace which would not make a single White ever feel threatened or uncomfortable, become civilised like we were. So most of the grownups would say, if ever a white child's conscience got out of hand, or a black politician or white liberal shook an angry fist or prophesied the wrath of God. There was all the time in the world. History was a slow business. Like evolution. A favourite argument was: It took us (Whites) 2000 years to get where we were, and we were a clever lot. The Blacks must be patient, particularly with themselves. After all, they'd only met civilisation a mere 200 or 300 years ago.⁷

An ethical and intellectually honest "long view" would, in fact, reject the fallacy of separate development.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.103.

⁶ Butler, *A Local Habitation*, p.64. In the twenty-first century, despite, or perhaps because of, the implementation of government's Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) policies, we continue to discover that 'the material benefits of capitalism' often cannot 'be reconciled with justice'.

⁷ Butler, 'My Lousy Education'.

As a writer and as a professor of literature, Butler placed contemporary events not only within the context of a broad historical sensibility, but also alongside the documents informing that sensibility – poetry, prose fiction and dramatic texts no less than written histories. Consider his editorial, defending the establishment of the Shakespeare Society of Southern Africa in 1988:

Some believe this is neither the time nor the place to be founding a society to encourage the appreciation of a dramatist who was born in a foreign land over four hundred years ago, and whose works are written in an archaic form of English. South Africa has more important things to attend to. It certainly has; but that does not mean long-term interests must be neglected. *There are occasions when urgent matters may properly benefit from our attending to matters of permanent importance.*⁸

Above all, the lens of Butler's Christianity – faith, however weak, in an immortal God – assured him of a long view. This underlies the poem, 'A Prayer for All My Countrymen':

Though now few eyes
can see beyond
this tragic time's complexities,
dear God, ordain
such deeds be done
such words be said,
that men will praise
Your image yet
when all these terrors
and hates are dead.

The second and final stanza in the poem imagines itself in the time 'beyond', in which there will be something to salvage from the suffering:

Through rotting days,
beaten, broken,
some stayed pure;
others learnt how

⁸ Butler, Editorial, *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* 1 (1988), iv-v. My italics. Cited by David Johnson, *Shakespeare and South Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.208. See also Orkin, *Drama and the South African State*, p.242 – Orkin's criticism of the Society's indifference to political and social conditions in South Africa is perhaps excessive, and is betrayed as such by his misquoting of Butler. As for the editorial itself, one may note that, at the height of his teaching powers, Butler bore out its assertion in the classroom and lecture theatre. 'With a quick turn of phrase' or 'a passing topical reference to matters of the day', Paul Walters remembers, he could 'suddenly collapse the centuries between Shakespeare and ourselves' or 'illuminate some difficulty of the text while simultaneously passing a challenging, penetrating comment on some sacred cow or unquestioned assumption of our own time.' (Letter to Butler, 8th June 1983. NELM.)

to grin and endure;
and here and there
a heart stayed warm,
a head grew clear.

There is refuge from the shifting tides of political power – tyranny and democracy, peace and war – in the permanence and intransigence of Divinity. As Isaiah has it, ‘the nations are as a drop in a bucket ... The Lord bringeth the princes to nothing; He maketh the judges of the earth as a vanity’ (40:15-17). Thus, for Butler, when ‘we talk of old truths; of the old, old story’, what we actually mean is that ‘the truth that is the same yesterday, today and forever. The truth does not date; it is in the present.’⁹ By not stipulating the parameters of this ‘truth’, Butler avoids dogmatism, but his frame of reference is belief in an eternal, unchanging God.

The notion that the truth is always ‘in the present’ (for each individual as well as collectively) does not, however, depend on a religious foundation. “New” insights into the human condition that we gain from artists, scientists and philosophers, or from extreme and apparently unique forms of experience in recent history, provoke the response: ‘This can never not have been there, this has existed from the beginning.’¹⁰ It is not simply that the past is repeated in the present; the present discovers itself in the past. This paradoxical position may be usefully elucidated by discussing Butler’s third play, *Cape Charade, or Kaatjie Kekkelbek* (1967).

The play continually conflates past, present and future, as it does fact and fiction, through the use of character doubling and a pervasive intertextuality. It opens with a reenactment of a scene from Goncharov’s nineteenth-century Russian novel, *Oblomov*, in which the eponymous protagonist engages in dead-end dialogue with his servant, Zahar (Butler was familiar with the work of Beckett, and one wonders if he had *Endgame*’s master-slave relationship between Hamm and Clov in mind when scripting this exchange). The actor playing Oblomov then becomes

⁹ Butler, ‘High Corner (13)’, p.40.

¹⁰ See Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p.5: ‘When something comes to light, something which we are forced to consider as new, when another structural order emerges, well then, it creates its own perspective within the past ... What appears to be new thus always seems to extend itself indefinitely into perpetuity, prior to itself.’ Lacan is referring to the impossibility of avoiding psychoanalytical constructions, and he insists that the Freudian construction of the Ego imposes itself on all others. It is a moot point whether or not Butler ultimately escaped the influence of Freud, whose work certainly impressed him as a young writer.

Goncharov, waking from a dream about his unfinished novel – for, we discover, *Oblomov* has not yet been published – and addresses the audience, ostensibly locating the play in a historical reality: ‘Stellenbosch, Cape of Good Hope, 1853’.¹¹

Goncharov was indeed the official historian of a Russian naval expedition that stopped in Simonstown that year, and the continuity of historical narrative and theatrical illusion appears to be established. This is subverted, however, when Goncharov takes on the role of omniscient chorus. Even if we ignore his claims that his account of the voyage ‘will become a Russian travel classic’ and that the incomplete novel ‘will prove to be a masterpiece’ as nothing more than confident boasts, Goncharov has an unsettling knowledge of future events (which, to the audience member/reader, lie in the past). He knows that the modern Suez Canal will be constructed in the following decade, and that there will be a communist revolution in the next century. These foreshadowings echo the time-warping conclusion to the Fool’s nonsense prediction in *King Lear*: ‘This prophecy Merlin shall make; for I live before his time’ (III.II.95).¹²

A similar effect is contrived in *Take Root or Die* when members of the 1820 settler parties break away from the action to narrate their experiences in the past tense and then continue to act out the scene in the unfolding present. Furthermore – although drawing the historical parallel may seem inappropriate – we cannot fail to recognise in descriptions of the settlers’ trials and living conditions the indignity suffered by black South Africans under apartheid: they have to carry passes; basic freedoms are curtailed (‘no one sets much store by rights’); mothers are reduced to begging to feed their starving children; there is no justice in the law-courts.¹³ The prospect facing writers circa 1820 was also not unlike that circa 1960 – independent printing presses confiscated, heavy censorship imposed – and yet, in figures like Thomas Pringle, the beginnings of an English South African literature are represented (are, in fact, figured in the play as a kind of protest writing).

¹¹ Butler, *Cape Charade, or Kaatjie Kekkelbek* (Cape Town: Balkema, 1968), p.4.

¹² Akal quotes a similar ‘curiously prophetic image’ from *The Dove Returns* (*Forms of Community Service*, p.62): the allusion to a ‘war in the future’ – between Afrikaner and black nationalism – ‘throwing its shadow/backwards’ on the protagonists (*The Dove Returns*, p.72).

¹³ Butler, *Take Root or Die*, pp.12-15.

In *Cape Charade*, Goncharov is astonished by ‘how active with their pens this little colony of Europeans is’. He reads in a local newspaper a ‘dramatic sketch’, which turns out to be Andrew Geddes Bain’s satirical song *Kaatje Kekkelbek*, introducing the second intertextual stream that runs through the play. Antjie, a coloured servant at the Stellenbosch inn, identifies herself as the daughter of the real Kaatje Kekkelbek; the doubling device is employed again when she performs the song as a finale to the show. Butler quotes one Professor Scholtz to point out that, in Bain’s original sketch, Kaatje ‘reveals herself precisely as the anti-philanthropic frontiersmen, English and Afrikaans, regarded her kind’ – that is to say, the portion of the South African population variously labelled as “Griqua”, “Hottentot” or coloured.¹⁴ By giving his Russian characters lines comparing the system of serfdom to the racial hierarchies in South Africa, Butler highlights the *de facto* institutionalisation of slavery under colonial rule and apartheid. Goncharov is baffled by the drunkard Klaas:

Goncharov:	Remarkable! Zahar could never behave like that! How different from our Russian serfs!
Antjie:	Wat se ding is ’n serf?
Goncharov:	A domesticated two-legged animal, loyal as a dog, who would rather die of thirst than take a drop of his master’s drink.
Antjie:	My father, he was a slave. The English set him free, but they didn’t pay his price to his master. So he stayed with his master till he died. ¹⁵

Martin Orkin has suggested that, although coloured stereotypes are ‘ostensibly implicitly criticised in the text’, the common white perception of the ‘trait of idleness’ in coloured people ‘nevertheless informs Butler’s presentation of his own characters’.¹⁶ This argument hinges partly on what Orkin calls Bain’s ‘paternalism’. He refers to the incident in which Bain lost all his possessions to Moselikatsie after the “Griqua”, Barends, stole

¹⁴ *Cape Charade*, p.iv. Compare Alden Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan’s comment on the encounter between Trinculo and Stephano (“colonisers”) and Caliban (“colonised”) in *The Tempest*: they ‘describe him as a monster because they have heard so many travellers’ tales of grotesques. When they are shipwrecked on a desert island, they find (they think) what Renaissance tales and romances have led them to expect’ (*Shakespeare’s Caliban: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p.78).

¹⁵ *Cape Charade*, pp.11-12.

cattle from the chief. Bain was left destitute and had to cross 120 miles on foot; he and his party of coloured servants were caught in a storm and nearly died. Klaas Klauterberg, Antjie's husband, was one of them:

- Klaas: The cold wind was in our teeth. At last we Hotnots could go no further ... We all lay together, in Mr Bain's shadow. His back broke the wind.
- Bain: ... I tried to get up. My limbs were so stiff I fell, twice. I shouted to the others to get up. They refused. It never occurred to me to leave them there, in the mud. I kicked them. They wouldn't budge. Then I took the sjambok to them.
- Klaas: I thought it was the lightning. We got up ... and started to move again.¹⁷

Butler thought it 'reasonable to suppose' that the betrayal by Barends and subsequent events 'embittered [Bain] somewhat, and may in part account for the writing of "Kaatje Kekkelbek"'.¹⁸ Yet the strange combination of violence and compassion evinced by Bain in the extract above is one of the factors leading to his 'moment of crisis: he must either adopt a more generous, less critical view of his fellows, or move into bitterness and isolation.' Bain's attitude towards coloured people is, according to this scheme, modified by the end of the play in the same way that he learns to relate differently to his own family and, crucially, to his past.

Coloured characters speak the lines that express the crux of *Cape Charade's* alternative approaches to history. The past will repeat itself, or will be revisited in the present – this is incontestable – but Klaas and Antjie differ in their responses to it:

- Klaas: Die verlede, hy lê soos 'n pofadder in die son, bek oop, onderstebo. "Daar lê 'n dooie slang", sê jy. Moenie glo nie, hy sal jou pik.
- Antjie: Die verlede, hy kan ook soos 'n plant wees wat die droogte van die jare gekroei het; maar gee hom 'n bietjie reën, en daar kom 'n pragtige botterblom uit.¹⁹

Bain is forced to 'reassess the experiences that have made him what he is', to acknowledge what Beckett asserted in his essay on Marcel Proust (*A la*

¹⁶ Orkin, *Drama and the South African State*, p.117. Coloured characters occupy an equivocal position in much of Butler's writing – poetry, drama and prose – and this is discussed further in Chapter Six (II).

¹⁷ *Cape Charade*, p.40.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.vi.

Recherche du Temps Perdu could, after all, provide a second borrowed subtitle to the play): 'There is no escape from yesterday because yesterday has deformed us, or been deformed by us ... we are other, no longer what we were before the calamity of yesterday.'²⁰

In the play's culminating "charade", Bain tries to persuade the ailing Russian expatriate, Belinsky, to have his ulcerous leg amputated. He retells the story of his friend, Fred Carlisle, who had an incurable skin disease on his leg until he overcame his skepticism about anaesthesia, accepted the 'mutilation' of losing a limb and found instead 'an end to pain'.²¹ Acting out the part of Carlisle, Bain unwittingly induces a confrontation with his own wound, the 'deformation' of 'yesterday'. Following this (admittedly contrived) catharsis, he is able to shed the bitterness of resentment – at his wife Maria, at coloured acquaintances, at failed enterprises, at unrecognised achievement – and tells the Russians, 'You have conducted a successful operation on me.'²²

Although the list of traits describing Geddes Bain in the *dramatis personae* ('Big; intelligent; determined; aggressive; rational; sarcastic') could not all – at least not consistently – be attributed to Guy Butler, the similarities between author and character certainly extend beyond their initials. Butler's enthusiasm for geology clearly shadows Bain's, and as in *The Dam*, the chief protagonist is led into physical and spiritual landscapes of 'mountains and abysses' echoed elsewhere in Butler's poetry.²³ Both men cherished the fossils of the Karoo, and Bain's outrage at a man who saw 'no earthly relevance' or 'use' in his collection is revealing (bearing in mind that Butler's aesthetic and intellectual predisposition was tempered by a strong pragmatic streak): 'What use is a picture, a song, a poem? I know about use – I make roads!'²⁴ Butler's multifaceted career and shifting interests saw him 'change horses ... several times', as did Bain, who was variously 'saddler, sailor, soldier, farmer, road maker'.²⁵ One could speculate that Jean Butler at times felt

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.8.

²⁰ Beckett, 'Proust' (1931), *Proust and Three Dialogues* (London: John Calder, 1965), p.13.

²¹ *Cape Charade*, p.50.

²² *Ibid.*, p.57.

²³ *Ibid.*, p.46.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.33.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.25.

Here the gyre represents not continuity but chaos; the spiral of history has become entropic, or degenerate. For centuries, millennia, human history has followed a pattern – but the nightmare of modernity in the twentieth century threatens to destroy that pattern. At times Butler shared the same fear; regarding the balance between contemporary authors and canonical texts in English curricula, he insisted: ‘What we need is not saturation in the modern mess, but acquaintance in depth with a few major figures from less murderous and arrogant cultures than ours.’⁵³ Elsewhere, he lamented the prospect of humankind’s self-annihilation in a moment of *fin-de-(vingtième)-siècle* despair:

I wonder, quite seriously, whether there’ll be much left of the human race at the end of 1984. Looks as though the 1st World is likely to blow itself up. A few people in the 3rd World, in forests of the Amazon, Congo and Irriwaddy, will survive, maybe; and their great-grand children will peer at the broken teeth of New York and the rest, like we do at the ruins of Greece and Rome. I love the ruins of past civilisations!⁵⁴

Yet even this train of thought betrays an intuition that the prospect of extinction remains less likely than another turn of the historical wheel. Jared Diamond, documenting *The Rise and Fall of the Third Chimpanzee* (1991), emphasises the need to recognise how ‘our present situation’ – he is discussing xenophobic belligerence and the destruction of the environment – ‘is not novel, except in degree. The experiment has already been run many times, and the outcome is there for us to learn from.’⁵⁵ Diamond exposes the fallacy of a “golden age”, pointing out that great civilisations and small populations alike had been destroying their habitats throughout the pre-industrial millennia. The question of ‘degree’ is undoubtedly disconcerting (in past centuries we have not had the capacity for decimating ourselves and our habitat that we now have), but there is an odd comfort in this revelation, for it implies that human nature is more or less consistent. This is perhaps what Butler found so thrilling about ‘the ruins of past civilisations’: the humbling but strangely

⁵³ Butler, letter to Marshall Walker, 11th November 1993. NELM.

⁵⁴ Butler, card to David Butler, 19th December 1983. NELM.

⁵⁵ Diamond, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Chimpanzee*, p.6.

reassuring ‘manifest evidence of human non-success’ that he encountered when he first visited Europe during the Second World War.

As we read earlier, Butler felt that this ‘preoccupation’ prevented him from fulfilling one of his functions as Information Officer: ‘being a successful propagandist for the gospel of progress and social hope’. If, as Sartre declared, ‘human life begins on the far side of despair’ – and is thus likely to end in despair as well – battles fought in the name of social progress can never end in anything more than pyrrhic victories; these hopeless human struggles can be encapsulated and dismissed in a maudlin survey.⁵⁶ Consider the following diary extract, in *A Local Habitation*, from Butler’s diary of the trip he and his wife Jean made to Italy and France in the summer of 1947 (they are near Avignon):

Yes, we talk – of America and Russia, the giants to East and to West, and we are earnest enough. But I think of young couples who walked here perturbed in the aftermath of Troy’s fall, or appalled by Athenian deaths in Syracusan quarries. Certainly all the great campaigns, civic broils and assassinations of Rome must once have broken as startling news over this acropolis. There is no need to take either the present or the past too seriously.⁵⁷

In this instance, Butler is playing the role of the whimsical lover and the lyrical poet. At other times and stages of his life he would reject any claim that we need not ‘take either the past or the present too seriously’ – would, in fact, affirm our obligation to consider both very carefully. He was particularly taken with what he called ‘the very first editorial in our free press’, from the January 1824 edition of the *South African Commercial Advertiser* (to which his family was linked); ‘The Future of English-speaking South Africa’ opens by instructing the reader to ‘go back in order to begin’ and then quoting an excerpt from the editorial:

It is the privilege of reason to view the present scene of life with all its wants, not merely in the light which the moment of their actual occurrence may shed upon them, but with the eye of retrospect to what has passed, and of caution for what is to come.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Cited in *A Local Habitation*, p.114 (Butler stage-managed *The Flies* in 1948).

⁵⁷ *A Local Habitation*, pp.79-80.

Nevertheless – and this is crucial – although retrospect and caution are necessary companions to ‘the present scene of life’, they tend to instill passivity and, potentially, impotence based on a sense of predetermination.

In *Karoo Morning*, Butler describes family car trips in which he and his younger siblings were ‘strapped in the back, facing the wrong way’: ‘one had a marvellous view’ when the road was clear, ‘trees and roads and huts rushing past the sides of the vehicle, gradually slowing down as they were pulled into the distance, then steadying themselves, settling down into the vast landscape.’⁵⁹ By comparison, Butler notes that viewed from the front seat of a car ‘the stable landscape ahead becomes nervous as it draws nearer, breaks loose from its moorings, and then starts flying and hurtling past on either side in great fragments’; one is thus ‘splitting and splintering the scene, a wedge destroying the unity of things’. These alternative ways of perceiving movement through space, writes Butler, are metaphors for two perceptions of movement through time:

If you have a feeling for the past, you have the assurance that the chaos and excitements that occur in the present will be integrated, composed and ultimately reconciled in that inevitable landscape. But if you are future-orientated, the beautiful composition breaks up as it reaches you, or you break it; and you never get into it, it is always fragmenting and falling apart.

The childhood anecdote and the analogy it provides are remarkable for two reasons. The first is that Sartre, in an essay on ‘Time in the Work of Faulkner’ (specifically *The Sound and the Fury*), uses exactly the same trope – ‘a man sitting in an open car and looking backwards’ – to present ‘Faulkner’s vision of the world’: ‘formless shadows, flickerings, faint tumbings and patches of light rise up on either side of him, and only afterwards, when he has a little perspective, do they become trees and men and cars.’⁶⁰ If Butler was not familiar with Sartre’s article (first published in English in 1955), the symmetry is all the more striking. Yet –

⁵⁸ Butler, ‘The Future of English-speaking South Africa’, *Essays and Lectures*, p.115. A facsimile of the editorial is also included in the supplementary material to *Take Root or Die*, p.120.

⁵⁹ Butler, *Karoo Morning*, p.59.

⁶⁰ Sartre, ‘On *The Sound and the Fury*: Time in the Work of Faulkner’, in David Minter (ed.), *The Sound and the Fury*, Norton Critical Edition (New York: Norton, 1994), p.267.

and this is the second significant point – they employ the figure for altogether different purposes.

Sartre, although he professes to like Faulkner's 'art', refutes his 'metaphysics'. In Faulkner's novel, the 'super-reality' of the past ('contours are hard and clear, unchangeable') delimits the present, makes it 'nameless and fleeting', 'helpless'. Sartre's existential argument asserts the freedom of the individual – not helplessness, but agency and its concomitant responsibility. He thus cannot condone a depiction of time which deprives it of the future tense, 'that is, its dimension of deeds and freedom': 'Man is not the sum of what he has, but the totality of what he does not yet have, of what he might have. And if we steep ourselves in the future, is not the formless brutality of the present thereby attenuated?'⁶¹

Butler's position, on the other hand, is past- and not 'future-oriented'. In presenting a necessary challenge to the rationalist approach, which would discard the past and forge headlong into the future (with adverse effects, for 'the beautiful composition breaks up as it reaches you, or you break it'), he also risks negating any possibility of progress or improvement, not only in "the human condition" itself, but also in all its social and physical symptoms. 'A feeling for the past' can thus be accompanied by the sense of a preordained future: 'the assurance that ... the present will be integrated, composed and ultimately reconciled in that inevitable landscape'. Here Butler's stance again resonates with that of Michael Oakeshott, whose conservatism sees tradition both as that which has happened and as a guide to that which is likely to happen – that is, to continue happening. This view holds that we will maintain or retain, in some form or another, whatever is of value from the past. Reciprocally, it would seem to suggest, we are also doomed to repeat and perpetuate the errors of the past. Oakeshott is not fundamentally hostile to change or to "progress". Rather, he critiques rationalism's understanding of how change should come about: 'the rationalist does not recognise change unless it is a self-consciously induced change, and consequently he falls easily into the error of identifying the customary and the traditional with the

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p.269 and p.271.

changeless.⁶² Nonetheless, if change only occurs organically, independent of any intervention, and can never be 'self-consciously induced', then individuals are resigned to a tractable fatalism and societies reduced to inertia. Such a predication would have been anathema to Butler, who was, after all, a tireless campaigner and a direct participant in – not simply an observer of – historical processes in South Africa.

'The Development of a South African National Character' challenges the attitudes entrenched in and by the apartheid system:

A prejudice is something absorbed from the environment, unconsciously, in the dark, as it were. Because it seems so natural, we find it hard to think it wrong. This, however, is to make the mistake of regarding the social patterns of the past as having been perfect, and ways of feeling appropriate to them as having a permanent validity. But prejudices need not be permanent. Change the environment, and they change.⁶³

In 'South African Literature', Butler bestows upon writers the power to bring about that change: 'Though no-one can predict or control the future, the fact remains that ideas do make history. Ideas are found in books, and books are written by men and women.'⁶⁴ A deft inversion follows: 'Marxist Russia, for instance, is not the result of an inevitable historical process; it is largely the result of *Das Kapital*, a book written by a man.' Ideas shape the future, and therefore writers have a responsibility towards that future. (There is, as we have seen, a rider attached to this commission: writers have to be to some extent detached from the present in order to enact their responsibility.)

Butler's "long view" thus does not imply stagnation, or blanket condemnation to repeat the past. Yet the rationalist position is equally untenable; likewise, a Hegelian idealism, which assumes progress towards a goal or a known end. Although he admitted to being influenced by Toynbee, as a self-proclaimed 'hesitant mottled chameleon' Butler could not share in Toynbee's confidence, for the same reasons that his own idea of history would not embrace the historical positivism of Hegel. Pieter

⁶² Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, p.4.

⁶³ Butler, 'The Development of a South African National Character', p.91.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p.42.

Geyl's critique of these two approaches, in *Use and Abuse of History* (1955), aptly demonstrates why. Hegel

is a child of the Enlightenment. He is imbued with its optimism, its belief in progress and perfectibility. And so history is to him the Absolute realising itself, in periods and through peoples carefully noted, until complete freedom has been attained through *understanding*.⁶⁵

Toynbee is more severely rebuked by Geyl, firstly, for having a vision of history dictated by a 'passion for unity, a passion fundamentally antagonistic to history, the guardian of the particular'; and secondly, because 'he belongs to those who obstinately blind themselves to the limitations of our comprehension of history.'⁶⁶

Anthony Akal, however, promotes Butler's debt to Toynbee and Hegel, emphasising the Hegelian "triadic" process of thesis-antithesis-synthesis and defending Butler's application of it to the South African situation. Akal argues that, 'for Hegel, the antithesis was not seen in negative terms' (in other words, rational Apollo is not 'axiomatically privileged' over irrational Dionysus), but that it gradually acquired these connotations 'in Marxist adaptations' – he considers the Marxist-materialist form of dialectics a misappropriation of the dialectical structure as originally conceived by Hegel.⁶⁷ This is a fair analysis of one philosophical principle underlying Butler's vision of a South African synthesis, but Akal is less convincing when he refers to the Hegelian process 'resulting in progress to a higher plane where, by gathering in the truth contained in earlier stages we reach, ultimately, a state of absolute knowledge'. Butler could not commit to an unqualified faith in continued, progressive improvement in individuals or in societies. Forms of cultural synthesis were and continue to be important in South Africa, but this does not necessarily speak to a broad advancement in the human condition.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Pieter Geyl, *Use and Abuse of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955 and Archon Books, 1970), p.35.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.66.

⁶⁷ See Akal, *Forms of Community Service*, pp.147-151.

⁶⁸ To apply a scientific paradigm, one might say that biological changes in individual organisms (ontogenetic development) and in whole species (phylogenetic evolution) clearly occur, but these do not represent – or are not manifestations of – a 'general law of evolution' incorporating all physical bodies and the interaction between them (such as 'the development of the cosmos, the stars and the planets from simpler beginnings' or

Akal also places the wrong emphasis on what he sees as the 'eschatological' dynamic in Butler's poetry:

Butler does not view history merely as a succession of contingent events but rather as an evolutionary pattern which is in contact with God's Divine Plan. In this view all events move inexorably forward towards a realisation of that Divine Plan.⁶⁹

It is true that Butler's Christian faith was the foundation of his world view, and that Christian doctrine teaches an ultimate revelation of God, through Christ, as the saviour of all humankind. Yet Butler frequently professed his doctrinal uncertainty and his opposition to 'holy banners' (indeed, there is no theological consensus over the form of 'God's Divine Plan' – debates over predestination, for instance, are age-old).⁷⁰ Butler's public pronouncements about his beliefs stressed salvation for individuals (because of 'the person of Christ') or alluded to redemption for a nation such as South Africa through the commitment of its people to God's grace, but did not proclaim an "end time" in which "every knee shall bow and every tongue confess" God's glory. He was not unswervingly optimistic about the future of the human race.

Akal claims that Butler's poetry reveals a frequent 'reversion to the Liturgies and Sacramental symbols of the Church in compulsive gestures which confirm and reconfirm the tenets of an eschatological destiny'. He goes on to suggest that these gestures can be better understood by following Walter Benjamin's distinction between 'horizontal' time and 'vertical' time: that is, the 'homogenous' time of historical progress and the 'simultaneous' or 'Messianic' time which allows for transcendence from

'progressive changes, over historical time, in social phenomena such as the arts, technology and language'). See Dawkins, *Unweaving the Rainbow*, pp.192-193.

⁶⁹ *Forms of Community Service*, p.216.

⁷⁰ Akal's argument that Butler's 'antagonism to modernism' (Akal does not, unfortunately, distinguish between modernism and modernity) is based chiefly on 'the open-endedness of modernist thought' – particularly the 'religious relativism originating in the 1950s', which 'undermines the very foundations of theological investigation and assumed Christian epistemes' (*Forms of Community Service*, pp.246-248) – is thus untenable, especially insofar as it makes Butler out to be an 'absolutist' or even a fundamentalist. As Don MacLennan points out, 'Butler is far from being a rigid essentialist. The story his poetry tells is that if there are certainties, their credibility depends in large measure on personal belief, since nothing is fixed or certain in this world ridden by time, change and death' ('The Poetry of Guy Butler', p.199).

history.⁷¹ I have shown that Butler's conception of time depended on the opposition of the straight line to the circle and the gyre, or alternatively on the image of the open field (time as spatial, rather than linear). In this context his thoughts were based on Old Testament paradigms – the 'purpose' of the prophets balanced by the priests' celebration of the 'unchangeable' – and not on New Testament proselytising or apocalyptic visions.

Benjamin's axes are nevertheless useful in analysing two aspects of Butler's response to "history" that have been discussed in this chapter. Firstly, there is the repetition of the past in the present, or the universality of human experience across time: poems such as 'Pieta' or 'Letter from Monte Stanco', Akal argues, depend on a (vertical) relationship between past and present suffering. Secondly, there is the desire to escape the obligation of participating in (horizontal) history, or to see fluctuating human history against the background of Divine immutability. Akal affirms that the prominence of liturgical and sacramental symbolism in Butler's poetry results from this pursuit of 'serendipitous experience', the yearning for 'one split second, outside, beyond the Fall' (quoting 'To a Statue of the Virgin').⁷² In doing so, however, he undermines his earlier argument about the 'Divine Plan' – for the poet is seeking freedom from consciousness of "purpose", both human and Divine, and not endorsing the view that 'all events move inexorably forward' towards a prescribed and perfect end.

What, then, remains as a paradigm for understanding history in Butler's terms? Hans-Georg Gadamer's principle of "the bad infinity" may be usefully applied. Gadamer acknowledges that we will never establish a comprehensive, objective version of history (our own or that of the other). Indeed, his frankness about the shortcomings of historical study – both epistemological and methodological – accords with Butler's 'deep-seated dread of certainty'. Crucially, however, through the activity of dialogue we are at least able to modify our partiality: it is a threshold, not a limit. By

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p.217. Akal makes some interesting comments about Butler's preference for poetry (which 'operates in the vertical plane') over the novel form ('the horizontal sphere'); he also notes that the autobiographies 'operate more comfortably in vertical timeframes' (pp.218-219).

⁷² *Ibid.*, p.245.

accepting that our “reason” is also our “prejudice”, we can, in a sense, aspire towards an objectivity that can never be reached. Gadamer described this asymptotic development as ‘the bad infinity’.⁷³ Through the dialogue between multiple subjectivities, each party involved – while conceding its subjective limitations – can at least expand its understanding. This process is one of *bildung*, ‘through which individuals and cultures enter a more and more widely defined community’:

Similarly, the *gebildete* culture is one that understands its place within a larger world-community ... individuals and cultures integrate this understanding of others and of the differences between them within their own self-understanding ... they learn from others and take a wider, more differentiated view.⁷⁴

For Gadamer, as for Butler, ‘specific historical advances such as the recognition, if not the realisation, of the freedom of all’ show that we can progress, however slowly, however asymptotically: ‘Our historical situatedness does not only limit what we can know with certainty; it can also teach us how to remember and integrate what we must not forget.’

⁷³ Gadamer, *Philosophical Apprenticeships*, p.189.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p.174.

CHAPTER SIX

I Ecologist

(i) 'The breach between man and nature'

It may seem strange that a section on Butler-as-ecologist should be located within a chapter on Butler-as-historian. Reverence for the natural world – what might be called Butler’s “environmentalism” – is, after all, a definitive and not a secondary characteristic of his work. Yet, as JM Coetzee comments in *White Writing* (1988), ‘Butler treats the relation of the poet to his landscape historically.’¹ Reciprocally, human history and natural history form the axes against which Butler’s activities and interests as an historian may be plotted.

I have already discussed some evidence of this relationship. Butler’s sense of the atavistic or primitive led him to a familiar dilemma: the natural world of ‘growth, sap, sunlight, soil and birdsong’ at times resists the human world of ‘guns and banknotes’; at other times, the cruelty of the butcherbird symbolises the bloody foundations of animal interactions within the human species. These examples are from *Bursting World*, and there are others in this record of the war years, when the balance or tension between nature and human activity was foremost in Butler’s thoughts. During military training, the sight of two lizards is both encouraging (because they are ‘signs of spring and reminders of the age of the earth and the cycles of evolution’) and disturbing (because there is ‘something terrifying in the eye of any cold-blooded animal’, hinting at ‘calamities that came and may come again’).² When Butler visits his younger brother Jeff after the latter has been seriously wounded, he becomes aware of ‘the human quiet’ that, whether in a hospital tent or a Quaker meeting, is ‘so different from the quiet of rocks and stones and trees’ – so full of emotion, for better and worse.³ While night-time battles rage in the sky and on land, ‘the bare trees and stars remain calm,

¹ Coetzee, *White Writing*, p.169.

² Butler, *Bursting World*, p.127.

³ *Ibid.*, p.236.

immovable, almost contemptuous.⁴

This quality is also evident in 'Karoo Town, 1939', a *locus classicus* in Butler's interpretation of the unemphatic but undeniable dominance of natural history over human history. Van der Mescht presents 'Karoo Town, 1939' as a depiction of 'a way of life that is inseparably associated with Nature', referring to lines such as 'here climate integrates the landsman with his soil/and life moves on to the dictates of the season.'⁵ Yet this association is disrupted when 'Europe asserts/her infallible remote control' and 'demands decisions' from the farming community. The conflict in the metropolitan centre (between 'the gods of London and Berlin') spreads to the provincial periphery ('a village lost in the plain'). In response to the 'imperative demands' of the recruiters' trumpets, the town forgets 'wool and lucerne bales'; 'crystallising loyalties, hardening hates', the war severs the connection between people and landscape. 'But', the poem concludes, human affairs 'cannot shake the rockstill shadows of the hills/Obeying remote instructions from the sun alone.'

This is what Coetzee refers to as 'the breach between man and nature' – a rift, like that 'between man and man', which cannot be bridged by language.⁶ He offers 'Near Hout Bay' as an example; the poem, he argues, deals with 'the alienness of the landscape' in terms of 'the alienness of the sounds of nature'. Although I concur with Coetzee that 'the question of a language for Africa' is a central concern in much of Butler's work, I am not persuaded that 'Near Hout Bay' addresses this question. As I have pointed out, the speaker in the poem accepts the failure of language to reconnect unravelled human ties only because the sense-data (an 'epic view', the sounds of 'cicadas; doves; wind; surf') of the natural world provide some non-linguistic reassurance. This is not an 'alien' environment: the elements in the 'sound-scape' are hardly, as Coetzee suggests, unique to Africa. Rather, it is a comforting and spiritually invigorating environment – 'not far from *natura codex dei*', Coetzee deduces – and the poem is very different to those of Butler's works that grapple with the linguistic rendition of Africa's topography, fauna and

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.285.

⁵ Van der Mescht, *The Poetry of Guy Butler*, p.20.

⁶ *White Writing*, p.170.

flora.

Coetzee may furnish the wrong example, but *Pilgrimage to Dias Cross* (published in book form a year before *White Writing*) vindicates his argument. The predominance in this long poem of the “elemental imagery” found in ‘Near Hout Bay’ forcibly demonstrates ‘the breach between man and nature’, presenting the relationship between human history and natural history in a more convoluted fashion.⁷ As ‘the ageing speaker’ (as Butler describes himself in a Prologue) makes his imaginary pilgrimage, the narratives offered by each of the ‘historical ghosts’ presiding along the Eastern Cape coastline are balanced by a more profound, constant, eternally repeated story: ‘Sea encountering sand, rock encountering sea,/and sea and land all round encountering the sky’ (Section II). Without the ghostly voices, there is ‘no sound except/the interminable/pounding of the sea’; when they have finished speaking and fade away, the speaker is plunged into

A chasm of silence
which all the falling breakers can never fill.
Nothing but the elements, sea, land, sky.
(IX)

There is something threatening about the ‘restless surfaces’ of the sea, and a ‘blanket of silent air and stars/cannot console’ him (XI).

The climactic Section XIII begins with a resolute acceptance of nature’s indifference to individual and collective human histories:

We know how the sounds of the air
and the roar of the sea
obliterate instinctive cries,
reasoning voices, prayers, curses, songs.

Our experiences – and the expression of those experiences – are at odds with the ‘arcane’ elements, and we cling to (artistic) victories over an incomprehensible cosmos:

⁷ Taken as a whole, the poem achieves an effect that Carol Clarkson (she is discussing the work of artist Willem Boshoff) describes as ‘reanimating the soil with historical narratives’; nevertheless, as I argue here, the poem also emphasises the disjunction between ‘soil’ and ‘narrative’ – between natural phenomena/elements and human history. See ‘Verbal and Visual: The Restless View’, *Scrutiny* 2 11/12 (2006/7 – forthcoming).

Sometimes a word outwits the cosmic noise,
sometimes by cunning or love
an action will flash into freedom,
feeling find form in song.

Yet 'culture', 'gods', 'chains of command' – the 'systems' we construct – all 'decay and die', to be followed by others. With this in mind, the eternal cycle of the ocean (wave breaking on shore, receding and returning again) no longer seems to be mocking human endeavour, but rather mirrors it. Matthew Arnold's evocation of 'the turbid ebb and flow/Of human misery' in 'Dover Beach' underscores the resolution reached by Butler: 'History's noise seems endless, like the sea's.'⁸ Though we feel helpless in the face of this dual onslaught – the inevitable cycles of human history and the supreme indifference of natural history – there is nevertheless some comfort to be found in the cogent symbols presented by natural phenomena. When vehicle and tenor are matched (the insistent sound of the sea and the relentless march of 'History'), the metaphor not only gratifies the poet, but also offers solace:

We are the traffic on its surface,
the life that sweats and labours
the singing voices on the shore.

Although in *Pilgrimage to Dias Cross* the sea does not function simply as an external form embodying the poet's state of mind, the poem is one of many instances in Butler's poetry undermining Coetzee's claim that the 'one familiar avatar we do not find in Butler is the poet as a being who projects moods onto the landscape or is flooded by the mood of the landscape.'⁹ Coetzee makes this statement in order to foreground the "historicism" of Butler's response to landscape, but I would argue that treating the relation between poet and natural environment 'historically' does not preclude a lyrical response in which the 'moods' of poet and landscape are mutual. In a 1950 lecture, Butler rebuked the strain of South African poetry that, 'devoid of accurate perception or description',

⁸ Matthew Arnold, 'Dover Beach', *The Poems of Matthew Arnold* (London: Longman, 1979), p.254.

⁹ *White Writing*, p.168.

makes the open countryside 'no more than a place where a mood descends upon one, and where one bleats about one's mood'.¹⁰ Yet, if he denounced a misplaced sentimental Romanticism for being 'anachromatic and unsuitable to the particular spiritual climate of our time', many of Butler's own poems exhibit a blend of lyricism and acute observation. It is worth noting, for instance, that Muriel Bradbrook uses 'Near Hout Bay' (Coetzee's example) to demonstrate the 'delicate blend of scene painting and mood' she finds in Butler's poetry – a 'wedding' of 'outer and inner landscape'.¹¹

There is, it must be granted, the bold statement in 'Having Seen Through the Pathetic Fallacy' that

No cord ties us to earth.
Our bloods are in different groups.
Remotely different seasons
set our ungovernable moods.

This poem stands out in Butler's work as a bitter, desperate articulation of a state of emotional inertia, from which there is no prospect of escape.¹² The cause of the speaker's anguish is unclear; he seems to be suffering from a version of writer's block (a year has passed 'since last a living thing/burst from my chrysalis') resulting from a spiritual crisis:

... the larger silk cocoon
of the Christian scheme was torn
and the cosmic hoar-frost stung
my soft heart into stone.

His despondency is exacerbated by the 'seasonal swing' because the stale "winter" of his emotions is not relieved by the external changes of spring and summer – the sun cannot 'warm a paralysis'. The poem does not, however, prove Coetzee's supposition, for the bleak tone is achieved

¹⁰ Butler, 'English SA Poetry today – A Review Lecture on the Gulston-Macnab Anthology, Delivered in Natal' (1950). Draft typescript. NELM. The volume referred to is Roy Macnab and Charles Gulston's *South African Poetry: A New Anthology* (London: Collins, 1948).

¹¹ Bradbrook, ' "A dome of many-coloured glass": The Lyric Poetry of Guy Butler', pp.156-157.

¹² Malan comments that the poem 'appears to contradict the message of hope and reconciliation offered in the "transcendental" plays' as it betrays both public and private causes for grief: 'the socio-political overtones in the repetitive line, "our bloods are in different groups", suggest that the poet's despair must be traced to the effects of the ideology of apartheid', while at the same time "'my chrysalis" in the second stanza suggests that the reason for his disillusionment is personal' (*Guy Butler: Poet and Dramatist*, p.219). Given that the poem

precisely by a rejection of that quality its author in fact demonstrates in so much of his work: 'projecting moods onto the landscape' or 'being flooded by the mood of the landscape'.

The different kinds of Karoo rock were 'implanted' in Butler's imagination as symbols of different temperaments: 'sandstone stood for experience, for tradition', whereas 'ironstone stood for raw instinct and energy tapped from the molten heart of things'.¹³ His own disposition shifted between these two, and in his search for synthesis he identified with lydianite (a sandstone-ironstone fusion): 'something comparatively rare, a product of two worlds, partaking of both', which represents 'a possible integrity and function for the mind, or the moment, or the mood, which, while owing its origin to highly contrasted sources, is different from either.'¹⁴

In 'Cradock Mountains', the peaks' 'bone-bare silhouettes' are celebrated for informing and presiding over Butler's childhood (Coetzee considers this 'the poem that most clearly reveals the depth of Butler's debt to Wordsworth' in its 'reflections on the power of remembered childhood scenes').¹⁵ As these events are narrated, however – and even though the speaker concedes that 'our affair is very one-sided/and I mean nothing to you' – the mountains take on qualities that reflect the boy's state of mind, or frame it by contrast. The combination of euphoria and guilt when hunting a dassie made his sight 'slip, whip, skim/... go ricocheting through' the peaks; after 'the dizzy, blinding first dive of a kiss', he 'surfaced gasping to find you floating remote,/impassive as

dates to 1955, the year before the Butlers' first biological son was born – they had already adopted two infants by then – the imagery of parturition is suggestive.

¹³ Butler, *Karoo Morning*, pp.240-241. The preponderance of "rock" in Butler's writing is reinforced by Coetzee's sense that 'the true South African landscape is of rock, not of foliage' and that the South African artist must therefore 'employ a geological, not a botanical, gaze' (curiously, he cites Butler's 'Sweet Water' as one instance of the 'art of deep reading' – that is, the poet's 'penetrative divining art' rather than the painter's 'representation of superficies' – for 'buried beneath the unpromising surface of Africa' lies 'life-giving underground water'; *White Writing*, pp.167-168).

¹⁴ See Dirk Klopper's discussion of the psychological processes underlying this geological metaphor in 'Soliciting the Other': 142-144.

¹⁵ *White Writing*, p.171. According to Coetzee, the weakness of the poem is that it 'raises a Wordsworthian question – In what ways have I been moulded by the landscape in which I have lived? – but barely begins to answer it'; by thus playing out 'themes from the English tradition against an African backdrop, Butler settles for no less provincial a goal than the Thomas Pringle of *Poems Illustrative of South Africa*'. This is too harsh. 'Cradock Mountains' is, after all, an early poem. It is the work of a poet who does not yet have the critical scaffolding that would be developed in the years following the Second World War (and that Butler himself took the lead in constructing). Moreover, the Wordsworthian content and themes need not be seen as purely imitative; the poem can be read as a legitimate, sustained allusion or tribute by one poet to another.

dreadnoughts through the winter air’.

The war poems are full of depictions of landscape that resonate with the poet’s mood. In poems of quiet hope or affirmation, the speaker seeks comfort in ‘Nature’s archetypal primacy’ which can ‘harmonise man’s petty differences’, a process Van der Mescht sees occurring in ‘Common Dawn’.¹⁶ In poems of grief or disillusionment, the horrors of the war are equated with an ‘assault on nature’. Van der Mescht quotes from an uncollected poem, ‘Fragment’, in which ‘dawn/cracks open beneath the hammer of the guns’, and from ‘El Kahira’, where nature (symbolised by various flowers) has been displaced and replaced by that ancient wartime ally, the sex industry:

In a doorway, half-ajar,
she pauses, sways and throws –
not cassia nor jasmine,
nor oleander, rose,
not even a flamboyant
that burns beside the Nile –
but a withered flower of the city
a stale commercial smile.

Van der Mescht concludes his analysis by discussing two poems that were written in ‘lyrical praise of nature, an emphatic re-statement of the belief that man is part of her cycle’.¹⁷ This description gives a rather ambiguous place to human affairs. If ‘man is part of [Nature’s] cycle’, he is cast in an organic, non-intrusive (non-destructive) role – but this is hardly true of ‘man’ in the Second World War. An alternative way of reading Van der Mescht’s formulation is to consider man as having a *minor* part within the greater natural realm, in which case the appropriate response to ‘Nature’s supremacy’ is to acknowledge her indifference to human affairs. Certainly, this is how Van der Mescht interprets ‘The Colossi of Memnon’, which he associates with Shelley’s ‘Ozymandias’ because the statues’ ‘doom is spelt out in stanza two: the elements, allied with time, will slowly wear them away.’¹⁸ This is not necessarily the clear implication of the poem, however, written as it is in the continuing present. The opening line

¹⁶ *The Poetry of Guy Butler*, pp.21-22.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.24.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.25.

declares, 'Imperial calm is on them still'; as, 'faceless, they face the implacable east', they seem to be braving – surviving – the elements with stoic resistance. Van der Mescht argues that 'in the "Bees that hive in the cracks of their stone" the poet sees, paradoxically, a symbol of greater endurance than the stone statues', but ultimately the statues remain as unsusceptible as the 'rock-still shadows of the hills' in 'Karoo Town, 1939'.¹⁹

'Syrian Spring' paints the picture of a different kind of human imposition: farming. Here there are 'singing peasants' who, 'in the first furrow's turning, the hedge's trimming' are inextricably involved in the spring 'rejuvenation of a landscape' (Van der Mescht's phrase) that encourages the already war-weary poet: 'changing a hillside, they change my heart'.²⁰ Yet, in the final stanza, the speaker stresses his observer status; the activities of sowing are

distinct from me:
I have no hold on them, no word to say
or wish to will on this soil in the sun.

Butler has seen the South African, north African and European landscapes not only as strong and enduring but also – like the poet-soldier himself – as fragile under the attack of warfare. Linking signs from the external natural world to his internal emotional world, the speaker "absorbs" nature:

By taking these changes into my heart
I have freed myself as a bird in an orchard,
or standing at ease, the stem of a tree.

When Coetzee denies that Butler is a poet who can be 'flooded by the mood of the landscape', he does not account for lines such as these.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.26. Again, differences between early and late drafts of the poem are illuminating. In the version quoted by van der Mescht, the final line concludes with 'the Colossi, the broken kings'; in the *Collected Poems*, the Colossi are 'stone-still kings.' These human impositions on the landscape are defiant, and seem to exist in a kind of equilibrium with natural elements.

²⁰ Don MacLennan affirms that the 'ancient wisdom of the peasants puts war into perspective, for nature persists and it is with nature, after all, that man must make his true accommodation' ('The Poetry of Guy Butler', p.202).

(ii) *Appropriating the land*

In the final image in 'Syrian Spring', the speaker compares his freedom to that of a tree – a paradoxical association. How can a tree, fixed, rooted in place, be "free"? As an older man, Butler would exalt and take as an expression of his creed the words of settler Henry Hare Dugmore: 'We must take root and grow, or die where we [stand].'²¹ Yet even Butler admitted, on occasion, what other settler historians have stressed: belonging also meant taking possession. The land was scouted, marked out and divided amongst owners. In order for those who had come to settle in this new land to feel free, they had to subjugate those who were already there. Even settlers who sought nothing but a life of peaceful subsistence farming became complicit in the dislocation or ejection of previously settled peoples.

Of course, this pattern is by no means unique to the South African colonial encounter. Nor, indeed, is it specific to Western imperial expansion over the last five hundred years. The enterprise of farming has always entailed marking domains and mastering dominions. Jared Diamond argues in *The Rise and Fall of the Third Chimpanzee* and, more recently, *Guns, Germs and Steel* (1999) that the advent of agriculture – the centralisation of food stores, as opposed to the nomadic lifestyle of the hunter-gatherer – introduced widespread malnutrition and disease, entrenched class structures and exacerbated gender inequalities. Butler hints at these ill effects in his Introduction to Herman Potgieter's collection of aerial photographs, *South Africa: Landshapes, Landscapes and Manscapes* (1990). Although he celebrates the aesthetic effect of ploughed wheat fields or lush tea plantations, Butler also acknowledges that the basic technologies of farming introduced the hierarchies of power so familiar to us today: 'It was only when [mankind] learnt to plant and cultivate ... to plough, irrigate and harvest, that he began to change the face of the earth. A steady food supply led to increases in population, to cities, to empires.'²²

²¹ HH Dugmore, *Reminiscences*, cited in Butler's Introduction to *Take Root or Die*, p.viii. Akal remarks on the prevalence of other forms of 'tree symbolism' in Butler's plays – notably *Richard Gush of Salem* and *The Silver Spoon (Forms of Community Service)*, p.120).

²² Butler, Introduction to *South Africa: Landshapes, Landscapes, Manscapes* (Cape Town: Struik, 1990), p.7.

By way of contrast, there is Steve Biko's insistence that the traditional African attitude to property is anathema to 'individual land ownership'.²³ Although this assertion depends on the fallacy of an "essential" Africa, to which we have already referred, it is nonetheless evident that the inhabitants of large parts of what is now South Africa were ill-equipped to prevent the appropriation of land by settler farmers (whether privately or on behalf of colonising governments).²⁴ The result is a fundamental site of conflict – literal and figurative – in South African history, one that has wide ramifications in current political debates over land restitution. The farms of the Eastern Cape that Butler knew and loved were integral both to his evocation of the Karoo landscape and to his conception of a South African English community, descending from the 1820 settlers, that had 'taken root' and had a substantial cultural-historical heritage. Unfortunately, however, the settler-farmers of South Africa were not simply early examples of "white Africans" who committed themselves to the soil and thus to the land itself; they were also, for better or worse, involved in the military and legislative suppression that accompanied colonisation and, later, apartheid.

Butler's poem 'Farmer' depicts its subject staring out over the 'three thousand morgen of good Karoo veld' that he 'pilots' from his stoep, like a captain on 'the bridge of his liner' (or that he has created, like the God of Genesis):

Some infinite assurance reached him through his eyes.
 The arc of the horizon, that particular
 configuration of ironstone and grey shale,
 pale soil stippled with dark round shrubs,
 red grass in seed shaking along the ragged ridges –
 he'd taken all that he saw into himself
 and found that it was good.

Farmer and land share an intimate, sacred relationship – the poet is

²³ Biko, 'Some African Cultural Concepts', p.45.

²⁴ The conflict caused by different approaches to the natural world is not, of course, unique to colonisation in Africa. Historians of early colonial encounters in Australia record that Aboriginal peoples were confounded by European settlers because they had no concept of private land ownership. By contrast, as Ian Buruma observes, many Asian cultures endorse human domination over the landscape independently of the "Western" pattern: in Japanese horticulture, for instance, 'nature must be tamed, or at least controlled' – it is 'worshipped, yes, but only after it has been reshaped by human hands ... love of nature does not extend to nature in the raw' (*A Japanese Mirror* (London: Phoenix, 2001), p.65).

reminded of 'a praying child' or 'lovers' – that the urbanite cannot claim to understand. Yet the farmer's gaze across the veld is the same one identified by Malvern van Wyk Smith in a colonial literary tradition stretching back at least as far, locally, as Thomas Pringle's descriptions of the South African landscape: 'the carefully progressive sweep of the eye over the scene ... to effect a thorough colonization'.²⁵ This gaze of domination and possession underlies the stare of the farmer who (not unlike the soldier-poet 'taking' the changing Syrian landscape 'into [his] heart') had 'taken all that he saw into himself'.²⁶

Discussing what she calls the 'looking relations' in EM Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924), Linda van der Vijver notes that the "colonial gaze" is both a discourse and a way of objectifying the people and place of the colony. Consider the well-meaning Adela's attempts to "see" India:

Although Adela wishes to avoid the Anglo-Indian mentality, she does not want to 'sacrifice the authority of the word' ...in Anglo-Indian society, 'speech must constitute either truth or lie', and this culturally imposed constraint prevents Adela (and perhaps all the British characters and the narrator) from truly 'seeing' India.

This notion of 'verbal truth' as paramount is frequently alluded to in the novel.²⁷

The need for 'verbal truth' or certainty is the coloniser's imperative (one remembers Kenneth Kaunda's comment that the Westerner 'cannot live with contradictory ideas in his mind'). With it comes the urge to name – to tame and to control – the unknown. *A Passage to India* offers useful examples, most notably the disastrous trip to the Marabar Caves, during which 'there is some confusion about the identity of objects, which Adela wants to identify and name, while her Indian companions seem less concerned about doing so'. It is not made clear whether low mounds at the side of the road are graves or symbols of the breasts of the goddess Parvati; after 'confusion' over whether or not a 'thin, dark object' in the distance is a snake or a tree branch, the English are exasperated because

²⁵ Van Wyk Smith, *Grounds of Contest*, p.8. The settler-writer thus 'not only describes the ... domestication of the landscape, but enacts it' (p.7).

²⁶ See also 'Bronze Heads', in which Butler is impressed by the imperturbable stare of the great kings' busts, 'as if such staring were the first slow act/by which man masters chaos anywhere'.

²⁷ Linda van der Vijver, 'Looking Relations in *A Passage to India*' (2005, unpublished).

nothing is 'explained'.²⁸ Similarly, the distraught Ronnie and Adela, having acknowledged that they cannot marry each other, seek comfort by talking about a bird but find they cannot identify it. The bird 'was of no importance, yet they would have liked to identify it, it would somehow have solaced their hearts. But nothing in India is identifiable.'²⁹

For the coloniser, naming objects and becoming familiar with them is a way of feeling less alien, of belonging: an understandable human desire. When Van der Mescht suggests that 'the question of belonging amounts to an obsession in the writings of Guy Butler', he is referring not only to the broad project of acculturating English speakers in South Africa, but also to the individual characters that populate Butler's poetry, drama and prose fiction.³⁰ Butler's early "farm plays" provide examples in the Long homestead (Susan declares, 'I never felt so rooted, so belonging'; Douglas suggests that feeling 'we belong' is 'more than one has a right to expect') and in the Van Heerdens' (Gracy recognises that despite his differences with Sarah, 'the need to belong is the same'; Simon reluctantly accepts his life with the Van Heerdens because 'a man must belong somewhere').³¹ *The Dam* and *The Dove Returns* may not have enjoyed much success – certainly, they do not loom large in South African theatrical history – but they contributed to, perhaps even began, a dialogue or discourse in which the question of "belonging" would be more compellingly addressed by later playwrights. Athol Fugard, for one, has acknowledged his strong debt to Butler in this regard.³²

In Fugard's play *A Lesson from Aloes* (1981), one of the characters loves to identify and label the aloe specimens he collects because 'it makes me feel that little bit more at home in my world.'³³ Yet this desire cannot easily be separated from the impulse to control and to assert one's authority. The more malicious processes of conquest and naming leave the victims of colonial history without any sense of "belonging". This is the plight of Boesman and Lena: uprooted, homeless, perpetually moving

²⁸ EM Forster, *A Passage to India* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), p.139.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.92.

³⁰ *The Poetry of Guy Butler*, p.12.

³¹ Butler, *The Dam*, p.64 and p.66; *The Dove Returns*, p.33 and p.13.

³² See Fugard's 'Dedication' in *Olive Schreiner and After*, pp.xiii-xiv.

³³ Fugard, *A Lesson from Aloes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p.4.

between places in which they are not welcome, places that have been named and circumscribed.³⁴ Discussing the historicity of the place-names that surface in *Boesman and Lena*, Peter Anderson comments:

Toponymy is of obvious interest to any enquiry into place, since it reveals the most overt cultural inscription of space, the most profound act of inhabiting. The business of naming not only leaves behind it the cast of “origins” and original occupations, but it is always in some degree an act of dominion, as Adam’s prerogative shows.³⁵

To Butler, however, “naming and taming” was essential for poetic purposes, and for the development of an authentically South African tradition of English poetry. ‘The English Poet in South Africa’, according to Butler’s 1956 essay, who wishes to make use of indigenous diction (South African English or borrowings from other South African languages) finds it difficult to do so ‘even when you have names for objects’ because ‘those names lack exploitable connotations’ for an Anglocentric audience.³⁶ Poets thus confront the ‘semantic poverty’ of words that have not been in the lexicon of English poetry. ‘Why, after more than a century, should we in South Africa still be looking for words for the African landscape and climate?’ asks Butler. The answer lies, he argues, in ‘the Romantic sensibility of our predecessors’:

The wide open spaces, whether here or in America or Australia, provided an excellent “objective correlative” for the Romantic love of the wild and the strange, of the receding horizon. “Vague”, “dim”, “strange”, “vast”, “mystic”, “boundless”, are favourite adjectives in much early South African poetry. In this sort of writing, no particular object is brought into a clear focus, and hence no troublesome proper names or precise epithets are needed. Indeed, “nameless” itself becomes a popular epithet.³⁷

There is some correlation between Romanticism and imperialism.

³⁴ *Boesman and Lena* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1984) premiered at the Rhodes Theatre – another of Butler’s building projects – during the English Academy conference in Grahamstown in 1969 (Butler was President of the Academy at the time). See *A Local Habitation*, pp.237-238.

³⁵ Peter Anderson, ‘Fugard’s *Boesman and Lena*’ (2005, unpublished).

³⁶ Butler, ‘The English Poet in South Africa’, p.47.

³⁷ It is significant that Butler consciously separates himself and his contemporaries from their ‘predecessors’ – who did not pay close attention to the landscape and to the local vocabulary for that landscape – for in this light (and taking into account the emphasis on “sense data” in ‘The Difficulties of Teaching a Non-Indigenous Literature’), Dirk Klopper’s insistence that ‘Butler’s endeavour to establish a meaningful relation with the South African environment through the creation of an indigenous literary idiom is hardly new ... it can be traced back as far as Thomas Pringle’ is less convincing (*The Poetry of Pringle, Scully, Slater and Butler*, p.239).

The adventurer, the European explorer of “uncharted” territory, enacts a process of colonisation in the very moment that he gratifies his pioneering spirit’s urge to be free. In recognising the inclination towards Romanticism, ‘The English Poet in South Africa’ and similar essays presage Coetzee’s *White Writing*, Van Wyk Smith’s *Grounds of Contest* and other works tracing the broad development in South African English literature from an initial concern primarily with the geography, flora and fauna of Africa to an awareness of the need to engage with the people of Africa – and ultimately, with the political struggles of Africa. Yet when the conclusion to ‘The English Poet in South Africa’ identifies hopeful signs of poets writing not about ‘boundless and unnamed spaces’ but about people, those people are the missionaries and explorers ‘who measured and named’ the landscape on behalf of the expanding colonial powers.³⁸ The essay thus avoids the political implications of the link between naming and appropriation.

Similarly, comparing the diaries of settler farmers to the consciously literary works produced by writers like Thomas Pringle, Butler emphasises that, because they weren’t ‘men of letters’, the farmers ‘weren’t displaying their mastery of the language’; rather, ‘they were using the language to master their experience of the land’, a land that ‘happens to be our land’.³⁹ Here naming is deemed a necessary, practical endeavour. Pragmatic map-makers, however, help to reinforce the narrative of domination begun by greedy governments and ideologues. In ‘The Language of the Land’ (1960), Butler celebrates the rich variety of place names throughout South Africa – Khoi, San, Xhosa, Zulu, English, Afrikaans, Portuguese, Dutch, Malay – and the curious histories and mysteries behind them. He attempts to turn these into a metaphor for social unity:

Our dead have left their names side by side on a map. A mountain range can be one, although its peaks may be called Gaika’s Kop, the Hogsback, and the Katberg. One ocean washes Mosselbaai, and George, and Knysna. And the blood in all our veins is red.⁴⁰

³⁸ ‘The English Poet in South Africa’, p.50.

³⁹ Butler, ‘SA Diaries’ (lecture notes). NELM. See also Butler’s Introduction to *When Boys Were Men* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1969), p.x.

⁴⁰ Butler, ‘The Language of the Land’, p.86.

This is a fine sentiment, but the tone of the essay is naïve, almost deliberately so; Butler acknowledges that the process of naming ‘is still going on’, as is ‘the process of re-naming’, but he does not place this in the context of apartheid policies of ‘naming’ and ‘re-naming’.⁴¹ In the wake of the implementation of the Group Areas Act – it had already begun by the time Butler wrote ‘The Language of the Land’, with the forced removals from Sophiatown and the cynical re-naming of that area as “Triomf” – the lyrical celebration of multilingual place names and name changes would prove even less felicitous.

(iii) ‘Man’s defiance of Africa’ / Africa’s defiance of man

When, in ‘The English Poet in South Africa’, Butler asserts that ‘as in frontier life, so in art: neither a beast nor an experience is tamed until it has an acceptable name’, he is nevertheless conscious that delineating ownership and control of the land is in many ways a European affectation: ‘Western man can normally only commune with a nature which has been partially tamed.’⁴² By implication, a nature that is untamed – the wilderness of Africa – may ‘inspire a primitive awe’, but the poet will not be able to establish an intimate relationship with it:

One cannot commune with Africa as Wordsworth did with the Lake District. As Aldous Huxley has suggested, lines like those “written above Tintern Abbey” are not produced when there are tigers about, or in a country where devastating droughts and tribal wars are frequent.

This is a landscape that has not been tamed for the poet, and cannot be tamed by him. Thus, in ‘Bronze Heads’, although ‘rivers and ranges are mapped and properly named/... Africa is anything but tamed’.

The portrayal of Africa’s geographical features, both intoxicating and terrifying, in terms of the uncertain place of the European in Africa was an established trope on which Butler built both critical and creative responses. ‘The English Poet in South Africa’ mentions Plomer’s scorpion and Campbell’s Adamastor, masks of ‘a violent, capricious, and sometimes splendid energy’; in Butler’s own work, Africa is a land simultaneously

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.83.

⁴² ‘The English Poet in South Africa’, pp.47-48.

threatening and comforting, its presiding gods or spirits at once malevolent and benign.⁴³ Like his 'Farmer', the poet observing the African landscape is 'watching something loved but treacherous'. Even in 'Karoo Town, 1939', the bond between the farming community and the 'soil' itself is tenuous; the image of a village 'strung like a bead of life on the rail' is the first of many in Butler's work portraying human outposts isolated in the stark Karoo.

Butler often wrote and spoke of Africa as 'comfortless', a 'frightening continent' with 'harsh soil'; once, flying home from England, he found himself having to adjust to the horizons of a continent that was 'vast, raw, bleak and inhuman in its scale'.⁴⁴ *The Dam* is once again a key text in this regard – even if the formulations found there are crude – for in it, the natural world is not indifferent to human endeavour in the generalised sense that I have already discussed. Instead, the play stresses the specific extremes of the African climate. The chorus asks, 'What significance have pride and fear/In this our universe of rock and water?'⁴⁵ Long's existential crisis following the initial failure of the dam turns him bitterly against Africa as a demonised projection of himself: 'O let this barren Africa, this me,/Breed nothing but stones and thorns. No!/Not even a thorn, not even a stone, nothing!' His original vision is of planting (of ensuring that he and his family 'take root'), but in order to undertake his scheme of irrigation in the arid landscape he must change 'what God has made'. He faces the ecologically conservative criticism of the pastoralist Jan de Bruin, but Sybrand, Jan's son, sees the dam as an opportunity to 'master the future'.⁴⁶ Thus, according to Van der Mescht, the dam remains 'a symbol of man's defiance of Nature, and of an English-speaking man's defiance of Africa ... a European's attempt at signing his name on an African landscape'.⁴⁷

⁴³ Klopper comments that Butler's apprehension of the Adamastor myth is 'characteristically ambivalent' insofar as Butler 'both acknowledges its symbolic force and seeks to deny its validity by asserting, precisely, his sense of belonging' (*Pringle, Scully, Slater and Butler*, pp.233-234). Quite apart from an academic's interest in the history of Adamastor in South African poetry, Butler was as preoccupied with the myth as any poet of his generation; he "translated" sections of Camoens' *Lusiads* and apostrophises the Portuguese epic poet in 'Elegy' (II).

⁴⁴ 'The Difficulties of Teaching a Non-Indigenous Literature', p.28 and *A Local Habitation*, p.44.

⁴⁵ *The Dam*, p.45.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.58.

⁴⁷ *The Poetry of Guy Butler*, p.102.

Although the pre-industrial African landscape inspires with its uninterrupted vistas and vast expanses of open terrain, the individual encountering this ‘newborn world’ is made to feel, like young Tom Stubbs in *A Rackety Colt*, ‘very small’: the valleys ‘seem bigger and more bare, the distances greater, the whole world so lonely and quiet’.⁴⁸ After the carnage and tragedy of *Demea* has come to an end, and ‘in the last scene, the trek slowly disintegrates’, the author’s instructions read: ‘the empty stage should suggest a Nature that is brilliant and hard beneath terrific pressures of light and space.’⁴⁹ The enterprises of trade and treaty have been confounded. When the British soldiers fighting the Boers in *The Dove Returns* are forced to cover wide stretches of land without signs of human habitation, they deem the semi-desert ‘immoral’: ‘a building makes sense of things’, but in Africa there is too much ‘bare, bleak veld, miles/From a road or farm or any reminder/That man has a place in the scheme of things’.⁵⁰ Gracy’s dying wish is to be buried under a tree that will ‘cross me with its shadow every day’, with ‘a wall round my grave, to keep it human;/Not, not in the empty veld’.⁵¹

This experience is not, of course, singular to the European-in-Africa. In a 1953 interview, Butler pointed out that growing up ‘in a countryside which tends to dwarf mankind’ stimulated his ‘passion for man-made objects’, among which he listed ‘Bushman paintings, beads and implements’ alongside more recent signs of human habitation and activity.⁵² The African landscape and climate are not only “wild”, “harsh” and “unwelcoming” to European settlers; the conditions were, objectively, as severe for Khoi/San hunter-gatherers or Xhosa cattle herders as they were for English farmers.⁵³ The difference is one of perception.

In ‘Servant Girl’, the first poem in Butler’s *Collected Poems* (it follows

⁴⁸ Butler, *A Rackety Colt*, p.28 and p.37.

⁴⁹ Butler, *Demea*, p.4.

⁵⁰ *The Dove Returns*, p.40.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.58.

⁵² Butler, interviewed in *Central News*, May 1953.

⁵³ Again, Jared Diamond’s anthropological theses in *Guns, Germs and Steel* are of interest here. Without resorting to race-based presuppositions, Diamond explains how Europeans became ‘accidental conquerors’: European societies developed technologically and “politically” – that is, in terms of social organisation – because the suite of plants and animals found in their geographical location was most suitable for domestication. This was not the case in, for instance, most of Africa, America, or the Polynesian islands. It may not be altogether inaccurate or “racist”, therefore, to depict Africa as inhospitable to certain kinds of human endeavour or activity.

'Karoo Town, 1939' in *Stranger to Europe*), the speaker's inability to understand a song being sung in Xhosa leaves him feeling removed from and foreign to the African landscape. A comparison between early and later versions of this poem reveals several changes. Notably, 'hill' becomes 'sand-stone hill' – giving, as Van der Mescht notes, a 'sense of locality' – while at the same time, the poet's tongue is described not as 'taught' (or "schooled", presumably as opposed to the servant girl's lack of education) but as 'taut', because it is 'unaccustomed to giving shape to local sensations, feelings and thoughts'.⁵⁴ Thus, 'the speaker's envy of the girl's intuitively intimate relationship with her natural environment' emphasises his own alienation. Nevertheless, as an imitation of Wordsworth's 'Solitary Reaper', the poem suggests the "long view" possibility of different cultural traditions co-existing within the same landscape – albeit that they respond differently to that landscape.

(iv) Political ecology

Given Butler's debt to Wordsworth and other Romantic poets, studies such as Jonathan Bate's *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (1991) offer a further paradigm for reading Butler's poetry and prose. This is the increasingly popular (and, with indications of a looming international environmental crisis, increasingly persuasive) literary school of "eco-criticism". For example, Bate treats Wordsworth's 'second spring' as an affirmation that, despite 'the volatile political order', there is comfort in 'the stability of the notion of "spring", the knowledge that every winter will be followed by a spring which will bring warmth and new life'.⁵⁵ It does not require too much contrivance to apply this to Butler's 'Syrian Spring', or to his predilection for nature-as-transcendence above the realm of human affairs. Yet the conjunction of politics and ecology is richer than this simple opposition suggests.

Insofar as the work produced by a writer on environmental subject

⁵⁴ *The Poetry of Guy Butler*, p.18. Tony Voss, in his review of Butler's *Collected Poems*, comments that these and other changes in 'Servant Girl' (such as the girl's description as, variously, 'Bantu', 'Fingo' and 'Xhosa') are 'a small instance of Guy Butler's dedication to his craft – *ars longa* – and of any poet's ironic standing in the flow of social change' ('Thank You and I'm Sorry': 229-230).

⁵⁵ Jonathan Bate, *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1991), p.2.

matter extends to the polemical, it may be regarded as a form of ecological activism, or “politicised ecology”. There are instances of this in Butler’s work. Yet the poet’s response to nature – and to human interaction with the natural world – can also take on a quality that I am here calling “political ecology”. This is when the poet’s attitude to the natural environment (specifically, to the human mistreatment of that environment) reflects and complements his approach to human relations (specifically, to human relations under pressure or in conflict).

‘Bronze Heads’, lamenting the paucity of artifacts or physical monuments to African culture and history, observes that no African peoples or nations (or so it seemed to Butler in 1954) ‘have paved a highway, keyed a bridge, or arch/through which victorious regiments might march’. Yet these lines hint that the great feats of architecture are inextricably linked to the bloodshed of organised, massed warfare – only the ‘old, storied lands’ of the Mediterranean that Butler fell in love with could have furnished battlegrounds for the new horrors of World War Two, precisely because their “human record” was based on a history of violence. ‘Bronze Heads’ thus seems to ignore Walter Benjamin’s famous reminder that ‘there is no document of civilisation that is not at the same time a document of barbarism.’⁵⁶

The wish that Africa could have been more thoroughly “mastered” by humans would be modified over the years as signs of the environmental damage caused by such mastery grew worldwide. Butler saw that, in South Africa specifically, a long history of colonial oppression and racial conflict had been shadowed by damage to the environment: the ecological imperative in his work was thus fused with his political dissent. This is particularly evident in the Introduction to *Out of the African Ark* (1988), an alphabetically arranged anthology (co-edited by Butler and his son, David) of poems about the fauna of Africa. The Introduction pre-empts a critical reader’s query over the motivation for a volume dedicated to Africa’s

⁵⁶ Walter Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p.254. To be fair, *Bursting World* does echo the symmetry of Benjamin’s critique and presents Butler’s ‘fascination’ with Europe – even when he was a student, before he joined the war effort – as anything but a naïve admiration: ‘One might revere Beethoven, but what of Bismarck? One gazed on Michelangelo, but what of Mussolini? One worshipped Shakespeare, but what of Chamberlain? What was it in the continent that made its artists so splendid, and its politicians so terrible?’ (p.26).

animals at a crucial political juncture. In response, the editors present a reading of South African history in terms of that history's effects on South African fauna and flora.

They begin, inevitably, with the San, articulating a Van der Postian reverence for this 'Man in Balance with Nature'.⁵⁷ A rather simplistic opposition is laid out between these 'stone-age hunter-gatherer[s]' and the relative 'newcomers' – 'pastoralists and agriculturalists', both black and white, who 'depended on domesticated animals and on crops' and whose 'flocks and herds drove the game away'.⁵⁸ The 'African' (in this case, as opposed to "European") pastoralists are described as having, or having had, less sympathy with wild animals than the San, but as possessing nonetheless a tradition of oral narratives, poetry and proverbs in which non-domesticated animals are ubiquitous and have a consistent symbolic function.⁵⁹ Enter the white settler, 'The Gentleman with Horse and Gun, the Destroyer of the Balance of Nature' and, as a result, the object of much censure. The devastating effect of the rifle on natural ecosystems is insisted upon throughout the book, while the dominance achieved by this superior firepower is disparaged:

Nothing can stand before this armed, mounted man. He clears the country to make it safe for his family, his animals and his plants. Anything that dares to kill or eat what he has tamed to kill or eat himself, becomes vermin ... Further, he does not only hunt for these practical reasons: he hunts because he enjoys hunting.

The settlers, so heroically portrayed in Butler's other accounts, are lambasted in *Out of the African Ark* (one senses that David Butler's dry sense of humour influenced his father in the editorial tone adopted). Abrasive ecological and political critiques merge:

As relaxation from the routine struggles of protecting and feeding themselves and their flocks, our pioneering grandfathers found some relief in taking pot shots at as many forms of life as they could draw a bead on

⁵⁷ Guy Butler and David Butler, Introduction to *Out of the African Ark* (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1988), p.23.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.25.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.27. Urbanisation and urban poverty as a consequence of apartheid – along with the inaccessibility of game reserves to black South Africans – are deemed to have ruptured this tradition, but Butler expresses the hope that 'proper conservation, with grassroots support, will restore these fading beasts to the eyes of the people who now know them as proverbs only'.

... None of them, however, would have set out, deliberately, to shoot the last surviving animal of any species. Such paralysis of imagination would afflict them only when confronted by members of rival human breeds.⁶⁰

This satirical manner resurfaces in the book as the Butlers, searching for an animal name beginning with a “Y”, employ Swift’s fabrication of the Yahoos in *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726). As a species of higher primates bearing a remarkable resemblance to *homo sapiens*, they are ‘quite as vicious and greedy ... with the same compulsion to exterminate other species’, representing ‘a threat and danger to all other forms of life’.⁶¹ Throughout the book we are reminded of the destruction wreaked by humankind, most powerful but least likeable of all the animals in ‘their zest for killing off [other species], and their own kind’.

Butler’s condemnation of ‘the gentleman with horse and gun’ in *Out of the African Ark* is the culmination of many years of artistic and ethical-intellectual engagement with that ambiguous image. The appeal of Roy Campbell’s “equestrianism”, Butler wrote in his (1974) essay on the poet, is not that of the fox-hunter or horse-racer, both of which are signs of man’s dominance over nature. Rather, it lies in the assertion of a deep connection between humans, animals and the life-giving elements of ‘the earth and the sun’; it is a reminder of ‘unalienated man’, of a way of life predating the factory and the industrialised city.⁶² Nevertheless, as Butler notes, it is unclear where the line can be drawn between this “noble” (feudal) icon and the uglier sides of ‘the great chivalric and aristocratic tradition’ – witness Campbell’s fascism and anti-semitism.

In the same essay, Butler likens Campbell to DH Lawrence, whose pursuit of ‘dark gods’ lies beneath the surface of Butler’s own brand of “primitivism”. As we have seen, in *Karoo Morning* the author ministers to his atavistic leanings by reflecting on his childhood experiences of hunting. These were mostly harmless adventures, and for young Butler, hunting a dassie or jackal or springhare was an initiation into the ancient instincts of the land itself. Similarly, ‘Myths’ evokes a powerful moment in which, having ‘smashed a five-foot cobra’s head to pulp’ (amongst aloes,

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.195-196.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p.255. Swift’s tale is assigned a peculiarly South African setting when the Yahoos are blamed for the extinction of the Quagga (docile cousins of their enemies and masters, the Houynyhymms – *Equus Rationalis*).

under the Karoo sun), Butler did not feel that he had subdued the African landscape – rather, his experience revealed that the manifestations of the European culture he had grown up in were ‘invaders’, ‘alien’ to the African environment in which they had been planted.⁶³

By contrast, there are depictions of hunting in Butler’s work that reproach hunters for vanquishing the wild animals of Africa. In *Take Root or Die*, Mrs Stubbs brands her husband and his hunting companions as ‘mad’ for assuming that ‘God made men to be only the most deadly of the many beasts of prey.’⁶⁴ One of the central episodes in *A Rackety Colt* is the elephant hunt that Tom Stubbs joins. Butler wrote in a note on the sources used for the novel that the elephant hunt is without basis in Stubbs’ *Reminiscences*, and yet he builds to something of a purple patch depicting the young protagonist’s reluctant participation in what amounts to an act of slaughter. Driven by financial despair into the brutal ivory trade, Tom nevertheless feels ‘a sneaking sympathy for the great beasts. It was one thing to be hunted by men with spears and primitive traps, but to be felled by thunder sticks in the hands of creatures you rarely saw’ was quite another.⁶⁵ On a previous occasion Tom had encountered a troop of elephants at night, and one of the silent forms he could make out was ‘a beast of such solemn magnificence that I understood why the poets of tribes, looking for the finest compliment they could pay to royalty, chose the designation Elephant’ – the ‘huge form’ was ‘majestic and doom-burdened under the heavens’.⁶⁶ The hunt itself seems terribly cruel. Tom’s

⁶² Butler, ‘Roy Campbell’, p.141.

⁶³ Dirk Kloppe reads the poem very differently: ‘the slaying of the cobra on the sacrificial rock at noon’ is an ‘act of violence against nature’, and ‘the sudden intrusive presence of the aloes, lichen and clouds is accusative. They bear witness to an atrocity.’ (‘Soliciting the Other’: 150-152.) Thus, ‘although the speaker experiences a sense of power’ as, “gauntleted” by the sun, he is initiated into a knightly order of conquest, he also ‘loses his innocence and gains insight into his state of alienation as a colonist’. This is linked to the Orpheus-figure at the end of the poem, who is ‘a representative of the colonial other, the enslaved indigene’, and whose ‘helplessness is a direct result of his repressed condition’; although Butler identifies an African incarnation of a “universal” European myth, only certain aspects of the Orpheus myth apply, for the South African Orpheus ‘is hardly an embodiment of the generous and liberatory spirit ... the god who, through the literature of Orphic tradition, is said to have revealed to man the secrets of life and death’ – instead, ‘he is a grimly ironic version of the principle of regeneration’ (153). If Orpheus can be associated with Dionysus, then the act of killing the snake ‘under Apollo’s sun’ relates directly to ‘the colonists in the second stanza’, and ‘the speaker assumes a combative persona, the kind that drives wedges into virgin landscapes and makes possible the conquering of nations and their enslavement in a colonial system’ (154). In this reading the poem constitutes a sublimated form of the “political ecology” I have been describing.

⁶⁴ *Take Root or Die*, p.69.

⁶⁵ *A Rackety Colt*, p.116.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.122.

friend and fellow-hunter Ronnie Thackwray is killed, but it is the elephants' suffering that receives the more sympathetic treatment; indeed, it defies description: 'Our shots rang out in sequence ... Language can't cope with that noise, nor the screaming of the beasts that followed.'

The greedy and bloodthirsty actions of human hunters are shown to be no different to the behaviour of other predators. Soon after the elephant hunt, Tom sees vultures descending on the carcasses, then hyenas and jackals: 'One jackal had its throat cut by the slash of a vulture's beak and bled to death under a bush – from which his carcass was dragged by an observant hyena'; wild dogs attack an orphaned baby elephant, which haunts Tom with its 'high, hysterical screaming'.⁶⁷ The parallel does not, however, offer any exculpation for the human predators. Our technologically-aided capacity for both self-defence and for killing marks us off from other animals: the development of these tools represents our ability to reason (to act against our instincts), and it is this same ability that must govern our treatment of and responsibilities towards the animal kingdom.

A Rackety Colt raises another environmental issue – deforestation. Tom is as uncomfortable with the mantle of the lumberjack as he is with that of the hunter. After three days in a saw pit with the ponderous George Wood, he looks up at 'the great, doomed trees' and asks, 'What business have we laying them level with the earth?'⁶⁸ Wood's docile reply, 'We do it because we need the timber', makes Tom explode with anger: 'Are our needs everything?' Persistent protest against the too-easy aphorism that 'it's Man's business to subdue the earth' constitutes an important element of Butler's ecological writing. This particular episode is interesting, however, not simply as an instance of such protest, but rather because trees (as suggested by Dugmore's injunction to 'take root') fulfil a vital 'need' in Butler's symbology.

The 'poplar, oak or pine' mentioned in 'Myths' are European signifiers, and – while these carry deep resonances of a history to which the poet lays claim – when Butler seeks to emphasise his African artistic credentials, he insists that his 'own trees' are the 'aloe and mimosa', which

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p.130.

'twine their roots around my bones'. 'Myths' and 'Aloe and Mimosa' are just two examples of an often-repeated motif in Butler's poetry and prose, but will suffice here to demonstrate the specific 'search for synthesis' between indigenous and alien flora. Although they ostensibly 'have no history' because 'no Christ or Caesar enjoyed the shade/of their niggardly foliage', the African trees can nevertheless be reconciled with these twin icons of Butler's Western heritage: the mimosa produces a crown of 'long white thorns', while the aloe annually bears 'new green and scarlet' leaves, like an emperor's laurel.

The synthesis is not, however, simply an aesthetic or symbolic one. Planting and preserving foreign trees and plants alongside or in place of indigenous species carries practical implications in terms of biodiversity (including animal habitats) and water resources. Nevertheless, Butler felt a certain empathy and respect towards the floral "invaders" that have made a home in South Africa. He defended 'exotic pest plants' like the Port Jackson Willow on the premise that 'a weed is, after all, merely a plant in the wrong place':

There is a desperate need for quick-growing trees ... to provide (a) cheap fuel and (b) light timber for housing. So, far from seeing this plant as a deadly enemy, let us espouse it as an ally, and allocate largish tracts of otherwise stony hillside to its cultivation and proper management. By all means root it out of areas which have a claim to careful ecological protection.⁶⁹

Reciprocally, Butler anticipated the need for educational programmes to ensure the conservation of indigenous flora. Here he is, in 1991, writing about the Eastern Cape:

There is little hope of our preserving indigenous fynbos areas if they are seen by most of our population as one of the white man's fanciful luxuries. Indigenous botanical areas should perhaps be open to African herbalists to gather traditional "muti". We should enlighten the public as to what uses these plants were put (and still are put) ... Botanical guide books and pamphlets should make a point of giving the Xhosa names of plants, and any folklore relating to them.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p.86.

⁶⁹ Butler, letter to Peter Jackson (The Grahamstown Trust), 11th June 1990.

By referring to the perception of ecological projects as ‘the white man’s fanciful luxuries’, Butler is acknowledging that, during apartheid, it was sheer hypocrisy for the state to prioritise the careful preservation of natural ecosystems while systematically oppressing the majority of South Africans and forcing them to live in squalour. Such duplicitousness led Es’kia Mphahlele to vent his disgust with the sentimental ‘Western attachment to animals’; clearly Mphahlele was not suggesting that Africans have no attachment to animals or consideration for environmental matters, but rather that if whites patently did not care about other (black) human beings, then their ecological concern was misplaced.⁷⁰ The corollary to this condemnation is an affirmation of precisely the brand of “political ecology” espoused by Butler. If the crux of power represented by ‘cantering horses and blazing guns’ is both a threat to the natural world and a source of subjugation of one group by another, then the resolution of human conflict and the preservation of natural resources are, in fact, mutually inclusive.⁷¹ Thus, although the perennial Europe-Africa theme is integral to ecological problems as they currently exist, it must eventually be transcended in responses to those problems.

In his Introduction to *South Africa: Landshapes, Landscapes and Manscapes*, Butler returns briefly to ideas he had first laid out thirty years before: that ‘there are no straight lines in nature’, that the circle is the definitive shape of traditional or undeveloped Africa, and that the straight lines of agriculture or industry represent activities introduced by colonisers from ‘advanced societies’.⁷² These distinctions are not altogether persuasive (indeed, some of the photographs in the book undermine such neat delineations), but the point is not made – as in Butler’s earlier work – to suggest the rich possibilities of interaction between irrational and rational, pre-scientific and scientific peoples. Rather, the tone of the whole Introduction suggests that, while breaking the circle and introducing straight lines does not in itself disrupt the balance of nature, it signals the start of “industry” (farm, factory, mine) and thus of ecological damage.

⁷⁰ Cited in *Grounds of Contest*, p.107.

⁷¹ *Demea*, p.61.

⁷² *South Africa: Landshapes, Landscapes, Manscapes*, p.7.

A counter-trend is ‘the growing chorus of individuals and governments who see the need to preserve the earth’ against the ‘destruction of our green, breathing wildernesses’ and the consequent ‘effects which threaten our survival’.⁷³ The visual *tour de force* of Potgieter’s images substantiates Butler’s claim that ‘the liberties we have taken with nature are insensitive and shortsighted’. Our ‘daring and power’ in industry – abusing the skills that allow us ‘to dominate nature and subdue the earth to [our] purposes’ – prevent a ‘happy symbiosis’ between man and nature; instead of acting as ‘custodian’, man has become the ‘exploiter’ of ‘his vulnerable world’.⁷⁴ Insofar as “European” industrial development and non-sustainable “African” pastoral techniques are equally complicit in this exploitation, neither black nor white can abjure the responsibility of reforming land use. In this text, as in various other strands of Butler’s “political ecology”, the ecological imperative is ultimately able to overcome political divisions.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp.8-9.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p.123.

II Cultural politician

(i) (W)ESSAs, then and now¹

Chapter Five and the preceding section of this chapter have, I hope, provided a context for what follows – what has been and remains my subject’s most contested role as an historian: “apologist” for the 1820 British settlers. Butler’s enthusiasm for the frontier history of the Eastern Cape was both a cause and a result of his project to champion and challenge white English-speaking South Africans under apartheid; it is unseparable, for better or for worse, from his involvement in the shifting debates around cultural-political issues in this country during the second half of the twentieth century. Yet it is equally bound up with the implications of *history* and *History* that have already been discussed, and this connection is sufficient in itself to modify the grounds on which numerous critiques of Butler as cultural politician have been built.

The lengthiest of these is Elaine Williams’ thesis on *Guy Butler and South African Culture* (1989). Her study maintains from the outset that Butler’s chief legacy is ‘not academic, intellectual, nor perhaps even literary’, but rather ‘in the symbolic realm’ – the construction of an ESSA identity, a ‘cultural programme based on the founding myth of the 1820 settlers’.² It is worth noting that Williams chooses to concentrate ‘on Butler’s non-fictional prose writings rather than on his more proper literary creations’ because it is in the former that Butler’s ‘ideas on culture are most clearly stated and most easily accessed’.³ In doing so, however, she ignores Enid Starkie’s assertion (Starkie makes it as the biographer of Baudelaire, Eliot and others, but the claim is equally valid of any ‘study of an artist’) that it is not the ‘outward life alone’ but the ‘inner personality’ of a literary figure that merits attention: ‘he will be most personally and

¹ The terms “ESSA” (English-speaking South African) and “WESSA” (white English-speaking South African) have in the past been used interchangeably. Here I tend to refer to “ESSAs” because it is the term most often employed by Butler, but when discussing the work of others who refer to “WESSAs”, I have used the latter term. Conflating the two is, of course, problematic, because language is strongly linked to race and ethnicity, and because power relations under apartheid depended upon these distinctions. I have already discussed the use of English by black and coloured writers – some of whom have/had English as a second language, some as a mother-tongue – in this thesis, and will elaborate further where necessary in this section.

² Elaine Williams, *Guy Butler and South African Culture* (Masters thesis. University of Cape Town, 1989), p.2.

³ *Ibid.*, endnotes, p.71.

individually alive in his creative work ... he will often only have the husk of his personality left for mere living.⁴ This is an overstatement in Butler's case – the overriding demands of his 'outward life' in fact limited his creative output – but the "pragmatic" approach taken by Williams in separating 'non-fiction' from 'literary creations' remains a weakness of her study. The 'symbolic realm' that she wishes to address is, properly, also the realm of art, of poetry and drama.

Williams presents the now-familiar argument that national or cultural identity is an artifice, constructed according to the arbitrary processes of history. She condemns Butler and others for constructing and then validating a particular version of ESSA identity, which both authorises and is authorised by Butler as a 'perfect representative of the group (since he is committed to South Africa, English, liberal, a man of letters descended from the 1820 settlers, a public figure and a poet)'.⁵

The last "qualification" listed by Williams underscores the point I have just made. Butler's concern with identity was an artist's pursuit: the archetypal quest to establish a relationship between self and society, to position the individual in relation to history. Insofar as the personal quest is projected into the public realm, this remains the (admittedly egotistic) prerogative of the writer who seeks – or creates – an audience. Nevertheless, when the artist wears an academic's cap and gown, or participates in cultural-political discourse, he or she carries different responsibilities; Butler's efforts to draw together the ESSA group into something more cohesive than the 'million English ... a vague communion/Indifferent to leadership or goal' (as Anthony Delius described them in 1959) were not unproblematic.⁶

When Williams criticises the "institutionalising" of English in South Africa, she is referring not only to the curricula of English departments, but also the establishment of the English Academy of Southern Africa, ISEA, NELM and their associated publications:

⁴ Enid Starkie, *Baudelaire* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p.20.

⁵ *Guy Butler and South African Culture*, p.22.

⁶ Anthony Delius, *The Last Division* (Cape Town: Human and Rousseau, 1959), p.45.

in the process of instituting English studies the academics involved were not merely passive communicators of an objectively constituted body of knowledge. Rather, the institutions then launched must be seen as social actors with particular interests.⁷

Readers may look to Anthony Akal's study for details of Butler's involvement in this process.⁸ In contrast to Williams' critique, Akal's largely sympathetic elaboration situates the formation of, in particular, the English Academy in 1961 within the twin contexts of, firstly, the 'bitter conflict' between 'the rival nationalisms of Afrikaner and African' aggravated by the Sharpeville shootings in March 1960 – 'a conflict from which the English-speaking South African was largely excluded'; and, secondly, the country's decision later that year to withdraw from the Commonwealth and its subsequent establishment as a Republic in May 1961, leaving ESSAs feeling further isolated – culturally, linguistically and politically.⁹ As a result, those 'of liberal persuasion were relegated to the status of political spectators'. I will discuss the difficulties associated with this 'liberal' tag (and the ways in which it is associated with ESSAs) in Section III of this chapter; but it is interesting to note, here, Akal's choice of metaphor. Almost thirty years after Sharpeville and the Republic referendum, Yvonne Banning accused WESSAs of being 'ghosts with ears': allowing the South African tragedy play itself out on a national stage while they simply watched (or listened) like so many silent spectators, neither taking an active part in the struggle nor speaking out against the wrongs of apartheid.¹⁰

Banning's paper refers to Butler in light of his espousal, in 'English and the English in the New South Africa' (1985), of views that she considers a reinscription of the 'cultural and linguistic colonisation that characterised eighteenth and early nineteenth century British imperialism in South Africa'. Yet, in many ways, her position echoes the stance taken by Butler some decades before. Banning focuses on certain South African English stage productions – such as Malcolm Purkey and the Junction

⁷ *Guy Butler and South African Culture*, p.17.

⁸ See *Forms of Community Service*, especially pp.271-294.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.7.

¹⁰ Yvonne Banning, 'Ghosts with Ears: The WESSA in Contemporary Drama', *English Academy Review* 6 (1989): 19.

Avenue Theatre Company's *Fantastical History of a Useless Man* (1976) – and, arguing that these reflect a false anxiety on the part of WESSAs about their own political insignificance (which is really the result of apathy rather than impotence), posits instead 'a possible future identity' for them that is "useful": one 'based on role and function rather than either race or language'.¹¹

Butler had been doing something similar since the late 1950s. Placing ESSAs directly in between the 'rival nationalisms' (to use Akal's term)¹² and, realising that many of them were actually willing to be 'relegated to the status of political spectators', he exhorted them not to allow this to happen:

There are three courses open to us. First, to abandon any cultural identity we may have, and become part of some other group. This would mean, for the vast majority, accepting the mystique of Afrikanerdom, its view of South African history, its cultural ambitions for the *volk*. Second, to become even more a-political than at present, simply a commercial species (like the English in Argentina?), making money, and vainly washing our hands of political responsibility. Third, to act in the belief that we have been cast for an important role, and to perform it with intelligence, energy and without apology.¹³

Similar, but not the same. Whereas Banning describes an identity focusing on role and not language, Butler's vision is precisely of a role *based on* language: to act as a bridge between the different racial groups of South Africa, and to be primarily accountable for education.¹⁴ Thus, in 'The Language of the Land', the 'humble' tasks are

to accept our responsibilities as bearers of a contact language seriously; to make the knowledge of the world available to all our countrymen of

¹¹ *Ibid.*: 26.

¹² Mike Kirkwood challenged this notion in 'The Colonizer', placing coloureds "in the middle" and accusing ESSAs of complicity in racial oppression – see (v) *Bastard races: ESSAs and "the coloureds"* below. Andrew Foley has, however, argued in defence of Butler's position as formulated by Akal: ESSAs 'are in the middle insofar as African and Afrikaner nationalisms do not as evidently subscribe to liberal tenets of individual freedom, democracy and humane values'. 'The White English-speaking South Africans: "Bastards", "Wimps", "Ghosts with Ears", or Something Else Again?', *English Academy Review* 8 (1991): 21.

¹³ Butler, 'The Future of English-speaking South Africa', p.116.

¹⁴ This position was subsequently adopted by a number of "ESSA theorists". David Welsh spoke on behalf of many delegates at the 1974 conference on 'English-speaking South Africa: an Assessment' when he asked: 'Is there not a role for English-speaking Whites and English institutions as interpreters or bridge-builders between conflicting groups?' ('English-speaking Whites and the Racial Problem', *English-speaking South Africa Today: Proceedings of the National Conference, July 1974*, p.237). That this question was still being asked some twenty years later is an indication of the fact that many, perhaps most, ESSAs did not respond to the call.

whatever race; to provide dedicated teachers and ample funds for this task.¹⁵

The spread of that ‘contact’ or ‘world’ language in South Africa since Butler penned these words in 1960 – its current dominance, some would argue, to the detriment of indigenous languages – is an issue of no small significance, and one to which I shall return. More important in this context, however, is Butler’s sense that English and the English in South Africa are *ipso facto* inclined towards forms of dialogue that would, in time, lead to a resolution of racial conflict (we may recall his assertion that the British settlers brought with them a ‘democratic habit’). This is what Banning exposes as ‘the myth that English usage promotes democracy’.¹⁶

Of course, Banning goes too far in her critique of English and of WESSAs. As Andrew Foley has pointed out in response to what he calls a ‘clumsy hatchet job’, she makes the mistake of tarring all WESSAs with the same brush.¹⁷ Foley’s chief complaint against Banning is that one cannot generalise about WESSAs, not simply because of their ‘heterogeneity’ – they in fact come from various national, religious and even linguistic backgrounds – but, moreover, because a ‘severe disjunction’ is evident between the various political attitudes held by those who fall within the WESSA group.¹⁸ Foley, writing in the early 1990s, invokes Lawrence Schlemmer’s research (as presented at the seminal 1974 conference in Grahamstown, ‘English-speaking South Africa: an Assessment’), which demonstrated this range of opinions.¹⁹

Foley’s intervention was largely in defence of WESSAs, or at least in defence of certain WESSAs; but to acknowledge the impossibility of generalising about them is also to acknowledge that when Butler spoke broadly about the positive traits of “the English in South Africa”, he did

¹⁵ Butler, ‘The Language of the Land’, p.85.

¹⁶ ‘Ghosts with Ears’, p.19.

¹⁷ Andrew Foley, ‘The White English-speaking South Africans: “Bastards”, “Wimps”, “Ghosts with Ears”, or Something Else Again?’, 15.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*: 16-19.

¹⁹ See Lawrence Schlemmer, ‘English-speaking South Africans Today: Identity and Integration into the Broader National Community’, *English-speaking South Africa Today: Proceedings of the National Conference, July 1974*, pp.91-135. H.L. Watts also provided a lengthy statistical analysis of ESSAs in ‘A Social and Demographic Portrait of English-speaking White South Africans’ (pp.41-90). It may be noted that, in terms of “ethnicity”, Schlemmer does identify ‘a numerically dominant “core” community of English-speaking South African citizens of Anglo-Saxon and Celtic descent’ which ‘allows one to postulate the existence of a single English-speaking white segment in the society’ (p.94).

not demonstrate a clear awareness that many ESSAs at that time ('almost a majority', according to Schlemmer) were characterised by 'conservatism ... apathy and political "introversion"'. By contrast, the 'progressive and activist' element that Butler touted was relatively small; this suggests that Elaine Williams is correct to identify in Butler's view of ESSAs a projection of his own self-image.

Butler's pronouncements about ESSAs may be usefully compared to, for example, the near-contemporary judgements of a scholar such as Colin Gardner. Like Butler, Gardner generalised about 'the British temperament' inherited by most English-speaking South Africans: 'common-sense, untheoretical ... sceptical about wild innovations and about large theories and enthusiasms ... prefer[ring] tolerance to intolerance, justice (as they conceive it) to injustice, peace to war'.²⁰ Again, like Butler, Gardner saw both the 'advantages and disadvantages' of the ways in which this 'political and social scepticism' found expression in ESSAs under apartheid:

most English-speaking white South Africans, however much they may be influenced or deceived by considerations of fear or expediency, are not really deeply or wholly convinced by the theoretical arguments of Nationalism, by the *mystique* of apartheid, by the almost religious sense of white destiny which seems to operate in the minds of a fair number of Afrikaans-speaking white South Africans. On the other hand, being human and vulnerable and also perplexed, most English-speaking South Africans are prepared (though their consciences are not really happy) to shelter under the wings of and to "go along with" a Nationalist regime and a basically racialistic way of conceiving the nation's corporate existence. At the same time, being ... rather sluggish in their thought about social and political questions, they are on the whole ... unlikely to respond very warmly to the call of a Helen Suzman, a Beyers Naude ... They are secretly quite pleased, I suspect, that such a person as Helen Suzman exists, that she stands in parliament ... And yet they don't really like or trust *enthusiasm*.

Even this, however, is a rather rosy picture of the inclinations, whether expressed or not, of the "average" ESSA. Gardner is more convincing when

²⁰ Colin Gardner, 'The English-speaking Whites' in Randall, Peter (ed.), *South Africa's Minorities* (Joannesburg: Spro-Cas Publication No. 2, 1971), pp.39-40. Gardner does admit to 'dealing in precarious generalizations', but goes on to make a rather poor attempt to 'account for the British Empire' in light of them: 'the British desire for justice ... and for peace and for commercial "normality" was often pursued, paradoxically enough, with considerable arrogance and pugnacity.' Compare this to David Welsh's assertion: 'In short "Englishness" is no guarantee that justice and liberty under the rule of law will be maintained. The case of Rhodesia demonstrates this point.' ('English-speaking Whites and the Racial Problem', p.237).

he concedes that ‘relatively few people’ make up ‘the more thoughtful sections of English-speaking white South Africa’ (those actively opposing apartheid), and that the ‘fairly typical’ view amongst ESSAs was ‘not particularly thoughtful’ – those who held such a view were, in attitude as well as in practice, amenable to apartheid.

Crudely, then, one might say that Butler’s estimation of English-speaking South Africans lacked numerical discernment. It was not simply that, amongst the enfranchised white population, the non-racialising English were outnumbered by the Afrikaner nationalists. Rather, within the English-speaking group itself, there was support (tacit or otherwise) for the policies of apartheid.²¹ Yet when cross-referencing Foley and Banning’s debate, circa 1990, with assessments of ESSAs in the 1970s and again with Butler’s early pronouncements about ESSAs in the late 1950s and early 1960s, one must take care not to conflate these periods. If ‘progressive’ ESSAs in the 1950s were moved to despair by the National Party victory in 1948, then the Sharpeville shootings in March 1960 marked a further watershed. Butler’s exhortations to ESSAs in the 1960s may be related not only to the sense that they were ‘excluded’ from the political conflicts of the time, as Akal suggests; there were also those who colluded with the apartheid regime and, on the other end of the scale, those who took oppositional courses of action, whether through peaceful protest and party politics (one thinks of the Black Sash movement, whose profile grew in the 1960s as the limited influence of the Progressive Party became evident – Helen Suzman acting as the sole parliamentary representative after 1961) or in more extreme, extra-legal forms (such as the acts of sabotage of, for instance, the African Resistance Movement).²²

Butler’s public statements from this period must also be placed against a background of events that are not mentioned specifically by him: the banning of the ANC and other organizations in 1960, Mandela’s arrest in 1962, the Rivonia Trial in 1964, and so on. That Butler does not do so, just as one will not find in his collected *Essays and Lectures* explicit

²¹ See “(vi) *English-Afrikaans relations*” below.

²² Denis Hirson’s recent memoir, *White Scars: On Reading and Rites of Passage* (Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2006) is interesting in this light. It documents his father Baruch Hirson’s imprisonment in 1964 for acts of sabotage against the apartheid government, while at the same time reflecting on what it was like to live in “white suburbia” in the years following Sharpeville.

references to deaths in detention, to police brutality, to anti-pass protests, to the various mass action campaigns of the struggle and their often violent suppression, or to the states of emergency throughout the 1970s and 1980s, makes it difficult for the present-day reader to see how – if, indeed, at all – he modified his message to ESSAs based on the changing socio-political climate. Certainly, the WESSAs disparaged by Banning and (partly) defended by Foley in the dying days of apartheid were not the same group to whom Butler had first addressed his campaign.

In post-apartheid South Africa, a distance of forty years or more makes it far too easy for us to dismiss Butler's ultimatum to ESSAs – either 'act in the belief that we have been cast for an important role' or 'become even more a-political'. We make such a dismissal at our peril, not only because this would be to disregard the prevailing atmosphere during certain periods of fairly recent history, but also because – and here I am presenting what is, to some, an uncomfortable notion – Butler's repeated exhortations are not yet ready to be consigned to the heap of historical artefact.

The position of the white English-speaking South African in these early years of the twenty-first century remains one of privilege and opportunity beyond what most South Africans can hope for or expect. Inherited wealth, quality education, vocational skills, ready access to the global village: despite gripes about affirmative action, government corruption and violent crime, most ESSAs would acknowledge that they enjoy a lifestyle of relative comfort (if not of luxury). Many would consider themselves free from guilt over the apartheid past – "that was the Afrikaner Nats" – and instead lay claim to being a driving force in social and economic racial integration. Is it still appropriate or necessary to harangue ESSAs about their roles and responsibilities, their lack of historical (self-)awareness and their reluctance to accept an Afro-European identity?

An honest answer must be: "yes". We may have racially mixed schools and shopping centres, but many affluent suburbs, with their expensive restaurants and fashionable bars, remain "white" (apart from service staff and domestic workers). Enclaves of racism and xenophobia

persist. Hundreds of thousands of young white South Africans prefer to live in London or Perth than in Johannesburg or Cape Town. Many who remain behind day-dream about clean, safe “Western” cities that have long since ceased to exist. The culture of materialism has become entrenched.

If we cringe while reading some of Butler’s essays and lectures, it is only partly because they are written in an idiom and describe a political context very different from our own. It is also because we must acknowledge that, in a number of ways, they are still relevant. What keeps Butler’s ideas topical may very well be their “inconsistency”. The call for justice, liberty, unity and a recognition of shared humanity never wavers; but as we have already seen, the ‘hesitant mottled chameleon’ in Butler’s mind sought very different – almost contradictory – means towards achieving these goals.

In 1950, Butler accused his fellow ESSAs of living ‘largely in a European or white dream-world’:

We do not wish the surroundings or the people we live amongst to become visible or articulate. That would be too disturbing, demand too much in terms of thought, self-criticism and sympathy. Much better to go to the flicks produced in Hollywood, or lose ourselves in the new enlightenment of Moscow, or drink beer and listen to the scores of cricket matches played six thousand miles away.²³

Some might argue that there is no place for such moralising in the globalised *status quo* of the twenty-first century; we follow international news and trends because virtual communication makes it easy to do so, in fact makes it vital to do so, because if we didn’t we would fall behind in economic competition. Moreover, it’s no longer just ESSAs; South Africans from all races and language groups have a vested interest in world affairs and “global” popular culture, and have both the right and the opportunity to pursue that interest. The crucial point, however, comes in the sentence following those quoted above. These interests are well and good, but they can also represent a callous indifference – ‘anything rather than try to find out, for instance, something about the life one’s wash-woman leads’. The vocabulary is blunt but the barb remains sharp. There are many South

²³ Butler, ‘South African Literature’, p.40.

Africans today – of all race groups – whose prosperity allows them to ignore the plight of the poor.

Poverty is not the only facet of South African life left largely unaccommodated by the bright lights of Hollywood movies, the catwalks of Europe or the picture-postcards of Australasia. Here is Butler introducing his thoughts on ‘The English Poet in South Africa’ (1956):

In Cape Town or Johannesburg you will see the same films, makes of car, fashions, best-sellers as in Sydney, Ottawa, New York or London ... Yet the pressure and prestige of this Western cosmopolitanism can do nothing about climate, or topography, or the colour of skins, nor can it abolish the local past.²⁴

We should not mistake the meaning of ‘Western cosmopolitanism’ here. It does not refer to the transnational, multiracial (“cosmopolitan”) make-up of many “Western” cities – this is a more recent phenomenon – but to those elements of Western culture that white South Africans found more attractive than local history and tradition.

Fifty years on, South Africans may feel that they do not have to make a choice. There is plenty of both local and international content on television, on our stages and in our bookstores; we readily buy “Proudly South African” products alongside more exotic brands. Again, however, we must remember the circumstances under which Butler was writing. *The Dam* and *The Dove Returns* struggled to find an audience. Whether for intellectual stimulation or for the distraction of light entertainment, white theatre-goers wanted to escape South Africa and immerse themselves in a European or American fantasy; they did not want to confront, or be confronted by, a local scene conceived by a local playwright. As for poetry, ‘any attempt by local poets to bring African objects (which are often awkward and truculent) into this sophisticated and temperate climate’ was regarded as ‘mistaken patriotism, resulting in bad artistry’.²⁵ Butler insisted, however, that in responding to South African creative artists, the public should be neither parochial nor embarrassed about their immediate

²⁴ Butler, ‘The English Poet in South Africa’, p.45.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.46.

environment: 'It is all too easy to mask a prejudiced deadness to one's own environment as a fight against provincialism.'

The sentiment was echoed ten years later in a 1968 piece, 'The Future of English-speaking South Africa':

Interesting, stimulating and essential as the literary and other products of London, Paris and New York may be, we shall remain cosmopolitan "Westerners by cultural correspondence course" unless we consciously locate ourselves and take root. Humankind is universal but each human being grows in a particular geographical and historical setting. Unless we accept this, no matter "how good we have it", we shall remain 'airy nothings' without 'a local habitation and a name'.²⁶

This is also a refutation of the kind of post-structural sociology that Elaine Williams applies in her study. Though it may be fluid and arbitrary (even artificial), we all carry some form of cultural or national identity. In fact, Butler goes so far as to suggest, we have an intrinsic need for such an identity – or, at least, in polyglot and heterogeneous South Africa, a collection of such identities.

(ii) Local but not parochial

In 'The Development of a South African National Character', Butler introduces a definition of that perennially problematic word, "civilisation": 'the characteristic activity of a civilised people', the essay suggests, is that 'they are concerned with the universal as well as the particular'.²⁷ They are, therefore,

capable of producing works of art, systems of thought and practical techniques which jump frontiers, strike root, develop elsewhere. The peculiar pride and glory of a country is to produce individuals capable of this catalytic, creative process. The greatest Englishman is Shakespeare; the greatest Hollander, Rembrandt. Neither is less English nor less Dutch for being universally acknowledged.

²⁶ 'The Future of English-speaking South Africa', p.118. The description of "Westerners by cultural correspondence course" would seem to apply to those whom Lawrence Schlemmer calls 'Anglophiles' and 'cosmopolitan sophisticates' ('English-speaking South Africans Today: Identity and Integration into the Broader National Community', pp.131-132). The former are people who 'value highly their links with the wider Anglo-Saxon world, reject South Africanism, are very similar in outlook to less well-educated people of British birth and up-bringing' and demonstrate 'a degree of English-language xenophobia'; the latter are 'highly educated', 'tend to be cynical and rejecting ... of the English-speaking group to some extent' and 'value their identification with the modern Western world'.

²⁷ Butler, 'The Development of a South African National Character', p.92.

The balance between the ‘universal’ and the ‘particular’ is an exacting one. Butler criticised ESSAs for their lack of national pride or commitment to local people, places and events. He told them that they could not engage with other South African “groups” until they had forged their own group identity, and that they could not do this unless they showed more concern for their (settler) past. On the other hand, however, we know that Butler eschewed fervent patriotism or nationalism – he had seen its consequences on the battlefields of World War Two and in South African politics.

In ‘South African Literature’, he argues that because ‘jingo-nationalism is, happily, almost dead’ and ‘the nationalism that survives is fairly mild ... not created in and out of experience in Africa’, ESSAs are able to look at South Africa’s problems ‘from a non-racial point of view’ and ‘with a deep understanding and a sympathy with all concerned’.²⁸ (This is, as we have seen, a dubious position, which Butler himself came to acknowledge and amend.) Conversely, in ‘Poetry, Drama and Public Taste’, he commits himself firmly:

Poetically speaking, I would rather be damned with Yeats than saved with Eliot. I am fonder of those who make no bones about their passionate concern for a city or a country, people who feel a local piety, a sense of belonging to particular places and groups of people, not merely the “World” and “Man”.²⁹

This is, of course, a younger Guy Butler speaking. The older poet would yearn more and more for Eliot’s “transcendence”; moreover, Butler’s insistence on a degree of artistic detachment is a reminder that, after all, his sympathy with Yeats was never based simply on principles of political activism. Yet he quotes the Irishman in “committed” terms: ‘To the greater poets everything they see has its relation to the national life ... You can no more have the greatest poetry without a nation than religion without symbols.’

In the same essay, discussing drama, Butler asserts that the public nature of the theatrical experience requires a group of people to be

²⁸ ‘South African Literature’, p.42.

²⁹ Butler, ‘Poetry, Drama and Public Taste’, p.56.

‘transformed into a psychological “crowd”. In a limited, but very important sense, each spectator must lose his self-consciousness ... be partially submerged in a sense of community.’³⁰ English South Africans, he laments, do not have that sense of community, and therefore cannot appreciate or produce great drama, in which ‘members of the audience look into a doubtful future, but their common past, their sense of sharing a common life, preserves their unity.’ As a dramatist, Butler attempted to create this sense of community: the sense of “belonging” in *The Dam*, the multiracial breaking of bread in *Richard Gush*, the exuberant song-and-dance of *Cape Charade* and *Take Root. Demea*, which posits a more ominous ‘doubtful future’, depicts the impossibility of unity precisely because of ESSAs who, like Jonas, are not sufficiently brave or self-aware to engage with their status as Africans.³¹

Contrariwise, Afrikaans theatre is ‘fortunately placed for audiences’ but ‘much of its drama has been strongly nationalist ... an amphitheatre has been built below the national shrine [the Voortrekker Monument]’.³² The problem, as Butler sees it, is that

many Afrikaans people are only capable of seeing themselves. They may notice others, but they don’t see them. They lack the detachment from self which mature drama demands. In many plays one will find the moment of revolt and questioning, the moment of panic and terror; but not the moment of pity; only the moment of self-pity – a rather adolescent admiration of the length and roughness of one’s personal or racial *via dolorosa*.

These are stern words, and have a bearing on the discussion of Butler’s attitudes to Afrikaans people found later in this section. The important point here is the danger of nationalism, a sentiment echoed in ‘The

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.61.

³¹ Chief Agaan tells Fitz, the drunkard Irishman who is a “drifter” rather than a “settler”: ‘In Africa a man must know what is his own or become a cave full of echoes. You had nothing here of your own; you brought good habits and a head and hands that could move a trek of wagons and make a trading business work. But to the strange and the cruel, the high and the deep things, you were deaf.’ (*Demea*, p.85.) The ‘cave full of echoes’ is one of the play’s many contrasting images of substance and emptiness. Universal humanity is ‘based on laws of blood and bone, things older than cries that leap from a sensitive skin’, but ESSAs remain mere ‘shadows’ because they will not confront the reality of the warring factions in apartheid South Africa (p.25). Butler’s complicated use of this imagery carefully avoids the typing of Dionysiac Africa/flesh/darkness and Apollonian Europe/spirit/light. Rather, blood and bone are associated respectively with dark and light; in turn, images of shared blood and bone flout the superficial difference in skin colour. This physicality is set in opposition to the light and dark of sun and shadows but, crucially, it is Demea who is closest to the Apollonian light – she addresses the sun.

Development of a South African National Character'. Arguing that one should not 'set up an official national [white] ideal character', Butler warns: 'Nationalism can become a form of group pressure to conformity, an intoxication which can lead to acts of which the nation is subsequently ashamed.'³³ Our common humanity, then, must be recognised over and above whatever national identities we may hold.

Having previously criticised Afrikaans drama – read, Afrikaans culture – for its excess of self-pity and lack of real pity (perhaps empathy would be a better, non-Aristotelean term), Butler reverts to the metaphor of society-as-stage, or polyvocal theatre as nationwide dialogue:

The lyrical love of our own and feelings for oneself are natural enough, and hardly need to be encouraged. But the higher vision is the dramatic vision, something essential to cultivate in a multi-racial society. We tend to look at our society entirely in terms of our own group (as if only one group's destiny were at stake), and try to cast it for all the heroic acts, nice costumes and great speeches. But ours is a composite drama, in which the tragedy and the comedy affect all. It is simply no good for an Afrikaner or an Englishman or a black to cast the others in minor roles, or in the role of villain. The hero is Man, and the theme civilisation, not race.³⁴

The final sentence contradicts his earlier celebration of 'a sense of belonging to particular places and groups of people, not merely the "World" and "Man".' Of course, the two papers were written for different audiences and different purposes, but it is notable that Butler turns in the latter essay to the troubled relations between South Africa and the world around it. He exhorts white South Africans to realise why it is that they have become so isolated; rather than blaming the international community and raging like King Lear against the storm, they should question themselves and their motives. 'Take physic, pomp' – and consider more humbly those of whom you 'have ta'en/Too little care'.³⁵

Despite calling for humility and insisting on not casting other groups into 'minor roles', however, Butler did not relegate English-speaking South Africans to limited responsibilities. 'The Future of English-speaking South Africa' encourages ESSAs to perform their 'important role

³² 'Poetry, Drama and Public Taste', p.63.

³³ 'The Development of a South African National Character', p.93.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.95-6.

³⁵ Shakespeare, *King Lear*, III.iv.32-33.

... without apology', followed by an unabashed explanation of the duties that accompany privilege, couched in the language of *noblesse oblige*. Unfortunately, this involves some flattery and, as I discussed earlier, the ESSA image projected by Butler is not entirely accurate as a set of bland assertions:

We are fortunate to have reached a stage (through no particular virtue of our own) when the more extreme national virus has burnt itself out ... We have a practical instinct for making things work. We are suspicious of magnificent political ideas or ideals, which make absolute demands ... We have an ancient belief in the primacy of the individual, in the value and wisdom of discussion, in the necessity for social adjustment. Briefly, we are sceptical democrats, who believe that the state should serve its citizens, and not vice versa.

Thus, for Butler, ESSAs could be politically removed but not politically indifferent; as socially-minded and committed citizens, their 'possession of a world language' should nevertheless provide 'a degree of wisdom and necessary detachment, at times, from a too-local view of things'.³⁶ At this point, however, we must ask the question: why, if the aim was 'a necessary detachment ... from a too-local view of things', did Butler devote so much attention precisely to the "local" history of the English-speaking South African, and the pivotal arrival of the 1820 settlers?

(iii) *Redeeming 'the settlers who came by sea'*

Czeslaw Milosz's *Native Realm* emphasises the value of 'one's origin': 'Its worth lies in the power it gives one to detach oneself from the present moment.'³⁷ This detachment can be achieved through a scholarly assessment of both group and individual identity: 'The chain of historical causes and effects from which any collectivity is forged stretches far back into the past, and the individuals who conform to its pressures [should] stop to consider what has marked them with this or that stamp.'³⁸ Butler saw contemporary apartheid society as the culmination of multiple failed encounters between collectivities – and in the case of ESSAs, a rather vague 'collectivity', that failure stemmed from a lack of self-awareness:

³⁶ Butler, 'The Language of the Land', p.85.

³⁷ Milosz, *Native Realm*, p.35.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.142.

'Self-awareness goes hand in hand with discovery of others; it is the opposite of self-consciousness: there is nothing imprisoned or imprisoning about it.'³⁹ Thus, 'a fuller awareness of our country must, for many of us, start with a greater awareness of ourselves.'⁴⁰

Know then thyself, the voice intones, *that you may know the other*. But how honest was Butler in this appraisal? His passion for settler history was that of one tracing a personal lineage – some of the stories and settler diaries that formed his source material were handed down within his own family. He admitted, wryly, to being one of those academics 'apt to rationalise their personal hobbies into important theories'.⁴¹ Elaine Williams' critique of the ways in which Butler constructed an ESSA identity and history based on his own persona has some weight in this regard. Furthermore, as Williams points out, there was a flawed 'narrative of origins' at the heart of Butler's tireless promotion of the 1820 settlers and their 'symbolic relation ... to contemporary English South Africa'.⁴²

David Welsh's contribution to the 1974 Grahamstown conference, 'English-speaking South Africa: An Assessment', is instructive in this regard. He notes that 'the core group of British settlers who came to the Cape in 1820 and to Natal in 1849-50 came from a society in which racial stereotypes had already been quite strongly formed'; these 'attitudinal dispositions' converged with 'their experience of racial contact in South Africa' to counteract the English insistence on individual 'liberty' when it came to treatment of racial others:

The question that arises is the extent to which values incorporating a spirit of personal freedom were thought of as applicable to Blacks as well. A similar question arises in regard to the Christian proselytization also: did or did not conversion to the Christian faith and education qualify Black people for admission to community? In various guises these questions have lain at the back of the English encounter with Black South Africans. Most English have answered both negatively.⁴³

³⁹ Butler, quoted in *The Argus*, 17th July 1969 (extracts from 'South African Writing in English and Its Place in the School and University', opening address to the English Academy conference in Grahamstown). This distinction can, in fact, be likened to that drawn by Kirkwood between 'self-transcendence' and 'self-consciousness'.

⁴⁰ 'The Future of English-speaking South Africa', p.115.

⁴¹ Butler, 'Early South African Diaries and Reminiscences in English', *Essays and Lectures*, p.120.

⁴² *Guy Butler and South African Culture*, p.31.

⁴³ Welsh, 'English-speaking Whites and the Racial Problem', p.218.

Thus, Welsh argues, the ‘political schizophrenia’ of present-day ESSAs can be seen to follow the tension between the positive traits and the limitations – even the bigotries – of the British settlers.⁴⁴

There are inconsistencies in Butler’s treatment of the settlers. His frank acknowledgement in the Preface to *Karoo Morning* that ‘I grew up inside the settler myth’ implies that, having grown up, he questioned and distrusted the received wisdom about the settlers; *A Local Habitation* records his resistance to ‘a white mythology based on our nine frontier wars’.⁴⁵ Yet a glance at *The 1820 Settlers: An Illustrated Commentary* (1974), or the introductions to works such as *When Boys Were Men* (1969), will show that these books do little but valorise the settlers. The latter text celebrates the English (British) settler involvement in “opening up” the country’ and in ‘romantic, exciting and tough pioneering jobs’.⁴⁶ It offers a regrettable survey of South Africa’s ‘recorded history’, in which the most vital period (one of ‘continuous, dynamic activity’) was ‘characterised by the infusion of a large English-speaking element’. If the English were primarily responsible for all of these positive advances, then the negative consequences must be laid at the same door. Would Afrikaner nationalism and its racial theorising have taken such extreme forms if it were not for the rise in British dominance in Southern Africa in the nineteenth century?

Butler’s admiration is, however, tempered; far from celebrating the motivation or application of British policy, his historical works regularly criticise the colonial authorities. His skills as a satirist are brought to the fore when condemning the representatives of the crown or the wealthier, more influential settlers. Some of the characters in *Take Root* belong with the caricatures of Gilbert and Sullivan:

Somerset, Trappes and Pigot:

We are three gentlemen, by Jove,
Of the crispest upper crust;
In whom my father,
The governer rather,
Reposes an absolute trust.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.231.

⁴⁵ Butler, *Karoo Morning*, p.x and *A Local Habitation*, p.297.

⁴⁶ See Butler, Introduction to *When Boys Were Men*, pp.ix-x.

Godlonton (aside): Somerset's not half as bad
But twice as stupid as his Dad.

Somerset, Trappes and Pigot: What we know of the process of law
Don't amount to very much,
But common sense
And experience
Is as good as Roman Dutch.

Godlonton (aside): Pigot's no bigot
But Trappes is, perhaps.⁴⁷

The events played out in *Take Root*, like Butler's chapters in the *Illustrated Commentary*, the diary extracts in *When Boys Were Men* and the reformulation of Tom Stubbs' journal in *A Rackety Colt*, reiterate the accusation: the British government made false promises to the settlers before departure, restricted their liberties on arrival and, importantly, didn't inform them that the land they were being granted had previously been occupied or used by the Xhosa.⁴⁸ Would-be farmers were forced, according to this narrative, to act as buffers at the edge of the Cape colony and, subsequently, became reluctant combatants in the frontier wars.

By contrast, the early encounters between white settlers and black tribes are figured as a model for peaceful interaction between races and cultures. When, for instance, it is discovered that some of the allotted land contains clay pits visited by the Xhosa, settler families overcome their initial nervousness and respect the ritual collection of the red clay. Frequently, settlers and local tribes meet to trade on the banks of the Fish River. It is only the interference of the colonial authorities – by restricting trade to preserve their control over precious commodities such as ivory, or by building forts to house new garrisons of soldiers – that brings about conflict.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Butler, *Take Root or Die*, pp.18-19.

⁴⁸ Butler's histories, by focusing on the effects of colonial policy on the settlers rather than seeing Eastern Cape history as one manifestation of global British imperial expansion, differ markedly from works such as Isobel Edwards' *The 1820 Settlers in South Africa: A Study in British Colonial Policy* (London: Longmans, 1934) and John Galbraith's *Reluctant Empire: British Policy on the South African Frontier 1834-1854* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963). For an indication of the antagonism that prevailed over questions of loyalty to "the Crown" and to colonial authorities, see Basil Le Cordeur's *The Politics of Eastern Cape Separatism 1820-1854* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1981).

⁴⁹ A chapter on 'Beads, Buttons and Brass' in *The 1820 Settlers: An Illustrated Commentary* (Cape Town: Human and Rousseau, 1974) contends that the 'newly arrived Settlers had no quarrel with the Blacks. The vast majority had no idea whatever that they were on disputed ground, let alone that the government hoped that they would ...provide a cheap means of defending the frontier' (p.193). When 'agriculture failed them', they turned to trade, and 'there were considerable periods of peaceful coexistence and exchange'.

Once again, the primacy of the individual is foregrounded. The 1820 settlers become real people, with quirks and foibles; their names become familiar (Pringle, Wait, Clarke, Stubbs, Pigot, Philipps, Montgomery, Goldswain, Moffat, Bowker, Ayliff); they have particular trades and qualifications, aspirations and disappointments. ‘The generalities of history,’ Butler wrote of his project, ‘crumble into individuals, this man and that woman, going about the business of living, loving and being.’⁵⁰ To idealise the motivations and actions of the 1820 settlers in the name of history is, however, to risk committing a great injustice to those who have felt the heavy weight of colonial and postcolonial History upon them.

Occasionally, when Butler’s enthusiasm becomes effusive, the settler becomes an icon of near saintly proportions: he is ‘an enterprising, sometimes a desperate fellow, who, without any political or economic theories’ travels to a new land ‘to try his luck at making a living. Hard times might have persuaded him to leave. Or, more rarely, persecution, religious or political.’⁵¹ Not all ESSA writers have viewed their forbears in this way. Compare William Plomer’s scathing depiction in *Turbott Wolfe* of “colonials” whose ‘enterprising’ nature extends in a different direction:

the sort of people you always find swarming in colonies – people whose first idea would be to run a bar or a brothel on the sly ... people who would aim at making their sons dentists and lawyers, in a vague hope that a practice of mucking about with the insides of other people’s mouths and private affairs would turn them into gentlemen.⁵²

David Welsh provides a more balanced and scholarly account, and one which focuses on WESSA history and its implications for South Africa’s racial problems:

⁵⁰ Butler, ‘SA Diaries’. Butler was certainly not the first to present the settlers in this way; HE Hockley’s *The Story of the British Settlers of 1820 in South Africa* (Cape Town: Juta, 1948) purports to be ‘not a tale of super-men’ but ‘the plain, unvarnished chronicle of the trials and struggles of a group of four thousand normal human beings, possessed of the failings and probably also endowed with the virtues of ordinary mortals’ (Preface). What distinguishes Butler’s work from Hockley’s is that Butler does not attempt to remove the emotion and drama – the “historical pageantry” – from settler narratives. This is partly because of his literary approach, partly because of his liberal humanism, and partly because he hoped to make settler heritage more dynamic and appealing to contemporary ESSAs.

⁵¹ Butler, ‘Sand in Their Ink’ (lecture notes). NELM.

⁵² Plomer, *Turbott Wolfe*, p.104. In ‘The Colonizer’, Kirkwood refers to JA Hobson’s *Imperialism: A Study* (1902), which ‘dwells on the vulgarity’ of ‘swaggering South African millionaires’ and condemns ‘the Jingo, the parasites for whom colonialism is an employer’; Kirkwood praises Hobson because he ‘dislikes colonials, registers the low voltage of a colonial culture’ and ‘is suspicious of the motives of people who go to colonies’ (pp.114-115).

[The Settlers] came to a society in which racial domination was established; they contributed to its continuation and expansion, becoming part of a dynamic force that thrust outward, subjugating, colonizing and otherwise acquiring control over indigenous African policies. In relation to Blacks their major aims were threefold: the acquisition of land and labour and the attainment of security. One might call this the typical colonist / native syndrome. Of course there were other goals as well: trade, for example; and many wished to see the work of civilization and evangelization proceed among the pagan people around them ... The early comments and writings of the English colonists show unmistakably the growth of those stereotypes which cohere to the phenomenon of race prejudice.⁵³

Thus, irrespective of personal qualities or characteristics, it cannot be denied that collectively the settlers formed part of the oppression-by-force that unfolded at an increasing rate after their arrival.

Butler put forward a controversial defence of the white settlers (a different application of the “long view” of history) by equating them with black settlers:

I am aware that the current climate doesn't favour people known as settlers. According to one fashionable view of history, settlers are all baddies and original inhabitants all goodies. Settlers who came by sea are a particularly wicked lot. Those who came by land are rather more noble. Neither of these views is shared by the remnants of those people like the Khoi-Khoi (Hottentots) or San (Bushmen) who were crushed by the settlers who came by sea and those who came by land.⁵⁴

There is theoretical merit in this argument, but it collapses when one surveys the scale of the impact of the “maritime” settlers. Although the spread of Bantu-language tribes to the south of the continent displaced the San and Khoi, this occurred over a longer period, with weaponry less effective at mass slaughter and with less ecological damage. The rapid rise to dominance of the ‘settlers who came by sea’ – more significantly, settlers who came with guns, and with the military might and vested economic interests of national governments behind them – is not comparable.⁵⁵

⁵³ Welsh, ‘English-speaking Whites and the Racial Problem’, pp.219-220.

⁵⁴ Butler, ‘A Note on Sources and Historical Background’, *A Rackety Colt*, p.154.

⁵⁵ See, for instance, Ben MacLennan’s *A Proper Degree of Terror: John Graham and the Cape’s Eastern Frontier* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1986), which details the imbalance between the ‘concentrated brutality’

(iv) Diaries – ‘the possibility of the lie’

A key difficulty in assessing Butler’s fervour for the 1820 settlers is the nature of the material he studied and promoted. As an historian, he was interested in documents and records of any kind; but as a writer, a literary critic and a raconteur, he could not resist the narratives he found in surviving settler diaries. A set of handwritten notes for a lecture on ‘SA Diaries’ concludes:

An acquaintance with even a few of these diaries would, I believe, change, and if not change, deepen our appreciation of ourselves and our country, our view of history ... A playwright [sic] or a novelist of a certain bent will find material enough for a lifetime in them – they will certainly find their sense of actuality sharpened, their sense of human possibility in Africa heightened.⁵⁶

This non-fictional literature does not only have value as ‘a source of theme and character for the creative artist’ (Butler refers, for example, to the sources used by Shakespeare and Tolstoy); it can in fact ‘help us to define what most of our fictional works lack: briefly, a proper sense of history and of place’.⁵⁷ The advantage of the diary, Butler suggests, is not only the ‘vividness and particularity’ of a first-person account, but also the honesty of the author.⁵⁸ In ‘On Being a Writer’, he draws a distinction between the diary-keeper and the autobiographer: the former typically has ‘no large overall artistic considerations in mind’, whereas the latter is working on something ‘conceived as a book ... it must be an interesting story’. Another lecture, titled ‘Sand in Their Ink’, describes diarists writing ‘in exposed situations with private, not public motivations – in a tent, or farm lobby, anywhere’. In such cases, ‘writing is so subsidiary an activity to the writer’s life that he or she has not the professional’s concern for putting the cork back in the [ink] bottle’; this is ‘writing that is close to the soil, with grit in it – rough with the texture of hard, practical lives’.⁵⁹

Against this, however, we must weigh Ambrose Bierce’s rather less generous definition: ‘A diary’ records ‘that part of one’s life, which can be

of the colonial forces and the Xhosa – who were, according to Maclennan, ‘not a warlike people’ (pp.110-111).

⁵⁶ ‘SA Diaries’.

⁵⁷ ‘Early South African Diaries and Reminiscences in English’, p.120.

⁵⁸ Introduction to *When Boys Were Men*, p.x.

related without blushing.⁶⁰ In the passages quoted above Butler does not sufficiently acknowledge that diaries, precisely because of their subjectivity, are faulty sources. He glosses over the great obstacle to which all historians must defer – the impossibility of establishing an authentic historical “truth”. Here, fiction has the upper hand over non-fiction, for it does not claim objectivity. Butler’s project of bringing settler personalities to life both anticipated and has been superseded by a number of more recent (post-apartheid) works that, hiding behind a veil of fiction, explore the variegated history of the colonial period without having to ratify the “truth” of a particular interpretation or version of events.

André Brink’s *On the Contrary* (1994) is an outstanding example. The novel, narrated in the first person, takes the form of an eighteenth-century “diary” – an imagined confession – but the “historical” character of Estienne Barbier is altogether fictionalised. Brink is able to revisit, with heavy irony, the imperatives driving the colonising mindset: ‘to leave the final frontier of the familiar world where everything already had a name’, a romantic yearning for ‘the discovery of something *new*, not yet named, not readily nameable, something not witnessed by human eyes before, earth not yet imprinted by human traces’, accompanied by a “civilising” moral mission, ‘a precarious yet invincible trickle of civilisation and noble aspirations moving through a dark interior, rewarding it with conscience and history.’⁶¹ We read in the previous section about the drawbacks of the romantic-colonial urge to ‘discover what was strange, to tame the wilderness, to name the as yet unnamed’.⁶² The extreme characterisation of the African landscape as other and alien is also to be found in *On the Contrary* – ‘this austral clime, severe and strong, penetrating, merciless’ – but here the author is distanced from the description as much as from the protagonist, whereas Butler is typically associated directly with similar descriptions from the pens of his diarists.⁶³

As novelist-historian, Brink is present only in the meta-text, using his character as a mouthpiece: ‘Everything in this world is so diverse, so

⁵⁹ ‘Sand in Their Ink’.

⁶⁰ Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil’s Dictionary* (New York: Dover Publications, 1958), p.31.

⁶¹ André Brink, *On the Contrary* (London: Minerva, 1994), pp.12, 15 and 18.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p.79.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p.94.

contrary, so obscure, that assuredly we cannot be confident of any truth', for 'whoever puts pen to paper ... lies.'⁶⁴ Barbier is constantly revising the narrative of his own life. This allows Brink to bring about the change in his protagonist that makes him accessible to the postcolonial reader. Barbier is horrified by his own complicity in genocide, destruction of the land and enslavement. His is a journey towards contrition, through a form of self-analysis that destabilises the imperial agenda even though it does not transcend colonial vocabulary ('Violence our language ... with the single purpose of leaving on that virgin barren place the scrawl of our progress ... To acquire, to conquer, to have, to possess' – 'this violence, this energy, this seeming exuberant cruelty, this need to subdue all adversaries real and imagined by brute force, this passion to destroy' springs 'not from exaggerated confidence, not even from hate, but from terror: the fear of this vast land').⁶⁵

Brink's book, like Butler's project, is trying to resurrect the past in order to cast new light on the present. Both realise that this requires attention to detail – and, in the case of written documents, a concern for the 'reigning humour in the author': 'For my own part,' writes Barbier, 'I think that it does not little contribute to the discovery of truth in a history to know the temperament of the man who wrote it.'⁶⁶ Nevertheless, Brink's novel is salutary for any historian, and particularly so in Butler's case:

It is not difficult to show that the constitution of a man frequently betrays him into a falsehood. And yet the curious thing is that were it not for this latitude allowed the author, this permissibility of falsehood in the individual, no apprehension of truth may be imaginable at all. It is only by allowing the possibility of the lie that we can grope ... towards what really happened, is happening, may yet happen.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p.174 and p.206.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.235-236 and p.265.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.27.

⁶⁷ It is interesting to note the symmetry between Brink's closing lines ('what really happened, is happening, may yet happen') and the lines that introduce the "historical fiction" of *Demea*: 'Something has got to happen/Something is happening/Something has happened already'.

(v) *Bastard races: ESSAs and “the coloureds”*⁶⁸

By positing a different account of ‘what really happened’ along the Eastern Cape frontier in the nineteenth century, Mike Kirkwood was able to strike a blow to the very foundation of Butler’s claim that the ESSA role was to mediate between Afrikaner and African nationalists, following the precedent set by their 1820 settler forebears. ‘The Colonizer’ questions ‘the notion that the English were or are “in the middle”’, presenting ‘the simple historical fact that the compact buffer settlement did not materialise’; the Albany district ‘was not suitable to intensive agriculture and the settlers gradually dispersed’.⁶⁹ Kirkwood’s paper makes a ‘brief foray into frontier history’ to show that the real ‘middle men in the historical military conflict’ were coloured people. An ‘exploited nexus between White and Black’, the Griquas were both a ‘pariah group which the Trekboers dragooned into their commandoes’ and an occasional ally of ‘the Black cause’. Likewise, coloureds were drafted into British garrisons to fight both Afrikaner (for example, in the Graaff-Reinet rebellion of 1799) and Xhosa (in the form of the Cape Mounted Rifles), but also ‘explored the alternative possibility of solidarity with Black South Africa’, joining Xhosa revolts against British forces. The English ‘identity crisis’ described by Butler, Kirkwood thus asserts, is ‘a very minor affair compared with the repeated crises of identity within the Coloured camp.’

The point is well-made, but misses the mark; the difference is one of degree, not kind. Butler recognised a complex affinity between ESSAs and coloured people. One of his better-known (and also much-disputed poems) is ‘Cape Coloured Batman’, which stems from his experiences in the Second World War:

⁶⁸ It is perhaps important to distinguish here between Butler’s (partly ironical) use of the word ‘bastard’ to indicate a multi-racial or multi-ethnic identity – as I discuss below – and Andrew Foley’s invocation of the term in order to disagree with ‘the idea of the WESSAs as rapacious, exploitative imperialists cunningly masking their racist, reactionary attitudes and conduct beneath a veneer of political neutrality’ or ‘acting out of sheer self-interest’ (Foley, ‘The White English-speaking South Africans: “Bastards”, “Wimps”, “Ghosts with Ears”, or Something Else Again?’, 15).

⁶⁹ ‘The Colonizer’, pp.106-7. It may be noted that Kirkwood, in challenging the version of frontier history ostensibly put forward by “Butlerism”, does not cite specific studies to support his case. Rather, the chief references in his paper are to theoretical critiques and models of the colonial encounter, such as Memmi’s *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (1967), Mannoni’s *Prospero and Caliban* (1950) and Worsley’s *The Third World* (1964).

My attitude towards Coloured batmen was regarded then as liberal and enlightened. I was genuinely fond of steady, sober Van Niekerk and of engaging rogues like Bonny [described elsewhere in *Bursting World*]. When in the spring of 1945 I wrote 'Cape Coloured Batman' I created a character, called Nelson, who was neither of these, but rather the melancholy Orpheus of the dispossessed mulatto multitudes which the Empires had bred throughout the world ... There are, however, clear traces of white paternalism in it, and even of thinking in stereotypes. It has been criticised on these grounds. I could not write a poem like that today.⁷⁰

Notwithstanding these 'clear traces' (Butler's acquiescence to political correctness does not do justice to the acerbic tone that surfaces in certain lines in the poem – 'Damned from birth by the great disgrace, / A touch of the tar-brush in his face'), the "paternalist" empathy felt by Butler as a young officer prefigures the less sentimental sympathy of his later political formulations. Hennie van der Mescht sees in the subject of 'Cape Coloured Batman' precisely the kind of ESSA discussed by Butler in his essays and lectures: 'both are composite beings, both lack a strong sense of belonging, and both are largely indifferent to this particular aspect of their predicament'.⁷¹

Butler taunted the apartheid frenzy over racial purity by declaring that the 'colour prejudice, and fears, and suspicions' English South Africans had in fact ran counter to the 'political and moral traditions' of the (British) 'Englishman', who is himself 'the classic example of a bastard race'.⁷² In the same speech, Butler put forward the plight of coloured people as evidence of the arbitrary and foolish nature of racial classification and discrimination:

The colour frontier cannot be fixed with any degree of scientific certainty or justice. And the touchstone of the situation is the man who is neither white nor black.

We are curiously inconsistent here. We believe white blood to be in some way correlated with civilisation, but it is evidently weaker than black blood; apparently two teaspoons of black blood have such potency that they can convert a European into a non-European. This black blood is so dangerous that many would rather die than take a transfusion of it. This is

⁷⁰ Butler, *Bursting World*, p.252.

⁷¹ Van der Mescht, *The Poetry of Guy Butler*, p.55.

⁷² 'The Development of a South African National Character', p.91. Butler's claim that 'the Englishman has never had much faith in racial theories' is, of course, a dubious one – made perhaps in comparison to the Aryan hopes of Nazi Germany – ignoring the fate of Jews, Moors and others within England itself, and of all non-caucasian colonial subjects.

curiously like witchcraft, in which certain physiological materials are given magical powers for good and evil.⁷³

Few “white” South Africans have absolute ‘purity of blood’; if strict racial categories were to be imposed, Butler goaded, ‘we must first hand over some of our best European families to the Department of Coloured Affairs and surrender some of our national heroes ... The “Coloureds” belong with us.’⁷⁴ This was a bold statement. Apartheid legislators had already rejected Hertzog’s view that coloured people were “bruin Afrikaners”. Rather, to be coloured was to embody the ultimate taboo: miscegenation.

The (hidden) prevalence and consequence (once discovered) of sex across the colour bar surfaces repeatedly in South African literature, before and after the implementation of the Immorality Acts of 1927 and 1957. Malvern van Wyk Smith, writing about the predominance of the mixed-blood theme in Sarah Gertrude Millin’s fiction, notes a ‘strong correlation [amongst whites] ... between a growing abhorrence of miscegenation and the emergence of black socio-economic power and political demands’; when blacks are perceived as a threat, miscegenation represents both ‘a “dilution” or “contamination” of the blood of the master race’ and ‘an archetypal emblem of psychic disjunction’ between outer and inner identity.⁷⁵ At the same time, the sexual act that causes miscegenation is an ambiguous symbol of possession and domination by white men or, more disturbingly for whites, the revolt against that subjugation by black men. The ‘profound schizophrenia’ thus generated in the ‘racist imagination’ explains why, in his Introduction to *English and South Africa*, Butler wrote of coloured people that ‘the contemplation of this most unethnic of South Africa’s ethnic groups has, from the beginning, evoked a mixed response: mingled affection and contempt, liking and loathing.’⁷⁶ Even Plomer’s “radical” hero in *Turbott Wolfe* resists making miscegenation an expressed goal of the “Young Africa” movement –

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p.94. The closing flourish is another inversion of the association of Africa, the Dark Continent, with superstition, paganism, and “savagery” – it is the “civilised”, enlightened Europeans who participate in witchcraft.

⁷⁴ The inverted commas in the printed copy of this speech are significant. “Coloured” is a standard usage nowadays, but it has historically been the site of fierce socio-linguistic dispute. Typically, Butler used the phrase “so-called” coloureds’.

⁷⁵ Van Wyk Smith, *Grounds of Contest*, p.55.

⁷⁶ Butler, Introduction to *English and South Africa*, p.5.

the prospect fills him with ‘a cold physical terror’: ‘It was one thing to talk glibly about miscegenation, to fool about with an idea, and another to find oneself face to face with the actual happening: it was the difference between a box of matches and a house on fire.’⁷⁷

Millin, Plomer and others foresaw tragic consequences to miscegenation; for Butler, the tragedy of South African race relations had been played out precisely because whites were unable to accept both the inevitability and the necessity of miscegenation, just as they were reluctant to integrate themselves into Africa. This is evident in *Demea*, which is full of imagery blending the conquest of land with sexual conquest:

FITZ: Wherever I have wandered I have seen,
And I will see again,
White men proud of their whiteness
Fall as snowflakes fall
Into the warm black earth of Africa.
In a mere nine months
Their precious whiteness melts
Into as many shades as the seasons of the veld.⁷⁸

The play provides obvious examples of miscegenation. Jonas and Demea’s children are coloured – the author’s notes specify that one is ‘darker, with closely curled hair’, while the other is ‘light-skinned and his hair is straight’.⁷⁹ When Jonas decides to join Kroon’s trek, and to subscribe to the ideology of racial purity, he agrees to send his sons to live with the Griquas. It is this act of bad faith (the ESSA reneging on his responsibilities through a lack of courage and conviction) that compounds Demea’s anger and produces her desperate, cruel response. The boys’ death is anticipated earlier in the play, in a choral dialogue between their tutor, Fitzwilliam, and the Van Niekerks, who are no longer welcome in Kroon’s party because of their “brown” baby:

FITZ: You old serfs, you exiled Malays, you Mozambiquan slaves, where are you now? A long conspiracy of silence seemed to have wiped you out; but now suddenly, uninvited, you return.

⁷⁷ *Turbott Wolfe*, p.142.

⁷⁸ *Demea*, p.39.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p.18.

VAN N: Until the third and the fourth generation.

MRS VAN N: And always upon the children.⁸⁰

In Jonas' case, however, the "sin of the father" (the biblical reference is to Exodus 20:5 and 34:7) is not lust, as the Van Niekerks imply, but cowardice – Jonas fails to envision and to create a society, or a microcosm of a society, that is not divided along racial lines.

For Butler, people of mixed race were a physical manifestation of the otherwise less tangible fusion between Apollo and Dionysus, imploding the Europe-Africa dichotomy and with it, the Nationalist belief 'that colour prejudice cannot be overcome'. As we have already seen, one of Butler's early controversial appearances in South African newspapers (and even, subsequently, a parliamentary debate) came in 1957, when he expressed his anticipation of a direct engagement between black and white that, with increased social contact, 'may even lead to what some people believe to be that ultimate horror, a coffee-coloured race' – which, he argued, would in fact be a mark of 'civilisation' compared to the 'barbaric' policies of racial segregation.⁸¹ Nevertheless, Butler's own 'colour prejudice' – largely in the form of those stereotypes he himself acknowledged – has been identified by critics of his drama and poetry. Martin Orkin's appraisals of *The Dam*, *The Dove Returns* and *Cape Charade* are pertinent here, but there is more ground to be covered if we are to assess Butler's portrayal of coloured characters thoroughly.

One commentator on the opening run of *The Dam* thought that 'the statement of problems by the Coloured people (some local papers still saw the coloured characters' primary function as that of comic relief) was self-consciously bold'.⁸² This is a useful reminder of the audiences Butler was playing to, or trying to persuade; in *A Local Habitation* he expresses his frustration, not only with the reception of his early plays, but also with their presentation on stage:

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p.20. See Michael Picardie's 'Shades of Brown' – written after *Demea* but performed before it – which presents a couple in the same predicament (*Market Plays*, ed. Stephen Gray. Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1986).

⁸¹ *A Local Habitation*, p.165.

⁸² "Melpomene", anonymous reviewer in *Trek* (June 1952:17).

Only once have I managed to get a professional production in which my coloured characters have not been burlesqued (*Demea*, 1990). Until Fugard's *Blood Knot* (1969) actors and producers could present so-called coloureds only as comic carnival coons or parodies of whites, not as people.⁸³

Unfortunately, however, some of Butler's attempts to break this stock characterisation merely endorse it. In *Cape Charade*, the coloured characters are certainly depicted more sympathetically than in Geddes Bain's original satire. Yet consider the scene showing the germ of the conflict between Rex and Bain over the fate of 'Kaatjie Kekkelbek', in which the painter I'ons offers a defence of 'Hottentots' against Bain's cynicism:

Bain: A drunken, lecherous, insolent, irresponsible lot.
I'ons: Dr Atherstone has detected other human attributes in them.
Bain: For instance? I said drunken, lecherous – I could add deceitful.
I'ones: Wit, gaiety, a love of music, an invincible instinct for happiness.⁸⁴

These lines, along with the witty repartee or slapstick comedy involving Antjie and her drunkard convict husband Klaas Klauterberg, resulted, as Orkin points out, in reviewers noting the characteristic 'instinct for happiness' at the same time as the misery of the District Six removals. The "compliment" could hardly be less appropriate.

The alternative to the inherent trait of 'gaiety' is equally typecast. Nelson ('Cape Coloured Batman') is only the first of many coloured figures sketched by Butler who present a specific form of 'the pathos of the human race' – 'the desperate, maudlin hedonist', indulging in 'melancholy cries', strumming a guitar, sorrowful and, typically, drunk. This joyless coloured man is, variously, Simon in *The Dove Returns*, Dirk Donnerwetter in *Cape Charade*, or the teenager Kleinboy in *Demea*.

Act III of *The Dove Returns* opens on Simon, faithful servant to the grieving Van Heerden family, after a bout of heavy drinking. He drinks out of guilt and sorrow, both for the death of Paul, and for himself:

Simon: ... I was afraid

⁸³ *A Local Habitation*, p.199. *The Blood Knot* actually appeared in 1961; 1969 saw the opening of *Boesman and Lena* at the English Academy conference in Grahamstown.

⁸⁴ *Demea*, p.24.

If I refused him anything, he'd stop treating me
Almost as if I was white. Afraid of being called
What I am, a dirty old Griqua.
So I gave him the gun, and he is dead.
If I had not been ashamed of my skin, it would
Have all been otherwise. I am sorry for my shame,
But no longer for the colour of my skin.⁸⁵

Yet Simon's self-pity remains ambiguous. He reminisces about 'the old, old days' when Philippolis was an independent Griqua capital but comments that, even before the Boers or the British came, 'we were bastards'. The only occupation of its coloured citizens seems to be drinking, except for those who, like the mysterious "Katot", gave up alcohol 'because of a thing the missionary said: "Brandy won't change the colour of your skin".'⁸⁶ Simon's debauchery is shown to be a response to the same predicament as that of Nelson in 'Cape Coloured Batman': from birth he was condemned to become a 'dirty old Griqua'.⁸⁷

There is, of course, a tone of sardonic protest in his remarks – as when he claims to speak 'like a man, not a Griqua', admits 'I catch myself/Not thinking like a coloured man at all', or asks 'How dare I, a Griqua, not take his,/A White man's, word?'⁸⁸ At other times, he seems to be sincerely submissive: 'O God, let me bear my colour with patience.' Similarly, in *The Dam*, Kaspar tells Susan to 'forget our talk of troubles' while Katrina insists, 'I am only a silly old coloured woman.'⁸⁹ These are their last lines in the play, and although their voices range from complaining ('Is God a God of favourites?') to threatening ('The poor wait patiently, but not forever'), the final impression on the reader or audience member is unlikely to be as bold as Butler hoped when he wrote that 'the so-called coloureds do not rejoice at the conclusion', and that 'their anguish in the close of the play' endorses Susan's political sensibility and social conscience.⁹⁰

⁸⁵ Butler, *The Dove Returns*, pp.74-75.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p.22.

⁸⁷ For an account by an ESSA academic that identifies similar "characteristics" – fatalism (75), alcoholism (60) – within coloured communities as a result of their unique position in South Africa's racialised history, see M.G. Whisson, 'The Coloured People', in Randall (ed.), *South Africa's Minorities*, pp.46-77.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p.23 and p.53.

⁸⁹ Butler, *The Dam*, p.69.

⁹⁰ *A Local Habitation* p.199 and *The Prophetic Nun* p.95.

Certainly, the coloured characters are necessary to ensure that these early plays '[do] not end on a happy note of reconciliation between Afrikaner and English-speakers', thus rejecting 'the notion that such a reconciliation between the white groups alone will be enough'. In doing so, however, they not only carry personal histories and represent the plight of coloured people – both historically and in terms of contemporary legislation – but they are also expected to stand in for all non-whites on a whites-only stage. Kirkwood's statement is warranted: coloureds are forced to play the role of the go-between.

In the first scene of *The Dam*, Kaspar mentions his experiences in the Second World War, linking him to the author and his fellow ESSAs.⁹¹ Throughout the play, Kaspar and Katrina are intricately involved with the fortunes of the Long family; yet, the dam once completed, Douglas – having been pulled back from the brink of suicide by Kaspar – dispatches him to 'the party below' with the black workers (where, we learn later, 'it was happy until the liquor ran out': 'Without enough to drink, men soon run out of fun./There's not much joy in the bottles of their hearts').⁹² Hennie van der Mescht suggests that Kaspar and Katrina's superstition is 'meant to represent the tribal mysticism of the non-white races'.⁹³ Notwithstanding the false assumptions that conflate all 'non-white races' into a generic pattern, this observation is another indication of the too-heavy emblematic weight foisted on coloured characters who are, after all, marginal to the main drama. In *The Dove Returns*, Simon's wretchedness makes Karel van Heerden wonder if 'one race can only rise on the back of another'. His daughter, Aletta – resisting the Boer nationalism of her mother – draws an unlikely parallel between Simon and the Afrikaners: 'We still may drink ourselves to death/On grief and dreams.' The implication is that, in 1955 (when the play was written), still embittered by the war with the British and pursuing the illusion of a "volkstaat", apartheid legislators were indulging in the lethal fantasy of segregation. The South African War sprang from antagonistic 'feelings of race' between

⁹¹ For instances of Butler describing coloured soldiers participating in World War Two, see *Bursting World*, pp.153-155 and p.172.

⁹² *The Dam*, p.67.

⁹³ *The Poetry of Guy Butler*, p.103.

the British and the Boers, but the peace that is made at the end of the play is intended as a model for all race relations in South Africa.⁹⁴

If coloured characters could be associated with groups as contrary as the Nationalist government, black farm labourers and ESSA ex-servicemen, it is evident that they were “floating signifiers” in Butler’s political and artistic vision. Yet in these alienated, drifting figures, he also identified a supra-racial archetype:

Patient as despair, eyes closed, ugly,
the woman stretched small hands towards the flames;
but the man, back to an indigo boulder,
face thrown up to the sky, was striking
rivers of sorrow into the arid darkness
from the throat of a battered, cheap guitar.
It seemed that in an empty hell
of darkness, cold and hunger, I had stumbled on
Eurydice, ragged, deaf forever,
Orpheus playing to beasts that would or could not hear,
both eternally lost to news or rumours of spring.

This is the “universal” couple in ‘Myths’.⁹⁵ Simon, too, expresses something about the human condition that goes beyond his historically defined role: by the end of *The Dove Returns*, he has reached a state of existential clarity, with ‘no more bubbles to blow, no rings of smoke,/No wishes, no dreams’.

(vi) *English-Afrikaans relations*

What, then, do we make of those dangerous dreamers who seem to be the real object of Butler’s criticism – men whose dreams became a concrete, if nightmarish, reality through legislated segregation – Malan, Strijdom, Verwoerd, Vorster? These are men subsumed in the figure of Kroon, men descended from Sarah van Heerden; their contempt for the black or

⁹⁴ *The Dove Returns*, p.77.

⁹⁵ These two are resonant not only with other couples in Butler’s work, but also with more iconic figures in South African literature. *The Dam* opens on a ‘dry, eroded river bed. On one side a rock-face. Katrina enters with rugs, basket, etc. She stares at the rock. Enter Kaspar with guitar ... Katrina starts making a fire’ (p.9). This anticipates the later arrival on the South African stage of *Boesman and Lena*; one is reminded of Fugard’s debt to Butler as a student and aspirant playwright. The question of shared ESSA/coloured identities is also raised by Peter Anderson’s suggestion that Fugard has written a ‘part’ for himself in *Boesman and Lena*: ‘according to the declensions of South Africa’s racial order, Boesman the “coloured” represents he in whom Fugard may “recognise my bastardised identity”, at once metropolitan and colonial, white and “non-white”’ (‘Fugard’s *Boesman and Lena*’).

coloured man is matched only by their bitterness (sometimes open, sometimes subliminal) against the Englishman. Butler's comments on Afrikaners and on Afrikaner nationalism – he was careful to distinguish between the two – inevitably formed a central part of his analysis of “the ESSA condition”, but the points of reference he used were then, as now, such flammable topics that his attitude to English-Afrikaans relations remains clouded.

It is clear that Butler was sympathetic to the Boer cause in the South African War.⁹⁶ He was not antagonistic to the Voortrekkers, recognising in them qualities of fortitude and resilience that he identified in the early English settlers. Rather, he opposed what he saw as the exaggeration or misrepresentation of these episodes for the purposes of engendering, through a *volkskultuur*, a xenophobic neurosis amongst Afrikaans-speakers. He was quick to point out, for example, the historical inaccuracies in depicting all-white Treks, or all-white opposition to the British in the South African War. Of course, as we have seen, Butler was criticised for precisely this kind of “mythologising” in his use of the 1820 settlers as representatives of English-in-South Africa. (Moreover, by emphasising that South Africa was not ‘explored, surveyed and built by Afrikaners only’, Butler was claiming for English-speakers a part in the country’s colonial history from which many would prefer to dissociate themselves.⁹⁷) Yet his symbolic campaign was not, as Christopher Doherty has claimed, ‘an essentially ethnic strategy’ that took a ‘morally ambiguous’ position ‘in relation to the theory of Afrikaner nationalism’.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Butler greatly admired the redoubtable Olive Schreiner and her husband Samuel Cronwright-Schreiner for their staunch opposition of many British actions in the conflict. See, in this regard, ‘Olive, Johanna and Cron’ in *Tales from the Old Karoo*, pp.181-205.

⁹⁷ *Bursting World*, p.82 (see also Butler’s comments on the 1938 Trek centenary celebrations, p.83). Discussing *Cape Charade*, Akal argues that Andrew Geddes Bain’s geological research, his ‘feats of engineering and his historical significance’ are made to stand for ‘the historical significance and contribution of the English Settler enterprise’ – if ‘the Afrikaners projected themselves as being the first colonists to open up the interior physically’, then ‘the English colonists were the first to open it up intellectually by mapping it’ (*Forms of Community Service*, p.111). This reading of the play offers a rather crude version of Butler’s cultural project; Akal is more accurate when he writes that in the “Settler Cycle” of plays Butler was ‘establishing the ground for a cultural myth which he no doubt hoped would act as a counterweight to Afrikaner Nationalism’s validating myth of the Great Trek’ (p.107). Such a mythico-historical revision was aimed at undermining apartheid legislation – a more valuable pursuit than simply justifying or celebrating British colonial expansion.

⁹⁸ Christopher Doherty, ‘Research versus “Prac. Crit.”: The Pedagogical Vacuum in the Radical Critique of South African Literary Studies’ in Laurence Wright (ed.), *Teaching English Literature in South Africa: Twenty Essays* (Grahamstown: ISEA, 1990), p.55.

Rather, it was a direct response to – an attempt, as it were, to neutralise – the Afrikaner nationalist propaganda on which justifications of apartheid policy depended.

Butler's public pronouncements in this regard invariably provoked strong responses in both the English and Afrikaans press. After he addressed a conference in 1978 ('The Road Ahead') on the topic of degenerating English-Afrikaans relations, one newspaper carried the headline, 'Butler: Racism Forced onto English Speakers'.⁹⁹ The argument recorded in this article is that ESSAs, deprived by apartheid laws of 'first-hand experiences' with black or coloured South Africans, are left feeling 'ashamed and guilty' because they 'know that their hands are dirty and are kept dirty by discriminatory laws'; they are driven 'into exile, or into apathy, or into more and more radical political stances'. The problem with Butler's position here is the use of the passive voice – ESSAs are rendered as victims of Afrikaner nationalist policy and as having no agency to remedy the situation (including, one presumes, those with 'radical political stances').

Such a depiction is anomalous in the context of the ESSA "roles and responsibilities" already described, which presupposed substantial influence in the social, economic *and* political arenas. This was a necessary inconsistency. In order to place English liberalism in opposition to Afrikaner nationalism, Butler had to vindicate – if not exonerate – the role of the English in pre-1948 South African politics, and to highlight their loss of political power. Thus, he rejected the idea of 'voluntary castration' on behalf of English speakers:

this suggests they had the numbers to win at the polls but did not use them. It is an error which many make, including themselves. Forty percent can't beat sixty once sixty find they have a winning formula, namely an appeal to language-based loyalties and dread of blacks (swart gevaar).¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ *Daily Despatch*, 5 July 1978. See Jeanette Eve's *Guy Butler: Fifty Years of Press Clippings 1944-1994* (Grahamstown: NELM, 1994), p.43.

¹⁰⁰ Butler, fax to Graham Leach, 12th December 1988. BBC correspondent Leach asked Butler to read a draft chapter on English-Afrikaans relations ('The Old Enemy') in Leach's *The Afrikaners: Their Last Great Trek* (Johannesburg: Southern Book, 1989). Akal suggests that 'in 1948, English-speaking South Africans initially saw little cause for concern: the National Party had indeed gained power, but on a minority of votes ... little seemed to shake the English establishment in South Africa during the fifties' (*Forms of Community Service*, p.6). This is not consistent with Butler's interpretation of the election statistics, nor with his anxiety – expressed at the time and throughout the apartheid decades – over the results of the 1948 poll as a turning

Kirkwood, however, would argue that the question of statistical advantage or disadvantage is redundant:

we are not a variant of the “two fragments” colonial pattern of Canada with the difference that the Afrikaners, unlike the French, are in the numerical ascendancy. Our culture is decisively conditioned, and always has been, by our partnership with the Afrikaner in White domination.¹⁰¹

In light of what he perceived as ‘the swing of ESSA voters to the right’, Butler was in agreement (although he would have contested the ‘always has been’): he was concerned that English speakers were becoming ‘*mak*’ (tame) and were being drawn into ‘alliances’ with Afrikaners that were really just ‘a kind of ganging up against other elements in South Africa. White consciousness can, and does mean just this for many whites – it is simply an anti-black marriage of fear and convenience.’¹⁰²

Butler’s own brand of ‘white consciousness’, however, saw him labelled by many Afrikaners as a “boerehater”. The furore over the ‘Road Ahead’ conference frustrated him greatly (he had had to summarise the second half of his speech owing to time constraints, and felt that the press misrepresented his view), as he believed he had ‘consistently attempted to improve relations between all sections of our community’. Ten years later, his article in the *Sunday Star* on ‘English Speaking South Africa’ provoked similar responses, including one from an apartheid apologist who pointed to the damage done under British imperialism and cited apartheid policies as an attempt to solve the problems of multiculturalism born under Empire. Butler’s answer was adamant:

I have never been anti-Afrikaner ... I have never been blind, either, to ESSA weaknesses. Both are subject to racial pride and prejudice – as almost all peoples in the world are. My quarrel is with the Nationalist Party for having made colour and race prejudice the basis of so much SA law, and for organising lives and limiting liberties because of a biological accident of skin pigmentation ... There are many countries where the

point in South African history: ‘It is very difficult to communicate, at this distance in time, the body blows and the protracted nausea of disillusionment in the years that followed the 1948 election’ (‘On Being Present Where You Are’).

¹⁰¹ ‘The Colonizer’, p.108.

¹⁰² Butler, letter to Hermann Giliomee, 24th July 1978.

population is mixed and prejudice abounds, but they manage without race legislation.¹⁰³

The romantic-imperial complex resurfaces in one of Butler's more ambiguous poetic portraits, 'The Last Trekker'. This character represents a 'great reaction'; he is an irrepressible adventurer, seeking freedom (as a Dutchman/Afrikaner) from the 'fertile' but constricting valleys of the (British Cape) colony. He embodies both the equestrian ideal ('man and mount/break like a lonely thunder on the plains') and the patient art of husbandry ('flocks and herds .../follow white clouds and rumours of rain'). In these endeavours he seems to have the poet's sympathy, or at least a grudging admiration. One might even pity this 'living legend' as a quixotic anachronism, 'two centuries' out of date, ignoring 'the well-worn road/and the new machine economy' as he plunges ever further north into Africa; an absurd 'blonde phenomenon' amongst the indigenous people and the 'dark-skinned' Europeans who have long since stopped exploring and are now 'settled'. If he is almost laughable as a mythical figure, however, the poem also hints at the grave implications of his quest: 'keeping his freedom unconquered', the pioneer becomes a destroyer of nature ('his rifle's dead-sure felling' of animals) and an oppressor ('breaking a score of tribes'), ultimately 'evading the established law'. Most threatening of all are the 'jackals and vultures' who, in the aftermath of this brave lion, 'follow to feed'. If the poem is read as allegory, these scavengers are the greedy merchants and politicians who exploit the dominance established by the firepower of the trekker in his desperate search for *lebensraum*. The poem dates to the early war years, but one can sense Butler's anxiety about the growing Afrikaner nationalism that corrupted the outdated and short-sighted idealism of the trekkers – a corruption on which the Nationalists' victory of 1948 and their justification of apartheid depended heavily.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Butler, letter to Winston Allwright, 22nd March 1989. See also *Sunday Star*, 3rd April 1988.

¹⁰⁴ W.A. De Klerk, in a short paper on 'The Afrikaner: Contemporary Attitudes' in Randall (ed.), *South Africa's Minorities*, distinguishes between the Great Trek of 1836 and the Thirstland Trek of the 1870s, aligning the former with *verligte* and the latter with *verkrampte* Afrikaners circa 1970. According to De Klerk, while the Great Trek was characterised by pragmatism, the Thirstland trekkers pursued an 'impossible ideal ... towards final absurdity', never reaching 'their Calvinist utopia in Portuguese West Africa' (p.35). This is particularly relevant to 'The Last Trekker', which specifies a route through 'Ovomboland, the Caprivi, or crossing into Angola' to join the 'Portuguese'.

Bursting World narrates two episodes from the same period, while Butler was in training for military service and English-Afrikaans tensions were reaching a peak over the conflict in Europe, that provide some context for his shifting attitudes towards Afrikaners. The first relates to his own concern, as a recent volunteer for the Allied cause, about the Nazi sympathizers within the Afrikaans community who attempted to sabotage the war effort:

A hot-bed of dissidents was Potchefstroom. Artillerymen in training there were set upon, held down across narrow water-furrows, and their legs jumped upon until broken. Needless to say the soldiery retaliated with some vigour ... Soldiers felt they could not trust the police, in spite of the fact that most of the arrests of saboteurs and shootouts were conducted by them. I fell into the trap myself. One weekend over drinks in a hotel lounge in Rosebank I made some derogatory remark about two constables who were leaning up against the bar.¹⁰⁵

It transpired that one of these policemen was a childhood friend of Butler's who had 'taught me several racy Afrikaans ballads which have never found their way into books of folksong'; he sternly disputed Butler's presumption, reminding him that the work of Afrikaans policemen in a country bordering on civil war was more hazardous than sneering English soldiers 'who were safe at base, far from the front line'. A second sharp reminder about his prejudice against Afrikaners came from his wife Jean. A minor sporting celebrity, wrestler Johannes van der Walt, was arrested on charges of treason. He escaped custody, but was re-captured and seriously injured while resisting.

Day after day his condition was front-page news in the Afrikaans press. I found it all sickening and silly. Thousands of braver and better men had been wounded and were lying critically ill in hospitals. Again, I had a lesson to learn. At home during the weekend Jean told me that she had x-rayed the wounded wrestler. Whatever his politics he was a suffering fellow mortal. One should direct one's anger not at such simple dupes, but at the politicians to whose rhetoric they had trustingly listened.

This sentiment emerges often in Butler's writing: blame the bad shepherds, not the sheep. As a young university graduate he may have felt some disdain for 'the inarticulate mass' (although he admitted that

¹⁰⁵ *Bursting World*, pp.157-158.

spending time with ‘the easy-going and second-best’ helped to soften his ‘priggish profile’ – ‘I corrupt easily’), but this was an intellectual elitism that led to him ‘baiting uncritical Britishers’ as often as sermonising against right-wing Afrikaners.¹⁰⁶ The ideologues, propagandists and policy-makers were the real source of his chagrin. Most of the Afrikaners in Butler’s work are “of the common throng”, presenting a variation on Peter se Puma’s proclamation that Butler’s characters are neither ‘saints’ nor ‘devils’, but simply ‘people’. This is particularly true of the Afrikaans characters in *Tales from the Old Karoo*, many of whom would not be out of place in the short stories of Herman Charles Bosman.

Moreover, the vivid portraits of Afrikaans literary figures – friends such as Uys Krige, or influences such as C Louis Leipoldt – in Butler’s autobiographies, along with his evident relish for the poetic and descriptive qualities of the language, attest to a deep debt of gratitude.¹⁰⁷ Butler admired the way in which Afrikaans scholars had embarked on the project of formalising and promoting the language; indeed, he saw in their work a model for the creation of lexicons or dictionaries of South African English. At the same time as he was lamenting the consequences of the Nationalist victory in the 1948 election, Butler thought it ‘little short of tragic that there should be so little contact between English and Afrikaans writers’.¹⁰⁸ For Butler, Afrikaans had the qualities of an African language because its literature was filled with images taken from its “local habitation”. As we have seen, he insisted that English literature would have to do the same if English was to become an indigenous language in South Africa.

(vii) Promethean fire or linguistic hegemony?

In *A Local Habitation*, discussing English-Afrikaans relations after 1948, Butler focuses on the policy of Christian National Education (CNE), which demonstrated ‘devastating frankness’ in policy documents advocating ‘the elevation of the cultivation of the love of one’s own (people, language,

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.146. See pp.143-153 for further descriptions of training camp life.

¹⁰⁷ André Brink also identifies resonances with DJ Opperman and NP van Wyk Louw (see *Three South African English Poets: A Critical Study*).

¹⁰⁸ *A Local Habitation*, p.100.

culture) to a prime and excluding principle'.¹⁰⁹ In theory it meant 'separate linguistic kraals' for all language groups. In practice, however, this would only apply to white English- and Afrikaans-medium schools; with regard to black students, CNE would provide 'one of the ideological excuses for the greatest of all Nationalist follies and crimes: the Bantu Education Act'. One needn't rehearse the disastrously "efficient" implementation of this Act – the dismantling of the mission schools; the negligible funds set aside for facilities, textbooks, and stationery; the poor quality of teacher training – for the legacy is evident in our current schooling system. The Verwoerdian stance ("what use is mathematics to a population group restricted to menial work?") provided an excuse for appalling school conditions in rural areas and townships which, despite the heavy protests of the 1970s and 80s, continued to decline.

The iconic status of June 1976 is key in our approach to Butler's vision for English in Africa and its coherence or disjunction with the post-apartheid climate. The student riots were the result of many factors, a boiling over of dissatisfaction on various fronts; nevertheless, they are remembered chiefly for the refusal to accept Afrikaans as a compulsory language of instruction at black schools. In that context – the imposition of the language of the most immediate and obvious oppressor, the Afrikaner – English was associated, by way of contrast, with the forces of liberation.

Butler noted this as the reason behind the 'unifying aspiration' of the linguistically divided black South African population for 'education in the English language ... a *lingua franca* which is also a world language'.¹¹⁰ This affirmation is recorded in 'The Language of the Conqueror on the Lips of the Conquered is the Language of Slaves', an address originally delivered in 1975 (it includes an assessment of second-language use in the classroom that seems prophetic in light of the following year's events). As an essay, it is a conflation of many public pronouncements made by Butler over the years. Newspaper articles from the 1960s and 1970s report on what were perceived in some quarters to be radical claims: 'English is an African language ... is, in fact, or potentially, part of the heritage of all South Africans ... because it is now thoroughly acclimatised, embroiled in

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p.100.

the agonies, tumults and delights of humanity in this part of the world'; 'English is not a sectional thing. It is a national possession.'¹¹¹

'The Language of the Conqueror' refers to 'a clear preference' for English competence among black people because it 'can be an essential step in economic, cultural and political liberation'. Elaine Williams argues that this implies assimilation, a 'myth of consensus' that allows for the paternalistic incorporation of black South Africans into 'the liberal programme of reform within an ethos of [British] tradition, permanence and objectivity'.¹¹² The question is one of agency and autonomy. Williams would suggest that the ESSA project abused the linguistic dominance of English to co-opt black people and to limit them within English 'cultural parameters'. Yet she quotes an interesting passage from Butler's self-portrait in *Contemporary Poets of the English Language* (1970): 'English, as the chosen language of literature of millions of Blacks, has a great and exciting future in Africa; and I've made it my life's business to encourage its creative use in this corner of the world.'¹¹³ Here, Butler depicts himself as having limited agency: he is simply responding to a phenomenon that has its origins and its impetus from sources outside of "institutional" English. In 'The Language of the Conqueror', Butler debunks the idea of acculturation: black Africans want to speak English, not 'so that they may absorb the British tradition and study its great books', but so that they can undo the damage wrought by the English/European coloniser.

This formulation received its most celebrated expression in Es'kia Mphahlele's description of English as the carrier of a Promethean fire. 'Prometheus in Chains: The Fate of English in South Africa' (1984) sketches the Nationalist regime as Olympian gods, who (with the imposition of Afrikaans) attempt to withhold fire (freedom through English) from mankind (black South Africa) by enslaving the rebellious Titan.¹¹⁴ Mphahlele employs not only this classical model but also the epitomised conflict between Caliban and Prospero, colonised and coloniser in

¹¹⁰ Butler, 'The Language of the Conqueror', pp.148-149.

¹¹¹ Butler, 'South African Writing in English and Its Place in the School and University' (*The Argus*, 17th July 1969) and *The Star*, 12th June 1974.

¹¹² Williams, *Guy Butler and South African Culture*, p.15.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p.20.

¹¹⁴ See Es'kia Mphahlele, 'Prometheus in Chains: The Fate of English in South Africa' (1984), *Es'kia* (Cape Town: Kwela Books, 2002), pp.344-360.

Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. The tone of Caliban's 'You taught me language; and the profit on't/Is I know how to curse' may be more vitriolic than Mphahlele's message requires (he does not actually quote these lines), but they lie at the heart of his conviction that English is the most effective language of protest and a necessary 'unifying force' in the struggle against apartheid.¹¹⁵

Mphahlele and Butler concurred on various other points regarding English in South Africa, and Butler clearly felt vindicated in his position when arguments echoing his own were put forward by a leading black intellectual (his 1985 address to the English Academy, 'English and the English in the New South Africa', refers in each of four sections to 'Prometheus in Chains'). Unlike Butler, Mphahlele has remained a much-quoted name in post-apartheid South Africa, looming large on the intellectual-ideological horizon of many "Africanists". Yet the advocacy of English as a language of communication, education and literature is being strongly questioned under the new dispensation. English, to adapt Mphahlele's paradigm, can also act as a force that keeps Prometheus chained to the rock.

Globalisation is a much-abused word and notion, but must be invoked here as a broad context – a centuries-old tale – in which to place the fears many South Africans have about the dilution of local cultures and languages in the wake of Western (Anglo-American) hegemony. One approach to the matter holds that indigenous South African languages need to be protected and promoted both for the sake of diversity and for the cultural and historical heritage that they carry. There is another approach, however, that is more pressing. It holds that: the great majority of South Africans still grow up with one or two "home languages" before they encounter English in the classroom or in the public square; the medium of teaching in our schools and universities is often the second or third language of students and teachers alike; this presents a fundamental barrier to the goal of having a well-educated population; we therefore need

¹¹⁵ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Arden edition, ed. Frank Kermode (London: Methuen, 1969), I.ii.517-517. See also 'South African Literature Versus the Political Morality' (1983), in which Mphahlele bemoans the fact that the opportunity to use English is restricted in South Africa, 'where the political establishment has been undermining English for the last thirty years and relegating it to the position of a mere "second language" for some twenty-five million blacks' (*Es'kia*, p.377).

to develop learning materials and, crucially, appropriate vocabularies in African languages to facilitate first-language education. This project is one that educationists such as Neville Alexander describe as the ‘intellectualisation of African languages’.¹¹⁶

The current situation is certainly different to prevailing perceptions about literacy in African languages in the 1960s and 1970s – despite the ever-increasing number of black writers choosing to write in English at that time. Consider, for instance, Chris Mann’s explanation of the choice not to include in *A New Book of South African Verse in English* poems originally written in African languages and translated into English: it would ‘just promote further hegemony of the English language in Africa and would distance literature even further from those who haven’t had a lengthy formal education’, exacerbating the problem that ‘literature written in English by prominent African writers is something very inaccessible to the majority of people on the African continent’.¹¹⁷

In the current South African literary environment, in which there is a dearth of both readers and writers in African languages, the implications of the project of “intellectualising” those languages are unclear. Certainly, both schoolchildren and adults should be engaging with prose and poetry in African languages, but will these be original works or translations from those writing in English? Reciprocally, how may writers be encouraged to write in their home language when the greater sales revenues and prestige are seen to lie in (a potentially international) English readership? Local publishers, too, are reluctant to bring out works of fiction in African languages because, they argue, the market is not big enough.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Neville Alexander, (ed.) *The Intellectualisation of African Languages* (Cape Town: PRAESA/University of Cape Town, 2005); see also Alexander et al. 2000 and 2003 in Bibliography.

¹¹⁷ Butler and Mann, ‘On *A New Book of South African Verse in English*’: 3.

¹¹⁸ See the author’s report on debates about multilingualism in South African literature at the 2007 Cape Town Book Fair, ‘Multilingual SA: A Gift or a Curse?’ (*The Weekender*, 30th June 2007, *Weekend Review* p.4). Tentative answers to the questions posed above are forthcoming in recent publishing and media initiatives. Two examples must suffice – Zakes Mda’s English novels have been translated into at least seven African languages, and the Lentswe Poetry Project offers prizes and the prospect of television or print publicity to aspirant poets in all eleven official languages. Nevertheless, there is much more required in this regard in order to foster a widespread culture of letters in languages apart from English and Afrikaans. South Africa’s situation is, of course, not unique; a similar tension prevails in multilingual India (to pick one of many comparable examples). See, for instance, Meenakshi Mukherjee’s “Fiction in English in a Multi-lingual Society: Location and Perspective” in Nanette Hale and Tabish Khair (eds.), *Unhinging English: The Languages and Politics of Fiction in English from the Indian Subcontinent* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2001), pp.9-22.

Butler's opinions on English in South Africa were largely a response to the specific conditions of education and literary creation prior to and during apartheid, and he anticipated that they would need to be revised. 'The Language of the Conqueror' refers to black South Africans writing in English – Sepamla, Serote, Mtshali – but also asks:

Once our society achieves a greater measure of justice and sanity, will not the literary pressure be taken off English? Will not a future Mtshali want to write poetry in Zulu? A world audience is fine for certain purposes, particularly for great causes, but it is not satisfactory for local pieties. And most of us still live and die in fairly small-scale environments.¹¹⁹

Alternatively, taking 'an even longer view', the essay conjectures that African languages may 'decline and wither' because 'the future language of the sub-continent [is] being created in the townships at this time' through the fusion of English, Afrikaans and African languages into a "tsotsi-taal" that will eventually develop into a formalised language.¹²⁰ Thirty years on, this prediction does not seem substantially closer to being fulfilled; nevertheless, it does raise the question of linguistic "purity".

There are any number of false assumptions that govern the attitude of many English first-language speakers to the use of English by second- or third-language speakers. This is a worldwide phenomenon, but its manifestation in South Africa in the years of transition to democracy was acute. Some ESSAs, after years of cultural isolation in which they had clung to the thin linguistic cord binding them to a distant mother country – a cord intricately bound up in power-relations dictated, at times, by snobbery and bigotry – achieved notoriety by complaining, for instance, about the loss of "BBC English" in news broadcasts. The furore took on racial overtones, although some disinterested observers pointed out that the dialect of English in white South African colloquial speech had long ceased to mimic the Received Pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary of metropolitan England.¹²¹ Similarly, South African language practitioners have chosen opposing camps in the international rift between

¹¹⁹ 'The Language of the Conqueror', p.154.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.155.

¹²¹ For further discussion of the question of "English pronunciation" in South Africa – in the context of producing Shakespeare for the local stage – see Thurman, 'Sher and Doran's *Titus Andronicus* (1995): Importing Shakespeare, Exporting South Africa': 33-34.

“prescriptive” linguists, who try to conserve certain forms or versions of a language, and “descriptive” linguists, who argue that languages exist in a state of flux and that a language such as English has achieved dominance precisely because it can accommodate variation.

Butler’s sympathy with either side of this debate shifted back and forth over the years. Much of his time at Oxford after the war was devoted to ‘work on Old English and Middle English’ and ‘special study on the development of English from the time of Chaucer to the present day ... the detailed examination of the language written and spoken in each successive period’, which informed his understanding of English as an organic language, even “within borders”.¹²² Yet he was quoted just a few years later expressing concern about the potential degeneration of English into a ‘barbaric dialect’.¹²³ In the 1950s, Butler foregrounded the ‘horrible uneasy question – has English a future in this country; has the English-speaking section a future in this country?’ It was only after the “crisis year” of 1959 that (having decided against emigration) Butler could answer this question in the affirmative, publicly, consistently and unequivocally. Nevertheless, at no stage did he abandon ‘standards’. Accepting the English Academy Medal in 1989, he warned that ‘in our justified and proper concern with English as *lingua franca* it is all too easy to neglect English as the precious heritage of mother tongue speakers. We must look after the language of the 10%.’¹²⁴ ‘The Language of the Conqueror’ insists that ‘standards must be defended and maintained as they have to be, even in those lucky unilingual lands, England, Australia, New Zealand or the USA.’¹²⁵ It should be noted, however, that at the Grahamstown conference on ‘English-speaking South Africa today’ (1974 – a year before ‘The Language of the Conqueror’ was delivered) Leonard Lanham affirmed how, despite the linguistic barriers faced by second-language speakers, ‘at different times [in South Africa’s recent history] English has been valued

¹²² Stefanya Ross, quoted by Norman Davis in letter of reference for Guy Butler, July 17th, 1947. NELM.

¹²³ Butler, quoted in *The Natal Mercury*, 21st November 1955.

¹²⁴ Butler, ‘Notes’ for speech to the English Academy, 1989. NELM.

¹²⁵ ‘The Language of the Conqueror’, p.156. Kirkwood criticised Butler for falsely comparing ESSAs to English speakers in other countries that ‘used to be called “the Dominions”’, and for treating ‘the indigenous bug’ as ‘a South African variety of a universal phenomenon’ (‘The Colonizer’, pp.108-109). Butler was in fact careful to assert the uniqueness of the South African situation, observing that ‘British, American and certain

and maintained more assiduously by those having it as a second language than by those having it as their birthright'.¹²⁶

Butler often referred to 'the curse of the African babel' (over six hundred languages dividing populations and undermining development initiatives), and his promulgation of English as the language of education, commerce and politics stemmed from a genuine desire for unity. Yet he recognised that this made English a 'melting-pot' as well as a 'battle ground', and he saw 'the changing nature of SA English itself' as a vital object of scholarship and a necessary subject of public discussion.¹²⁷ 'The Language of the Conqueror' challenges the reluctant ESSA to acknowledge that 'we are not in a unilingual country. We cannot, dare not, turn a blind eye to what is happening to English beyond our small, white, middle-class enclave. We need to move out of it.'¹²⁸

This diversification was not limited to the linguistic environment. As we have seen, for Butler, making 'life in Africa at home in English, and English at home in Africa' was directly linked to making "the English" at home in Africa – which entailed making ESSAs both more responsive to, and more responsible in, their adopted continent and country.

In summary, then: while Butler's attitudes towards and perceptions of his fellow ESSAs can be traced through certain phases in his life, the combination of criticism and praise, of consolidation and recrimination, is indistinguishable almost throughout. His early interest in English and the English in South Africa was sparked by family connections to the British settlers in the Eastern Cape – recorded most in the diaries he read so

Commonwealth patterns [regarding English usage] are frequently misleading' (Butler, 'Curriculum Vitae', p.3). NELM.

¹²⁶ L.W. Lanham, 'English as a Second Language in Southern Africa since 1820', *English-speaking South Africa Today*, p.296. Lanham goes on to chastise ESSAs for tending 'to see this as growing support for their cause in whatever way they conceive it', dismissing it as a fallacious belief because 'in promoting English as a second language we are not distributing party cards'.

¹²⁷ Butler, letter to Michael Chapman, 27th December 1983. Akal responds forcefully to Williams' critique of Butler and "standard English" by referring to more recent disagreements among language scholars regarding standardisation (see *Forms of Community Service*, pp.269-270).

¹²⁸ It is interesting to note the recent resurfacing of the debate about "white" English and "black" English in Lesego Rampolokeng's criticism of Fred Khumalo for writing in an English that is 'cremora whitened' – using a style that almost makes 'easy reading for retarded Caucasians' (see 'Call it Black Life 101', *Sunday Times*, 27th May 2007. Available: <http://www.thetimes.co.za/printedition>). Rampolokeng thus affirms the appropriacy of a "black idiom". This is similar to Thembelani Ngenelwa's assertion that, although he writes in English to obtain the widest possible audience, 'I want my black South Africanness to come out in the text'. Mike Nicol, on the other hand, disputes the distinction between 'black' South African English and 'bourgeois' South African English. See Thurman, 'Multilingual SA: A Gift or a Curse?', p.4.

avidly. His childhood in the Karoo stimulated a love of the Afrikaans language and an affection for Afrikaans people, whilst at the same time exposing the tensions between English- and Afrikaans-speakers; this would inform his response to Afrikaner nationalism in later years.

As a student at Rhodes University, he developed an anti-jingoistic streak based on a growing awareness of the atrocities committed in the name of the British empire; yet it was also at this time that his abiding love of English literature was entrenched. He joined the Allied war cause and went to fight “for Britain” having never been to England, an experience that underscored his connection to European history and culture but also confirmed that he was a ‘stranger to Europe’ – in other words, an African. The Second World War also brought about his disillusionment with forms of Western modernity to which the English in South Africa were still clinging; thus, in Oxford, at the heart of “Englishness”, he first engaged with the European-African synthesis which he would later promote to ESSAs.

Returning to South Africa and taking up residence in Johannesburg, he encountered (as he had previously done during army training and when “courting” his wife Jean) the urbanised English, so different to the predominantly rural English amongst whom he had grown up: driving industrialisation and accruing wealth through the boardroom and the mine, but lacking in cultural or historical self-consciousness. This drove him, when he moved back to the Eastern Cape, to promote settler history as the key to forging a sense of community and to encouraging ESSAs to participate in the contemporary South African socio-political scene.

It is not coincidental that this accompanied the “institutionalisation” of English through the universities and various academic organisations, nor that activity on this front was most intense in the years following the withdrawal from the Commonwealth. Butler was of course vehemently anti-Verwoerdian, but he was not anti-republican *per se*; he was by no means as desperate as many others in the English literary-intellectual establishment to ensure that ties with Britain were maintained, because

he disdained the idea of following a 'cultural correspondence course' and advanced a discourse of indigeneity for discussing English in South Africa.

For all its faults, 'The Republic and the Arts' contains a seminal expression of Butler's vision for ESSAs – one which, though it became dated, he maintained for three decades:

It is all too easy for Englishmen in the Republic (a minority, hurt, and still dependent and colonial in much of their thinking), to withdraw, and leave the two powerful, increasingly nationalistic groups – the Afrikaner and the African – to fight it out. A few might feel safer inside the Nationalist White laager, a few go Liberal or Progressive, but most of us alternate between an obsessive occupation with our commercial empires and sudden psychic jitters resulting in mild gestures of protest and lip-service towards our traditions and language. But a minority has its responsibilities, and can play a crucial role.¹²⁹

¹²⁹ Butler, 'The Republic and the Arts', p.101.

III “Old Cape” liberal

(i) *ESSA = liberal = conservative?*

I argued in the preceding section that many of the challenges laid down to white English-speaking South Africans by Butler’s cultural-political project remain relevant. Yet, insofar as the circumstances and attitudes he identified and criticised have not yet disappeared, this in fact increases the danger that, because he is inextricably associated with promoting the group’s interests (as settler historian, ESSA campaigner and self-proclaimed inheritor of the English or “Cape” liberal tradition), Butler may be incorrectly viewed as an obsolescent figure in South Africa’s social and intellectual history.

Derek Barker has commented that applying the label “ESSA” typically ‘functions as an invalidation or validation mechanism’ – and more often than not, it is the former: a ‘prior allegiance’ is imputed to a particular figure in order to achieve a ‘short-circuiting of discourse’, such that

propositions are dismissed or brought into question on the basis of the speaking subject’s purported allegiance to a particular group (race, nationality, social status, class, interest group). It is rather more than *ad hominem*: it is the (attempted) silencing of the speech, rendering it inadmissible or of no account, of the speaking subject through dismissal of all his or her statements as irredeemably enthralled to a discredited doctrine.¹

Furthermore, Barker notes, ‘in literary academic discourse in South Africa’, there have historically been ‘a number of surrogates with the same function’; foremost among the terms “synonymous” with ESSA in this way is ‘liberal’.² Assessing Butler’s position as a cultural politician (or, more specifically, addressing perceptions about his role as a public figure) thus necessitates some discussion of liberalism in South Africa. Here, however, we confront two major difficulties. The first is the problem of defining and using the words “liberal” and “liberalism”, given that they have multiple

¹ Derek Barker, *English Academic Literary Discourse in South Africa 1958-2004: A Review of 11 Academic Journals* (Doctoral thesis. University of South Africa: 2006), p.126 and p.135.

valencies in the South African context. The second is that Butler, although he referred to himself as a liberal often enough, did not go to any great effort to make it clear exactly what he understood the description to mean. Indeed, I would contend that, although supporters of Butler might praise him as a “liberal”, and critics might denigrate him as a “liberal”, his liberalism is not the most useful point of access to an understanding of his life and work. For this reason, I have been reluctant to introduce it at an earlier stage of this study. Nevertheless, precisely because he has been (and no doubt will continue to be) referred to as a “liberal”, it is necessary to try and situate Butler-as-liberal within the broader frame of reference, as well as the more recent history, of liberalism in South Africa. Within the space available, it is impossible to discuss the complex resonances of “liberal” and “liberalism” thoroughly, but one may at least attempt to establish – as, for instance, Andrew Foley has done for Athol Fugard, another literary “liberal” – ‘an understanding of the nature of [Butler’s] liberalism’.³

During the course of this study, the word ‘liberal’ has been quoted in various contexts and used with multiple significations: Professor Roberts thought Butler’s approach to history was ‘liberal and catholic’ (open-minded); his wartime associates thought his attitude to coloured soldiers was ‘liberal and enlightened’ (non-discriminatory); I have used the phrase ‘liberal humanism’ to describe his insistence on the primacy of the individual rather than the ideological, ethnic or political collective. Butler himself saw the ‘white liberal’ under apartheid as one who, like the ‘black politician’, ‘shook an angry fist or prophesied the wrath of God’. Yet many would view this as insufficient protest, highlighting the necessity of more radical – perhaps violent – opposition in bringing down apartheid. Moreover, although the relatively peaceful transition to democracy is typically deemed to be a vindication of the liberal position, there are those who blame “liberalism” for the slow rate of socio-economic change in post-apartheid South Africa; at worst, the label “white liberal” is associated with

² It is interesting that Barker lists among the speaking or writing subjects whose work has been ‘short-circuited’ through the use of the [ESSA = liberal] equation such literary academics as Stephen Watson and Michael Chapman, who have at various stages been outspoken critics of both ESSAs and liberals.

³ Andrew Foley, ‘Fugard, Liberalism and the Ending of Apartheid’, *Current Writing* 9 (2, 1997): 58.

Eurocentrism, capital-driven affluence for a protected minority, and perhaps even patriarchal colonialism.

The problem of defining liberalism is not, of course, specific to South Africa; the evolution of liberalism in Europe and America is a subject far too complex to be discussed adequately within the confines of this thesis. It may be useful, however, to follow Gerald Gaus' formulation as a basis for distinguishing between the 'classical liberalism' of John Locke and Thomas Hobbes – which depends on 'a vision of men as essentially independent, private and competitive beings who see civil association mainly as a framework for the pursuit of their own interests' – and 'modern liberalism', which 'is much more apt to stress mutual dependence over independence, co-operation over competition, and mutual appreciation over private enjoyment.'⁴ Modern liberalism, following the utilitarianism of John Stuart Mill, typically finds expression in 'communitarian' ideals and, Gaus argues (particularly in the liberalism of LT Hobhouse, John Dewey and, more recently, John Rawls), in 'collectivistic economic prescriptions' – a 'new liberalism' that is

characterised by a somewhat unenthusiastic endorsement of private property and a critical acceptance of the market, strong support for some form of state provision of a social minimum and endorsement of some redistribution of income and, especially, wealth.⁵

Given also its concern for welfare and for labour conditions, this liberalism thus shares with Marxism the aim of 'reconciling individualised personalities with a yearning for a community of some sort' (although Gaus is careful to deny that 'modern liberals are closet Marxists').

Set against this is the neo-classical liberalism – or neoliberalism – of, for instance, FA Hayek, Milton Friedman or Robert Nozick, which advocates a market economy operating entirely free of state intervention (even the minor involvement proposed by Keynesian economists); this is, essentially, a return to the position of an Adam Smith or a David Hume, following which governments adopt a *laissez-faire* approach and trust the "invisible hand" of market forces to translate the selfish motivation of

⁴ Gerald Gaus, *The Modern Liberal Theory of Man* (London: Croom Helm, 1983), p.7.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.4-6.

individual agents into a form of collective prosperity.⁶ Certainly, it has informed the so-called “Washington Consensus” that drives the policies of economic organisations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. The widespread perception that this neoliberal programme perpetuates inequalities – wages, living conditions, access to education and healthcare – both within and between nations has been evident in the “anti-globalisation” protests of recent years.

Despite these various forms and manifestations of liberalism, a South African liberal scholar such as Foley maintains that,

[f]or all its plurality and flexibility, liberalism remains a single, integral tradition rather than several traditions or a diffuse syndrome of ideas. All liberals would affirm a core set of values and beliefs which constitute a unitary political philosophy. Amongst these values is the idea of the autonomy of the individual; the primacy of the individual against any social or political collective; the moral equality of all persons before the law and in terms of political participation; a belief in the power of reason and negotiation to bring about social amelioration; and a concomitant rejection of violence as a means of political change. Moreover, virtually all liberal theorists today would concur that liberalism finds its most congenial political expression through democratic government, and would agree on the fundamental characteristics of the liberal democratic state, namely the limitation of governmental power through a system of constitutional rules which guarantees the freedom of the individual under the rule of law.⁷

Foley makes this assertion about liberalism universally, but it is significant that he does so in the context of defending Fugard’s liberal stance against the criticism of Nicholas Visser – specifically, about the tension that existed, for opponents of apartheid, between the possible means towards the desired end of democratic government: ‘reason and negotiation’ or increasingly violent protest and overthrow.

Visser condemned Fugard’s *My Children! My Africa!* for misrepresenting the violence within black schools during the 1980s. In Fugard’s play, a black teacher is killed by his pupils. Referring to the murders of Matthew Goniwe and Ford Calata, Visser’s article disputes ‘the

⁶ I have followed the convention of contracting “neo-classical liberalism” to “neoliberalism”, except when quoting other writers who use the hyphenated “neo-liberalism”.

⁷ Foley, ‘Fugard, Liberalism and the Ending of Apartheid’: 58. Foley’s definitions of classical and modern liberalism are similar to those of Gaus – the former ‘favours a minimum of state intervention and a free market economic system’, while the latter holds that ‘a reasonable degree of equality is a legitimate goal of liberal government, and that justice is sometimes best served by some form of state intervention in matters of unfair

appropriateness and historical plausibility of depicting the political murder of an African teacher by his pupils'; Goniwe and Calata were killed by agents of the apartheid state, and their deaths were examples demonstrating that 'violence directed against persons was typical not of oppositional politics but of the state ... the principal responsibility for deaths lay with apartheid and not with resistance to it'.⁸ Thus, argues Visser, Fugard's play is a 'distortion'. Furthermore, because the young white girl Isabel is given the last word in the play, it is implied that 'the future ... will belong to liberal-minded, well-intentioned whites (like those in the audience) and patient, peaceful blacks, not to those who have actively and at such immense cost struggled for liberation'.⁹ This explains, according to Visser, the rapturous audience response: 'the consoling, not to say flattering, impression that their own wise, moderate forbearance has contributed far more to ending apartheid than have (by definition) extreme actions of those who have more directly opposed the state.'

There are various points to be made here. The first is that, as Derek Barker has noted, Visser's 'indictment' of Fugard is based on 'the imputation of the ESSA creed to [his] approving audience' – and, as we have seen, it is fallacious to assume a single 'ESSA creed'.¹⁰ The second is that, in light of Butler's relationship with Matthew Goniwe and his links to the Calata family, it is perhaps inappropriate to try and separate 'those who have actively and at such immense cost struggled for liberation' (such as Goniwe and Calata) from those whom we would dub "liberal" (such as Fugard or Butler) into distinct categories of resistance between which there was no cooperation or dialogue.¹¹ The third is that, insofar as oppositional politics took a violent turn, this did also occur within the "liberal camp".

Jill Wentzel has argued that the condoning of violence or "criminal" behaviour in the name of opposition was one aspect of a broader 'liberal

social and economic inequality' – but he suggests that this makes it 'something of a misnomer to speak of a "new liberalism" with regard to developments in South Africa and elsewhere in the 1990s' (73).

⁸ Nicholas Visser, 'Drama and Politics in a State of Emergency: Athol Fugard's *My Children! My Africa!*', *Twentieth Century Literature* 39 (4, 1993): 499-500.

⁹ *Ibid.*: 500-501.

¹⁰ Barker, *English Academic Literary Discourse in South Africa 1958-2004*, p. 131.

¹¹ See *A Local Habitation* pp.252-255, as well as Butler's poem 'Ode to Dead Friends' and note (*Collected Poems* p.272).

slideaway' in South Africa during the 1980s.¹² Mathew Blatchford has, however, criticised this position, showing that Wentzel's attempt 'to redeem the image of those who opposed mass mobilisation, trade unions and sanctions' and to support the neoliberal idea that 'South Africa changed largely through capitalism' – because the pressures of a global free market economy demonstrated that apartheid was not viable – is flawed.¹³ Again, we return to the equation of ESSAs with different forms of liberalism: Wentzel's position was one that had been maintained by "ESSA capitalists" such as Michael O'Dowd (head of the Anglo-American Corporation) for some time.¹⁴

The standard response to this is that, far from contributing to the downfall of apartheid, capitalism sustained and reinforced the apartheid system. According to Paul Rich, this 'Marxist critique grossly over-estimated the degree to which South African capitalists benefited from the supposed "super exploitation" provided by apartheid' – industrialists were, in fact, rendered less competitive by the constraints placed on their labour force.¹⁵ Nonetheless, Rich notes, capitalists did exhibit 'a degree of "false consciousness" in taking the easy option of connivance with the apartheid regime'. As late as the 1970s, Francis Wilson (taking issue with O'Dowd on the assumption that 'economic growth is necessarily a good thing'), would argue that industries such as mining had both the opportunity and 'the resources needed to transform the labour pattern which shames us all' – a pattern which they had shaped and would continue to shape.¹⁶

One could argue that apartheid was not primarily an ideological but an economic system, based on the ready supply of cheap labour for South

¹² See Jill Wentzel, *The Liberal Slideaway* (Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations, 1995). Martin Legassick's *Armed Struggle and Democracy: The Case of South Africa* (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2002) provides a Marxist assessment of debates within the ANC and other struggle organisations about the merits and/or necessity of the armed struggle from the 1960s onwards.

¹³ Mathew Blatchford, 'South African Neo-liberalism: The Anti-Politics Democrats', *Current Writing* 9 (2, October 1997): 104-106.

¹⁴ O'Dowd was a member of the English Academy – one of many "liberal" / "English" institutions that received sponsorship from corporations such as Anglo-American. He was invited to speak at the 1974 conference on 'English-speaking South Africa Today'; his paper, 'An Assessment of the English-speaking South Africans' Contribution to the Economy', is a largely unabashed celebration of this contribution (*English-speaking South Africa Today*, pp.137-151).

¹⁵ Paul Rich, 'A New South African Liberal Conscience?', *Current Writing* 9 (2, October 1997): 2.

¹⁶ Francis Wilson, 'An Assessment of the English-speaking South Africans' Contribution to the Economy – Another Point of View' in *English-speaking South Africa Today*, p.155 and p.168. It is interesting to note that Wilson's paper also contains a strong ecological critique of the mining and farming sectors (echoed by Butler's comments in *South Africa: Landshapes, Landscapes, Manscapes*, as discussed in Chapter Six: I).

Africa's mines and factories – and, as historians such as Martin Legassick and Saul Dubow have shown, this in turn has its roots in the segregationist policies formalised during the early 1900s and between the world wars – periods of heavy industrialisation and urbanisation.¹⁷ If this is so, then liberalism in South Africa is complicit to a degree: liberals acted as 'agents of social control', the argument goes, aiding 'the reproduction of capitalist social and class relationships' and, in the first few decades of the twentieth century, being 'instrumental in the development of segregationist ideology'.¹⁸ Towards the end of the 1930s, however, many liberals began to break with the notion of segregation as a solution in South Africa and when, during the 1940s, liberals looked towards 'economic advance as some sort of "solution"', this was with a view to 'producing greater black prosperity and the emergence of a black middle class which could act as a social and political stabiliser'.¹⁹

Such a focus on 'black prosperity' in the 'middle class' is putatively not altogether dissimilar to the economic approach of the ANC government in post-apartheid South Africa. Legassick somewhat astringently claims that, since 1994, the government has 'voluntarily implemented a neo-liberalist policy'; he finds it 'doubtful whether this economic programme can alleviate poverty' and warns that 'in the long run' it will 'threaten democracy'.²⁰ If so, he continues, 'it is the price that will be paid for the aborting of a worker-led democratic revolution in favour of a negotiated compromise'. Rich, likewise, suggests that ANC government policy has been overly influenced by neoliberal agendas and that in post-apartheid South Africa, while there is a place for limited privatisation, more state

¹⁷ See Dubow's *Racial Segregation and the Origins of Apartheid in South Africa, 1919-36* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), especially pp.51-66; and Legassick and Francine De Clercq's 'Capitalism and Migrant Labour in Southern Africa: The Origins of the System' in Shula Marks and Peter Richardson (eds.), *International Labour Migration: Historical Perspectives* (London: Institute of Commonwealth Studies, 1984).

¹⁸ Rich, 'A New South African Liberal Conscience?': 1 and Rich, *White Power and the Liberal Conscience: Racial Segregation and South African Liberalism* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1984), pp.4-7; Rich also quotes Martin Legassick's unpublished paper on 'Liberalism, Social Control and Liberation in South Africa' (University of Warwick, 1977). As Rich notes, much of Legassick's work on the subject is only published in pamphlet form – see, for instance, *The Rise of Modern South African Liberalism: Its Assumptions and its Social Base* (University of Sussex African Studies Faculty, 1975).

¹⁹ Rich, 'A New South African Liberal Conscience?': 6. See Dubow, *Racial Segregation and the Origins of Apartheid in South Africa, 1919-36*, pp.45-50 for an assessment of 'the liberal break with segregation'.

²⁰ Legassick, *Armed Struggle and Democracy: The Case of South Africa*, p.62.

intervention is in fact needed.²¹

Certainly, in the last few years, various incidents of civil unrest – coming to a head in recent wage strikes and protests over lack of municipal service delivery – have seemed to represent a growing frustration with the increasing gap between rich and poor (South Africa’s nauseatingly high Gini Coefficient). As current tensions within the ANC-SACP-COSATU alliance indicate, the polarisation of capitalist/Marxist (neoliberal/populist) sympathies in South Africa is less strongly associated with white/black racial distinctions than it has been in the past. Yet “WESSA liberals” continue to occupy a deeply ambiguous position in South Africa’s political vocabulary: *Watchdogs or Hypocrites?* asks the title of one (1997) book on the subject.²²

Andrew Foley observes that, at the multiparty negotiations during the transition to democracy in the early 1990s, the delegates ‘fell back on liberal principles, first to get negotiations started, and secondly, as a means of achieving compromise’; Penny Enslin asserts that ‘in its constitution and the image of citizenship which it reflects, post-apartheid democracy in South Africa has already made a commitment to fundamental liberal principles’; and yet, as John Conyngham has remarked, insofar as liberalism has ‘been used to underpin the ethical code of the new democracy’, this is ‘unknown to most South Africans’.²³ Etienne Mureinik notes that if, under apartheid, “liberal” was a ‘stigma-label’ for apartheid sympathizers, meaning ‘so far to the left as to be almost communist’, then in post-apartheid South Africa, “liberal” once again became a stigma-label – meaning ‘so far to the right as to be almost racist’.²⁴

²¹ Rich, ‘A New South African Liberal Conscience?’: 17.

²² Libby Husemeyer (ed), *Watchdogs or Hypocrites? The Amazing Debate on South African Liberals and Liberalism* (Johannesburg: Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung, 1997).

²³ Foley, ‘Fugard, Liberalism and the Ending of Apartheid’: 59; Penny Enslin, ‘Contemporary Liberalism and Civic Education in South Africa’, *Current Writing* 9 (2, October 1997): 78; John Conyngham, ‘Liberalism and the Post-Apartheid SA Press’, *Current Writing* 9 (2, October 1997): 91.

²⁴ Etienne Mureinik, ‘Do We Want Quality or Ethnic Cleansing?’, *Mail & Guardian*, 22nd December 1995. *Watchdogs or Hypocrites?*, p.152. Compare Cherry Wilhelm’s complaint, in the 1970s, about criticism of ESSA literature: ‘For the Right, white English writing is too radical, for the Left it is not radical enough’ (‘Trends in Recent English Fiction and Criticism in South Africa’, *English in Africa* 5 (2, September 1978): 17). Jeffrey Butler argued a decade later that ‘the main ideological contender against liberalism’ was ‘no longer Afrikaner nationalism but Marxism’ (Introduction to *Democratic Liberalism in South Africa: Its History and Prospect* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1987), p.16), but ten years later still Paul Rich would claim that, in hindsight, ‘this was an over-reaction’ – ‘while Marxism seemed still to be advancing in

Black intellectuals such as William Makgoba have tried to dismiss white liberals, ostensibly “reclaiming” liberalism for black South Africans: although liberal philosophy has succeeded ‘within the classical Western democracies ... it has failed to accommodate the race issue [in South Africa]’ because liberals have ‘lacked the courage to propagate liberal principles to their logical conclusion’ and, at the same time, have ‘ignored other groups’ values and cultural systems.’²⁵ A more controversial figure, Ronald Suresh Roberts, has repeatedly described white liberals under apartheid (including, bizarrely, figures such as Helen Suzman) as well as critics of Thabo Mbeki’s presidency as ‘illiberals’.²⁶ Indeed, “liberal English conservative” is a form of insult peculiar to South African political parlance.²⁷ This is not, of course, a new phenomenon; Michael Chapman has remarked on ‘the vilification of the term “liberal” by proponents of Black Consciousness’ in the 1970s, largely because ‘the liberal principle itself has not always succeeded in remaining independent of the “superior English manner”’.²⁸

This relates partly to the fact that, for many, ‘the ESSA “liberal” connotes a *monoculturalist* agenda’ (Barker’s phrasing) – the criticism levelled by Elaine Williams at an English cultural establishment putatively subsuming black resistance into a liberal programme of reform with an Anglocentric ethos.²⁹ It is also linked to the perception that white liberals desire to “speak on behalf of” black people: Legassick calls liberalism a

South Africa in the 1980s, elsewhere it was on the retreat and would shortly be eclipsed’ (‘A New South African Liberal Conscience?’: 2-3).

²⁵ William Makgoba ‘In Search of the Ideal Democratic Model for SA’, *Sunday Times*, 27th October 1996. *Watchdogs or Hypocrites?*, p.200. John Conyngham describes Makgoba’s shifting position from being a ‘blinkerer proponent of black advancement’ to accusing apartheid of ‘distorting liberalism and giving the impression that it is the domain only of English-speaking whites’ and, finally, separating ‘the notion of liberalism from its past racial associations’ (‘Liberalism and the Post-Apartheid SA Press’: 95-96). Conyngham also points out, however, that Makgoba’s ‘high moral stance’ and ‘triumphal tone’ (as well as his broad definition of “black liberals”) compromise his stance.

²⁶ See, for instance, Suresh Roberts’ *Fit to Govern: The Native Intelligence of Thabo Mbeki* (Johannesburg: STE Publishers, 2007), pp.82-104 and 294-296; ‘Why Do South African “Illiberals” Misread JM Coetzee?’, *Molotov Cocktail* 1 (March 2007): 46-49; and, most recently, ‘Illiberal Journalism Creates Its Own Monsters’, *Mail & Guardian* 23 (34: August 24 2007): 24. Equally curious is Suresh Roberts’ labelling of Nadine Gordimer as an “illiberal” – that is, a white liberal under apartheid who acted out of fear and wished to preserve the *status quo* – considering the general agreement that her novels, from 1974’s *The Conservationist* onwards, imply a rejection of liberalism as untenable in the South African situation.

²⁷ Barker, in his survey of literary academic discourse in South Africa since the late 1950s, includes ‘conservative’ alongside ‘liberal’ in the list of adjectives that are ‘surrogates with the same function’ as the term ‘ESSA’ (*English Academic Literary Discourse in South Africa 1958-2004*, p.126).

²⁸ Chapman, *South African English Poetry: A Modern Perspective*, p.26.

force trying to assure ‘selected’ black South Africans ‘that the grievances they felt could be ameliorated through reforms which liberals could promulgate’.³⁰ Practically, in terms of parliamentary political representation at least, this was necessitated by the restricted franchise under both the Union government and the apartheid regime. More broadly, however, there is some merit in the accusation of paternalism – it has long been a feature, as Rodney Davenport acknowledges, of certain forms of South African liberalism.³¹ Yet, according to Butler’s brother Jeffrey, detractors of liberalism (he is referring to supporters of South Africa’s racial order, but the same could be said of “far left” opponents of apartheid) have failed ‘to distinguish between a paternalist humanitarianism on the one hand and a genuine democratic liberalism on the other’.³²

The moniker of ‘paternalist humanitarian’ need not, however, be altogether pejorative – nor, indeed, limited to white liberals. Jeffrey Butler uses it to describe the multiracial Cradock joint council in the 1930s (James Calata and the Butler brothers’ aunt Mary were both members) which was, primarily, a ‘welfare body’.³³ There is, moreover, a long-standing black liberal tradition in South Africa, of which the black ‘moderates’ in the first half of the twentieth century (many of whom were linked to churches and missions) can be seen as early examples.³⁴ However, as mainstream white liberals ‘remained very cautious over political engagement’ despite the increasingly urgent need for intervention against segregationist policies, the ‘steady depoliticization of [their] view and strategy’ led to an increasing alienation from black resistance, and so the black liberal tradition faded.³⁵ Calata, who became Secretary-General of the ANC in 1937, was ultimately disillusioned with the Cradock joint

²⁹ Barker, *English Academic Literary Discourse in South Africa 1958-2004*, p.127. I discuss this further under the heading of ‘(iii) Patriotism and pluralism’ below.

³⁰ Legassick, *The Rise of Modern South African Liberalism: Its Assumptions and its Social Base*, p.1. See Isabel Hofmeyr, ‘The State of South African Literary Criticism’, *English in Africa* 6 (2, September 1979): 42.

³¹ Describing South African liberals in the 1890s, Davenport describes ‘a growing paternalism’ that ‘seemed to be blunting liberal principles’. See ‘The Cape Liberal Tradition’ in *Democratic Liberalism in South Africa*, p.29.

³² Jeffrey Butler, ‘Interwar Liberalism and Local Activism’ in *Democratic Liberalism in South Africa*, p.81.

³³ *Ibid.*, p.97 and p.91.

³⁴ Richard Elphick, ‘Mission Christianity and Interwar Liberalism’ in *Democratic Liberalism in South Africa*, p.66.

council and felt that black people could not look to ESSAs ‘for our champion’.³⁶ During the Second World War, ANC President Alfred Xuma challenged the South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR) to adopt a stronger stance on segregation and pass laws; it failed to do so, gradually lost the support of the ANC and would maintain, over many years as a key “liberal” institution under apartheid, an ambiguous position in the eyes of those involved in the struggle.³⁷

Despite the founding of the Liberal Party in 1953 as ‘a more vigorous alternative’ to the opposition offered by the United Party, many liberals distrusted the 1955 Freedom Charter as a “populist” document; in the years that followed, the possibility of an alliance being forged between the Liberals (or, from 1959, the Progressive Party) and the ANC or other congresses was prohibited by ‘cold war ideological rivalries’.³⁸ The Liberal Party buckled under the pressures of state intimidation and legislation that outlawed ‘nonracial politics’, eventually folding in 1968.³⁹ Despite subsequent avenues for affiliation with, for instance, the United Democratic Front (UDF) or Frederick van Zyl Slabbert’s Institute for a Democratic Alternative in South Africa (IDASA), liberals were increasingly isolated in the 1970s and 1980s.⁴⁰

It was under these conditions that “white liberals”, and thus liberalism, became perceived as divided from the cause of black South Africans. The challenge that continues to face liberalism in South Africa is, as Rich puts it, finding ‘black adherents’ and completing ‘the disconnection of liberalism as a political creed from its historic colonial roots’.⁴¹

³⁵ Jeffrey Butler, ‘Interwar Liberalism and Local Activism’, p.82 and Rich, ‘A New South African Liberal Conscience?’: 5.

³⁶ James Calata, quoted by Butler in ‘Interwar Liberalism and Local Activism’, p.96.

³⁷ See Rich, *White Power and the Liberal Conscience*, pp.73 ff.

³⁸ Douglas Irvine, ‘The Liberal Party, 1953-1968’ in *Democratic Liberalism in South Africa*, p.116 and Rich, ‘A New South African Liberal Conscience?’: 10.

³⁹ Irving affirms that, apart from the Communist Party (which was outlawed in 1950), the Liberal Party was the only South African political organisation that operated ‘on a fully non-racial basis’ – even the United Party and the ex-servicemen’s Torch Commando were ‘incapable of accepting nonracial membership’ (*ibid.*, p.116). He implies that the Prohibition of Improper Interference Bill, passed into law in 1968, specifically targeted the Liberal Party.

⁴⁰ Van Zyl Slabbert, it should be noted, represents a long tradition of Afrikaner liberalism that lies beyond the scope of the present discussion (see his ‘Incremental Change or Revolution?’ in *Democratic Liberalism in South Africa*, pp.399-409). For a discussion of the relationship between “verligte” Afrikaners and liberalism, see Hermann Giliomee’s ‘Apartheid, Verligtheid and Liberalism’ in the same volume, pp.363-383.

⁴¹ Rich, ‘A New South African Liberal Conscience?’: 17.

(ii) *Christianity vs “the commercial spirit”*

If we want to understand Butler-as-liberal, we must look further back than the brief history of South African liberalism in the twentieth century that I have sketched above. What did Butler mean when he insisted that he came from the old Cape liberal tradition?

Scholars of liberalism in South Africa generally agree on the characteristics of the ‘great tradition’ (Stanley Trapido’s phrase) of Cape liberalism: it was missions-based, ‘strongly influenced by the mid-Victorian ideal of social upliftment through the instilling of values of hard work and self-help’, and grew out of the ‘colour-blind’ – albeit restricted – franchise established in the Cape constitution of 1853-4.⁴² The focus on welfare was accompanied by a commitment to ‘access to knowledge’ through educational institutions and a free press, as well as ‘equality of opportunity’ and freedom of speech and association.⁴³ Cape liberalism was predominantly a rural phenomenon, and this was particularly true of the Eastern Cape, where it was defined chiefly by missionary activity. It was this “Christian liberalism” that Butler inherited.

The relationship between Christianity and liberalism has been described by Richard Elphick as sustained by a ‘necessary tension’.⁴⁴ In one sense, they are opposed: ‘liberalism is a celebration of human freedom over tradition and authority’, while ‘Christianity is an affirmation of a transcendent authority over all human institutions and actions’. Yet one can be viewed as a precursor to the other:

Christianity, and especially Puritanism, was highly influential in shaping and maintaining the liberal tradition in Anglo-Saxon societies ... Without the self-discipline that Puritanism had imprinted on the English character, the liberals’ optimistic assessment of human potential would have been impossible ... [there are] numerous points of contact [with Protestantism]: a common preoccupation with freedom and with the responsibility of the individual; a similarity between Christian millenarianism and a secular progressive view of history; and a common egalitarian tradition.

⁴² *Ibid.*: 4 and *White Power and the Liberal Conscience*, pp.1-2. Although the slave trade was abolished in 1807 and British imperial legislation during the 1830s ensured the *de jure* emancipation of the slaves as the Cape, this was followed by ‘considerable dislocation and hardship’ (Davenport, ‘The Cape Liberal Tradition to 1910, p.23) that was not altogether relieved by the limited non-racial franchise after 1854.

⁴³ See Hofmeyr, ‘The State of South African Literary Criticism’: 42-43 and Davenport, ‘The Cape Liberal Tradition to 1910’, pp.21 ff.

⁴⁴ Elphick, ‘Mission Christianity and Interwar Liberalism’, p.65.

Certainly, in Butler's Quaker family background, one can recognise these elements. Indeed, the Quaker avowal of pacifism perhaps goes even further than the liberal belief in, as we read earlier, 'the power of reason and negotiation to bring about social amelioration' and 'rejection of violence as a means of political change'. This is the stance of *Richard Gush of Salem*; it is what made Butler a reluctant participant in the Second World War (and even then, as a non-combative engineer and subsequently Information Officer). Yet Butler fully supported the Allied war cause – 'reason' in the form of Chamberlain's "appeasement" had clearly failed to curb the rise of fascism in Europe. It was during this period that he experimented with a 'muddle-headed espousal of Marxism'; but, returning to South Africa after the war, despite his disappointment at the Nationalist victory in 1948 he did not take up the "revolutionary" cause. Indeed, at times (as I have noted in discussing his poetry of the 1960s and 1970s), he went too far in his pacifism by condemning the violence of the oppressed and the oppressor alike.

The assertion of 'a similarity between Christian millenarianism and a secular progressive view of history' has some merit, but there is one important doctrinal sticking point. In Christian theology, humans are sinners in need of salvation – without redemption through Christ, they are 'wretched' and 'sold as slaves to sin': 'For I know that good does not live in me – that is, in my human nature' (Romans 7:14-25). Butler saw the worst of this side of humankind during the war and under apartheid; moreover, he admitted that it was through an awareness of his own guilt and wrongdoing 'more than anywhere, that Christ speaks to my condition'. Gaus argues that what modern liberals share is a common view of human nature – a belief that 'if we know the nature of man, then we can design suitable political institutions'.⁴⁵ Modern liberal theory is thus 'a thesis about what we have it in ourselves to be, how this can be brought about and what occurs when it is not'. Even if the latter case allows for those aspects of human experience which are (with a nod to Hobbes) 'nasty, brutish and short', the liberal-minded individual generally has, as

⁴⁵ Gaus, *The Modern Liberal Theory of Man*, p.153.

Davenport puts it, 'a trust in human nature'.⁴⁶ Davenport considers liberal rhetoric 'less insulting to political humanity than the opposite tendency of assuming that egocentrism is the only valid key to political behaviour'. Butler, however – while no cynic – did view humanity with a healthy measure of cynicism.

Insofar as the modern liberal stance is that of the "enlightened man" maintaining a rationalist position, Stephen Watson has written that

from this belief in reason, along with the advance of science and the new self-confidence of the diligent bourgeoisie in nineteenth century Western Europe, stemmed a belief in progress, in an advancing civilization ... Following from this, liberalism believes that the main obstacles to human advancement and betterment are extrinsic or external – such as ignorance, or bad social conditions – rather than being intrinsic to man's nature.⁴⁷

Butler advocated education to overcome 'ignorance' and worked to improve 'social conditions', but he did not share this undiluted 'belief in progress'. His attentiveness to that side of human nature governed (both for better and worse) by irrational impulses, alongside his avowal of "a long view" identifying patterns of human behaviour repeated in myth and history, prevented him from a too-optimistic view of 'human advance and development'.

Jeffrey Butler and Deryck Schreuder describe modern liberal historical scholarship both as having 'a basic optimism that human beings *can* respond rationally and morally to the problems they create by their own deeds' and as giving 'high priority to evolution as the preferred mode of change' – a view that 'could be confidently held only if the recent past gave some ground for believing it to be possible'.⁴⁸ Thus, South African liberal historicists in the twentieth century responded to a 'social reality' that was 'intractable' by looking for 'retrospective explanations of *when things began to go wrong*'. Paul Rich opposes this view, suggesting that the 'scientism and positivism' that were 'endemic' to the liberal ideology from

⁴⁶ Davenport, 'The Cape Liberal Tradition to 1910', p.34.

⁴⁷ Watson, *The Liberal Ideology and Some South African Novelists* (Masters thesis. University of Cape Town, 1980), p.69.

⁴⁸ Jeffrey Butler and Deryck Schreuder, 'Liberal Historiography Since 1945' in *Democratic Liberalism in South Africa*, p.164 and p.150 (their emphasis). They criticise those forms of liberal scholarship which, based on a 'vague optimism', believe that 'human regeneration' will ultimately 'happen along certain patterns'; this should not be confused with the tension experienced by Butler between cyclical and linear patterns in history.

the early 1900s onwards dictated a decreasing concern for 'the historical past which was seen as the repository of South Africa's racial ills' and a focus instead on generating 'the correct political mechanisms on which to build a new harmony that that could eventually erode these atavistic legacies from another era'.⁴⁹ As we have seen, Butler's approach to history is not one that can be accommodated by either of these forms of liberal historicism. At best, we can attribute to Butler a version of Gadamer's 'bad infinity': limited improvement in human relations through individual and collective dialogue between opposing prejudices. Moreover, what Watson classifies as the 'secular' or 'prosaic' quality of the liberal ideology (it is 'not concerned with heights and depths, with the so-called dark side of life, with tragedy or transcendence') is anathema to the spiritual foundation of Butler's social and aesthetic principles.

The 'prosaic' nature of English-speaking white South Africa up until the 1950s and 1960s – a "community", if such a disparate group merited the term, that was largely oriented towards economic activity and was unreceptive to artistic pursuit – led Butler to invoke, in 'The Republic and the Arts', Matthew Arnold's reproach of the "Philistine" mentality.⁵⁰ This, in turn, has something of the bourgeois "commercial spirit" disdained by Mill and, in a different context, Alexis de Tocqueville. As Alan Kahan points out, although these founding fathers of the modern liberal sensibility were adamant that the rights of the individual be protected, they nevertheless rejected the individualism that accompanied the 'destruction of the society of orders':

Individualism favoured the commercial spirit by restricting the individual's perspective to his own and his family's needs, and by cutting off his attachments to the rest of society. Freedom from the need to consider others encouraged the concentration on material well-being characteristic of the commercial spirit.⁵¹

This is familiar territory. As I have indicated, probably the chief accusation currently laid against liberalism in South Africa is that it protects the economic interests of the wealthy white minority (although,

⁴⁹ Rich, *White Power and the Liberal Conscience*, p.56.

⁵⁰ See Butler, 'The Republic and the Arts', p.98.

⁵¹ Alan Kahan, *Aristocratic Liberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p.41.

given that the country is increasingly separated along lines of income rather than race, it would be more accurate to speak of the growing high-end consumer class). One of the pillars of neoliberalism is the operation of a free market, but enormous economic disparities suggest that “free” is a misnomer.⁵² As long as socio-economic inequalities prevail, the free market is only free for some – those who are, in turn, able to join the cult of consumerism.

Butler commended the economic enterprise of the ESSAs and their forebears on the grounds that business interaction is usually a precursor to social interaction in diverse societies.⁵³ Likewise, Colin Gardner, commenting on South Africa’s economy (‘with which, of course, many English-speaking South Africans have always been vitally concerned’) circa 1970, wrote that ‘commerce and industry may be creative and humanising forces’ insofar as apartheid ‘reveals its unnaturalness on a purely material and utilitarian level’; that is to say, because ‘certain aspects of apartheid seem irritating, unacceptable, even absurd’ to business people, those who did not oppose apartheid on ideological grounds might be inclined to reject it because of ‘economic pressures’, and thus, ironically, ‘material considerations ... have the ultimate effect of reminding people of their better impulses.’⁵⁴

This does not self-evidently lead, post-apartheid, to the claim that ‘South Africa changed largely through capitalism’. Equally, in a country of “two economies”, creating wealth for the few does not necessarily lead to a decrease in poverty for the many. Butler saw no panacea in the spiral of profit and spending; here, the economics of Hume and Smith must be modified by the moral skepticism of La Rochefoucauld – a reminder that human behaviour, and therefore market behaviour, does not always conform to the rationalist model. Even if his early flirtation with Marxism, which grew out of frustration with the economic disparities accompanying racial policies in South Africa, was short-lived (owing to his

⁵² As Blatchford phrases it, ‘making individual *economic* freedom supreme gives a rich person more power than a poor person – *diminishing* the absolute freedom of the poor’ (‘South African Neo-liberalism: The Anti-Politics Democrats’: 98).

⁵³ In *Richard Gush of Salem*, the roguish go-between Charlie (who nags at the settlers’ consciences like a Shakespearean fool) insists that ‘the sooner we forget about our side and their side of the river the better. One country! No frontiers! Free trade! Mix!’ (p.21)

⁵⁴ Gardner, ‘The English-speaking Whites’, p.45.

disillusionment with the monomania of Marxist ideologues and with the brutality of communism) the Fabianesque desire for an alternative to all-consuming capitalism remained. RH Tawney's advocacy of "the Functional society" would have appealed to Butler: a society that 'assigns to economic activity itself its proper place as the servant, not the master' of all other human activity.⁵⁵ Having grown up during the Great Depression, Butler was averse to the greedy accumulation of wealth and to excessive spending. As an older man, he was not poor, and he by no means renounced material interests and possessions acquired over the years; but his correspondence records indicate substantial financial support for local charities, educational funds for black students, miscellaneous community projects and even the families of prisoners.

The *caritas* of the Christian faith and the sense of responsibility towards others engendered by his parents and wider family meant that Butler's brand of liberalism was not one of unadulterated individualism (in the economic sense). When he described himself as a liberal in the Cape tradition, he was indicating his allegiance to the liberalism of another generation, one comparatively free from the taint of economic self-interest and political self-preservation. Yet one must be careful not to idealise old Cape liberalism or its heritage in "Christian" South Africa.

Davenport has brought into question Trapido's linking of nineteenth-century Cape mercantile interests with the objectives of the missionaries – 'the Christianity of free trade'.⁵⁶ Both, ostensibly, had the effect of increasing (or least advocating) the rights of 'black peasants' in the rural areas; but, as Davenport emphasises, their association also hints at a 'free trade of Christianity'. One can draw a line of continuity from this conveniently ambiguous form of Christianity to Gardner's observation that ESSA "Christians" were not, generally, very active in opposing apartheid – they were, at times, 'dismal'.⁵⁷ There is no doubt that many church-leaders and their congregations have played a crucial role as a nonracial and anti-segregational force in South Africa over the last two centuries; Monica

⁵⁵ RH Tawney, *The Acquisitive Society* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1933), pp.240-241.

⁵⁶ Davenport, 'The Cape Liberal Tradition to 1910', p.28. Along with 'liberal' and 'conservative', the third 'surrogate' to the term 'ESSA' as identified by Barker is, of course, 'Christian' (*English Academic Literary Discourse in South Africa 1958-2004*, p.126).

⁵⁷ Gardner, 'The English-speaking Whites', p.44.

Wilson went so far as to describe the 'glory' of the English and Scottish missionaries and the 'splendid roll' of black Christians in the nineteenth century who rejected 'an exclusive Church'.⁵⁸ Still, given that apartheid apologists sought Biblical justifications for separate development, and given the Calvinist-racist complex at the heart of Afrikaner nationalism, it is hardly surprising that large sections of the "Christian" population in South Africa saw no conflict between Christianity and apartheid. This was acknowledged by the Study Project on Christianity in Apartheid Society (Spro-Cas), which was in itself a leading (liberal) oppositional institution.⁵⁹

Moreover, irrespective of its Christian character, Cape liberalism was bound by its own limitations as much as the socio-historical context in which it ultimately foundered. First of all there is, according to Davenport, some difficulty in defending the notion of a growing British liberalism at the Cape at the same time that frontier wars were being fought. Then, even if one accepts the 'untarnished creed' of the 1830s and the constitutional principles of the 1850s, the last decades of the nineteenth century saw a sharp decline in liberal ideas and behaviours.⁶⁰ The discovery and subsequent mining of diamonds and gold, along with the development of 'capitalist farming' and a growing British imperial interest, destroyed the "great tradition": Cape liberalism was ill-equipped to deal with a new political economy, increasingly dependent on migrant labour, urbanisation and formalised segregation. Rich laments that 'liberals never fully grasped the implications of segregation, or how to oppose it' – and, indeed, they ended up endorsing it because of their sense that it was in the welfare and educational interests of black people to be kept "on the land" in rural areas rather than to live in towns.

This misguided "ruralism" is contained in Butler's rather condescending view that black people suffered in the process of urbanisation not simply because of gross neglect and even deliberate maltreatment by employers and city officials, but also because of something innate: they were unable to adapt to cities because urban 'laws

⁵⁸ Monica Wilson, 'The Future of Christian Churches in South Africa' in *English-speaking South Africa Today*, p.184 and p.191. At the same 1974 Grahamstown conference, Peter Hinchcliff delivered a longer defence of 'The "English-speaking" Churches and South Africa in the Nineteenth Century', *ibid.* pp.171-182.

⁵⁹ See Peter Randall (ed.), *Apartheid and the Church* (Johannesburg: Spro-Cas Publication No. 8, 1972).

⁶⁰ Davenport, 'The Cape Liberal Tradition to 1910', p.33.

and beliefs' were 'alien' to their culture, and 'there is nothing African in the powerful ferro-concrete of the white man's city'.

Butler admitted to 'traces of paternalism' in his work – typically, in South Africa, these have taken the form of racial stereotyping – and he cannot be altogether exonerated in this regard. Still, it is significant that he was not one of those liberals who, according to Margaret Legum, deny their own racial bias. For Legum (writing in 1996), while those white South Africans who did not oppose apartheid 'are open to the knowledge that their racist conditioning was powerful and pervasive', white liberals – especially those who grew up in 'liberal homes' and 'were taught to respect black people' and oppose race legislation – 'can genuinely believe they have no internalised racist heritage'. By contrast, we have seen that our subject, though he was proud of his liberal roots, was not blind to the limitations of his upbringing, or of his unconscious assumptions and conscious ruminations about race.⁶¹

Cape liberalism was not inherently non-racial. As the Cape colony grew to incorporate the Transkei and the Ciskei in 1865 and 1885 respectively, thus substantially increasing the percentage of potential black voters and resulting in the creation of four new constituencies, whites began to oppose a franchise with no colour-bar restrictions. Following this, the Cape Parliament 'systematically limited black representation', and by the turn of the century black voters were only being 'courted' by English and Afrikaans politicians because their votes could sway the 'delicate balance of power' following the Anglo-Boer or South African war.⁶² After 1908, when the re-enfranchisement of the Cape rebels led to a comfortable victory for the Afrikaner Bond, black voters 'became expendable in interwhite political conflict'.

According to Rich, despite the attempts by 'the inheritors of Cape Victorian liberalism' to 'reassess their political and ideological standpoint' and to take on a 'new role' between the wars – which would ultimately

⁶¹ Margaret Legum, 'I Was a White Liberal and Survived', *Watchdogs or Hypocrites?*, p.125. Legum also distinguishes between racism and race prejudice or race discrimination, a distinction she bases on power dynamics. While no race group is immune to some form of prejudice/discrimination – for no one can claim to have 'grown up without being affected by their culture' (we may recall Gadamer's comments on the inevitability of prejudice) – racism is constituted by discrimination allied with power (p.124). This is similar to Butler's warning against 'elevating our prejudices into sacred principles'.

⁶² Davenport, 'The Cape Liberal Tradition to 1910', pp.32-33.

result in the formation of the Liberal Party – they were too weak to be effective.⁶³ This does lead to a questioning of Legassick’s assertion that liberals were ‘agents of social control’, but it also speaks to a political “impotence” and even apathy (despite the more radical positions of ‘left-inclined liberals’). Liberal theorists developed a ‘nascent plural model’ that, in contrast to the ideas of their Victorian antecedents, was ‘rooted in pessimism’. Here again, Butler differed – not only on the question of pluralism, but also on the problem of apathy.

(iii) Patriotism and pluralism

Stephen Watson, in a 1980 study on *The Liberal Ideology and Some South African Novelists*, posits that there is a self-perpetuating, paralysing cycle intrinsic to the liberal dilemma. (He has since rescinded his Marxist, anti-liberal stance – to the point of affirming, in the Introduction to Butler’s *Essays and Lectures*, the ‘resurgence’ of liberalism in democratic South Africa – but the critique is nonetheless worth considering.) Liberals, the argument proceeds, are typically in a position of prosperity; they also believe in the autonomy of the individual. Yet the facts of poverty and oppression seem to undermine faith in freedom of choice – thus, liberals may feel guilty, both as a result of their privileged position and because their promotion of liberal ideas seems to have no effect on the socio-political reality of human suffering. Ultimately, they may perceive that their efforts to achieve justice and equality stem from this feeling of guilt, which is itself a further cause of guilt. Because of this ‘sensitive perception of the impure motives for most of his actions’, argues Watson, and because ‘from his usually “unengaged” vantage-point’ he has the ability ‘to see all sides of the problem’, the liberal ‘often enough ends up by not acting at all’.⁶⁴ The failure to participate heightens the ‘corrosive sense of guilt’, and so the cycle continues.

In much of his work Butler diagnosed, and attempted to remedy, the plague of guilt. Lionel Abrahams wrote in a review of Butler’s poetry that he had made the problematic place of white people in South Africa ‘peculiarly his own subject’ in that ‘his consciousness of it is not bounded

⁶³ Rich, *White Power and the Liberal Conscience*, p.8.

by guilt, although he early made several very strong pronouncements about white guilt.⁶⁵ This “early” Butler is described by the “later” Butler in *A Local Habitation*: a young lecturer at Wits University who had returned to South Africa from Oxford with self-consciously critical eyes, was disillusioned by the horrors of the Second World War, stunned by the National Party victory in 1948 and its political implications, and as a result felt ‘eaten up by introspection, white-anted with guilts and dreads’.⁶⁶ As we have read, when he returned to Oxford thirty years later to pursue research on *King Lear*, he again felt guilty for temporarily leaving his ‘mad land’ – musing as he did so that South Africans are ‘shadowed by guilt’. Some of Butler’s ‘guilts and dreads’ were personal, relating to his wife and family, but he did not allow the larger burden of “liberal guilt” to prevent him from taking meaningful action or making strong pronouncements within political or social spheres. Nor, indeed – as the epilogue to *Karoo Morning*, which calls into question the nature and use of white guilt over apartheid and its consequences, spells out – did he consider the (objectively valid) reasons for this guilt sufficient grounds to negate or overshadow those aspects of life in South Africa which merit affirmation or celebration. This is what Abrahams called Butler’s ‘visionary patriotism’.

The liberal standpoint has also been seen as one of sheer opposition; an outlook defined by negatives. Consider the contempt for “liberals” in nineteenth-century Russia – like Bazarov, the iconic nihilist in

⁶⁴ *The Liberal Ideology and Some South African Novelists*, p.76.

⁶⁵ Lionel Abrahams, copy of review of Guy Butler’s poetry (for the *Rand Daily Mail*) enclosed in a letter to Butler, 17th February 1976. NELM.

⁶⁶ Butler, *A Local Habitation*, p.149. ‘Elegy’ (l.l) records how Butler and his fellow servicemen of a “liberal” inclination would

nag at ironies: of how we’d come –
white Africans who artlessly abhorred
raw voices screaming from Berlin and Rome –
only to learn the bitter paradox
of trouble brewing, terribly, back home:
to help bring Freedom through the storms and shocks
to harbour in calm waters, victory won –
and then to run upon the selfsame rocks.

There is a resonance here with HIE Dhlomo’s poem ‘Not for Me’, which communicates the even greater frustration of black South Africans who contributed to and supported the Allied cause during the war:

I who helped and slaved in the protection
Of their boasted great civilization:
Now I sit in tears ’mid celebrations
Of a war I won to lose
Of a peace I may not choose.

See Chapman and Dangor (eds.), *Voices from Within* (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1982), p.59.

Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* (1862), who declares that there is not 'a single institution of contemporary life, public or private, which does not call for absolute and ruthless repudiation' – based on a perception that liberals reject others' beliefs while being unable to profess any of their own.⁶⁷ Dostoevsky, through the mouthpiece of "Prince S" in *The Idiot* (1868), berates the liberal because he

goes so far as to reject Russia; that is, he hates and strikes his own mother. Every misfortune and mishap of the mother country fills him with mirth, even with ecstasy ... If he has a justification, it is that he does not know what he is doing, and believes his hatred of Russia is the grandest and most profitable kind of liberalism ... of late [liberals] have grown more candid and are ashamed of the expression "love of country", and have annihilated the very spirit of the words as something injurious and petty and undignified.⁶⁸

The extremist gesture of 'South Africa rejection' (to use Abrahams' phrase) has no place in Butler's work, even when his anti-apartheid stance is most clearly expounded. At the same time as stressing 'the need to cultivate self-criticism of a deep and radical kind' in order to end social and political injustices, Butler also proposed

the necessity for generosity of mind, the habit of acknowledging a debt, of saying thanks, of giving praise. I am glad I was born a South African, I am grateful that I live in a multi-racial country. I freely acknowledge my debt to all my countrymen. A little nervously, I give thanks that we have been placed in a situation which demands the best we have to give.⁶⁹

Butler's decision to remain in South Africa rather than join an increasing number of intellectual émigrés and writers-in-exile bears testimony to this commitment to foreground the "local" – a commitment balanced by his artistic credo, as described by Muriel Bradbrook: 'Fidelity to what is known in one place brings larger reverberations.'⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Ivan Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons* (1862), trans. Rosemary Edmonds (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p.70.

⁶⁸ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot* (1868), trans. Eva Martin (London: JM Dent & Sons, 1940), pp.319-320.

⁶⁹ Butler, 'The Development of a South African National Character', p.97.

⁷⁰ Bradbrook, "'A dome of many-coloured glass": The Lyric Poetry of Guy Butler', p.164. The option of self-imposed exile presented itself to Butler repeatedly over the course of his career – most forcefully in 1959, the "crisis year". *A Local Habitation* (p.234) highlights Butler's article on 'Why I am Not Leaving South Africa', printed under the headline 'My Ancestors Stuck It Through Thick and Thin'. The consequences of his decision to remain in the country can be contrasted with the experiences of the (many) South African writers who chose to emigrate. See, for instance, David Wright's 'The Weaver-bird's Nest: Homage to Guy Butler' in *Olive Schreiner and After*, p.214.

(Tangentially, it may be noted that this ‘fidelity’ in fact pre-empts the call by Isabel Hofmeyr, in her censure of the “liberal” English cultural establishment of the 1970s, for ‘greater historical sensitivity and acumen in South African literary studies in order, among other things, to give specific and historical grounding to such notions as archetypes and myths as well as to test large generalizations’.⁷¹)

The ability to balance criticism with endorsement – to find subjects worthy of praise as much as objects worthy of censure – is, according to Denis Beckett, something that liberals had to foster in the early years of African National Congress (ANC) government. The task of challenging government in order to prevent abuses of power is one of the most important that the liberal can perform.⁷² But, Beckett argues, this in itself is not sufficient, and an excess of it becomes self-defeating:

I take it that some portion of the proper liberal role is to make people cross with you. You’ve got to be a gadfly, and if the rump of state does not get irritated it’s a gadfly with a lousy sting. But you don’t want to be a sheer irritant ... we need to flavour the rigidity of pure principle with a pinch of common sense ... Look at the very connotations of the word “liberal”, which outside the political context is taken to mean gentle, generous, nice. But put the political wrapping around it and we become a bunch of porcupines, prickly and uptight and high on intellectual meticulo.⁷³

Notwithstanding Beckett’s call for an appropriate measure of appeasement, it is disturbing to hear critics of the state in post-apartheid South Africa branded by government officials and supporters (creating an unfortunate echo of the old Nationalist response to dissenting voices) as “unpatriotic”. This is, of course, a well-rehearsed tactic in all forms of government, democratic or otherwise – as any American who has fallen foul of the Patriot Act will confirm. In a country such as South Africa, however, the protection of the rights and freedoms contained in a liberal

⁷¹ Hofmeyr, ‘The State of South African Literary Criticism’: 47. Hofmeyr specifies two examples: firstly, the idea of the frontier, and secondly, the noble savage figure. Butler’s work on settler history, for instance, does not depend on ‘the concept of the frontier as involving exclusively relations of racial conflict’ or ignore ‘evidence of conflict as well as cooperation that hinge more around the availability of land and labour than race as some *a priori* category’. The noble savage aspect is more problematic – as I have demonstrated, Butler’s recourse (whether conscious or not) to this motif did at times, as Hofmeyr puts it, ‘pander to white nostalgia by representing a pre-industrial golden age’.

⁷² Andrew Foley, writing in 1991, suggested that WESSA liberals could play an important “oversight” role post-liberation: ‘the need for autonomous, informed, sceptical assessment of the conduct of whatever fresh government takes power is one of indefinite duration’ (‘The White English-speaking South Africans’: 22).

constitution depends largely on an awareness of the conditions of unjust rule from which its citizens have only recently escaped. Butler's warning against submission to the 'tribalism' of the apartheid era remains cogent.⁷⁴

On the one hand, tribalism refers to Butler's experience of nationalism in both Africa and Europe, which taught him that 'we cannot meet each other through our nationalisms'. This results from and further entrenches tribalism: the delineation of group identities in a way that leads to conflict or separation. Rather, individuals and groups must meet 'on the tacit or open understanding that they are [humans] before they are Germans or Frenchmen, or whites or blacks.'⁷⁵ On the other hand, tribalism also denotes an attitude of dumb obedience; Butler accused ESSAs living under apartheid of

becoming as tame as tribesmen in our fear of the authority of the state. I am shocked that so many of us fear to use our minds and to speak them. It may be in the interests of politicians to have a docile, timorous electorate; it is certainly not in the interests of the nation. Politicians are our servants, not our chiefs.

If tribalism as the invocation of group identities or nationalisms remains a divisive influence, then tribalism as the reluctance to accept differences of opinion has also been visible in recent South African events. Xolela Mangcu is among those who have attempted to address the vexed question of a national identity in post-apartheid South Africa from a broadly liberal position.⁷⁶ Mangcu grants that common values and goals are needed in pursuing the vision of an African Renaissance, but warns that an insistence on solidarity – towing the ruling party line or blind loyalty to struggle affiliations – often deadens individuals' critical senses such that the very idea of alternatives is banished from public life (as has been seen, variously, in HIV/AIDS policies, the Zimbabwe question, and various high-profile corruption scandals). In establishing a methodical political culture inside and outside of party politics, he argues, we need to safeguard and cherish pluralism even as we pursue the idea of a national

⁷³ Denis Beckett 'More Rose, Less Thorn', *Sidelines*, 1995. *Watchdogs or Hypocrites?*, p.78.

⁷⁴ 'The Development of a South African National Character', p.95.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p.93.

⁷⁶ Xolela Mangcu, 'The Quest for an African Identity, Thirty-seven Years On' (Steve Biko memorial lecture, Rhodes University, June 2004. Available at <http://www.ru.ac.za/> and accessed August 2004).

consensus; pluralism is, in fact, a precondition of consensus, which assumes heterogeneity of opinion.

John Gray has argued that liberalism has ‘two faces’ (that is, two philosophies):

In one, toleration is justified as a means to truth. In this view, toleration is an instrument of rational consensus, and a diversity of ways of life is endured in the faith that it is destined to disappear. In the other, toleration is valued as a condition of peace, and divergent ways of living are welcomed as marks of diversity in the good life. The first conception supports an ideal of ultimate convergence on values, the latter an ideal of *modus vivendi*. Liberalism’s future lies in turning its face away from the ideal of rational consensus and looking instead to *modus vivendi*.⁷⁷

For Gray, then, a plural model is not a temporary measure while societies become homogeneous – it is necessarily a permanent state. The twenty-first century is no less defined by the clash of ideologies than the twentieth was, with religious and cultural fundamentalism brought to the fore because of, rather than despite, globalisation; people will continue to hold different world views, and only a pluralism that does not expect ‘rational consensus’ on single set of beliefs is sustainable.

Nonetheless, the liberal emphasis on pluralism is complicated because, as I discussed with relation to Zygmunt Bauman’s *Legislators and Interpreters* (in Chapter Four: II), pluralism can potentially be used as an apology for racial and other forms of segregation. This has particularly been the case in South Africa. Paul Rich is careful, however, to distinguish the pluralist discourse of inter-war liberals such as Alfred Hoernlé from the ‘ethnically-based federalism’ or ‘consociationalism’ put forward by some liberals that was adopted to a degree by P.W. Botha in the 1980s (and which was subsequently appropriated by, for instance, cessationists who made a so-called “liberal” case, based on minority rights, for the establishment of an Afrikaner homeland or “boerestaat”).⁷⁸

Rich characterises the anthropological approach to black South African communities taken by liberals in the 1930s as one which resisted the ‘incorporation into a single homogeneous social model implied by

⁷⁷ John Gray, *Two Faces of Liberalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), p.105.

⁷⁸ Rich, ‘A New South African Liberal Conscience?’: 9.

racial assimilation'.⁷⁹ Yet at the end of the 1970s, Hofmeyr expressed the frustration of the "left wing" with members of the English liberal-literary establishment: 'As with most tradition-builders, the practitioners of South African literature have attempted to pass off their class-based tastes, preferences and predilections as universal'.⁸⁰ Did Butler find the middle ground, where racial integration does not result in cultural assimilation?

Perhaps he was, as an institutional figure, guilty in some measure of "universalising". Butler was temperamentally and intellectually opposed to concepts of "universality" that undermined the value of the local (claiming that neither Shakespeare nor Rembrandt 'is less English or less Dutch for being universally acknowledged'), but he did, after all, state that 'those who handed our civilisation on to us believed in its universal validity, and that they were given the task to spread it, to give it to all men'.⁸¹ These assertions were made, however, in 'The Development of a South African National Character' (1961), in the context of arguing *against* "separate development" and *for* the synthesis that could arise if African and European cultures were allowed to meet without the constraints of apartheid.

If he did not have enough faith in humans to commit entirely to the notion of rational consensus, Butler did consistently affirm that 'competing positions' could and should be 'reconciled'; Europe and Africa were not, for him, 'irreducibly different worlds' because they might be fused in a new South African nation. Nevertheless – despite Butler's ironical comment that a 'coffee-coloured race' would be desirable if this was the result of ending racial segregation, or his reference to 'the curse of the African babel' – he did not desire racial, cultural or linguistic homogeneity. Indeed, Foley sees his 1985 lecture on 'English and the English in the New South Africa' as arguing for 'a broader poly-ethnic base

⁷⁹ See Rich, *White Power and the Liberal Conscience* pp.54-76.

⁸⁰ Hofmeyr, 'The State of South African Literary Criticism': 43.

⁸¹ Foley, defending the 'liberal-based approach to literature' from Tony Morphet's accusation that it seeks to identify a 'universalising moral pattern' in literary texts – emerging 'not from individuals or a class or a place or a time but from a hypothesised universal, transcendental mind' – affirms that this is absurd because the 'essence of liberalism' is its focus on individuality ('Liberal Democratic Values and Cultural Practice in a Changing South Africa', *Pretexts* 4 (1992): 57). This resonates with Butler's position, although Foley's discussion of *values* in literature does hint at a Leavisite approach to literary study that Butler disputed.

for liberal democratic thought' in this country.⁸²

While the conventional (European) liberal emphasis on individual autonomy and private property may require some adaptation to acknowledge different (African) conceptions of the body politic, liberalism need not be considered antipathetic to traditional "Africanist" or socialist philosophies that are group- and community-oriented. For Butler, the reciprocity of social relationships implied by this orientation (*umuntu ngu muntu ngabanye abantu*, a person is a person because of other people) does not automatically lead to the quasi-Marxist view that the self is a derivative of the collective; instead, it can give expression to both Christian and liberal humanist principles – the biblical command to "Do unto others ..." and the more secular ideal of "civil association" are respective examples – foregrounding the interaction between one individual and another.⁸³ Likewise, Butler felt that an awareness of group identity (language, culture, history) was necessary if individuals from South Africa's different groups were to engage with each other. As an artist, furthermore, he yearned for an audience or readership with a 'sense of sharing a common life': great drama depends on spectators whose joint experience of watching a play 'preserves their unity and allows them to be transformed into a "crowd"', while writers crave 'the assurance that they are speaking on behalf of some community'.⁸⁴

Essentially, however, as we have seen, he remained committed to prioritising the value of *history* – of life as lived and experienced by individuals – over the grand movements and major events painted on the broad canvas of *History*. Unity does not require conformity: 'The notion that the opinions of people in the mass are healthier and morally superior to those of individuals' is, according to Butler, 'a popular and damaging myth'.⁸⁵ As for democracy, 'All that democratic procedures can do is to let us know what most people at any particular time want. What they want

⁸² Foley, 'The White English-speaking South Africans': 23.

⁸³ Rich suggests that *ubuntu* is a form of liberalism ('A New South African Liberal Conscience?': 20). In *The Prophetic Nun*, Butler quotes Ernest Mancoba's equation of *ubuntu* with Christian discipleship (pp.114-115). Oakeshott's description of "civil association" can be found in *On Human Conduct* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p.183.

⁸⁴ Butler, 'The English Poet in South Africa', quoted by van der Mescht in *The Poetry of Guy Butler*, p.13. A slightly modified version appears in *Essays and Lectures*, pp.45-50.

⁸⁵ Butler, 'High Corner (13)', p.30.

can be very wicked indeed. Hitler got into power on a plebiscite.’ It may be somewhat histrionic to cite this particular historical case, but the underlying sentiment is that an electoral system is not the only indicator of a free or just society. When Butler referred to the ‘democratic habit’ of the 1820 settlers, he had in mind a rights-based individualism that simultaneously required of those individuals an interest and involvement in all areas of social activity: a habit of participation in community affairs, of open debate, of committees and of consultation – even of the mundane but necessary functioning of an efficient bureaucracy.⁸⁶ Butler’s liberalism not only demands the protection of individual autonomy but also develops a spirit of mutual responsibility; it espouses the liberal principles of opposition to state hegemony and of tolerance for different viewpoints (what Enslin, in educational terms, calls ‘the development of critical thinking on the one hand, and the promotion of respect for cultural diversity on the other’), but it seeks to transcend even these principles through religious faith and through art.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ As an old man, Butler expressed concern not about changing government policy but about the administrative consequences of the transition: ‘My single greatest source of pessimism [about the future of South Africa] is the total collapse of our civil service into a treacle of clerical incompetence!’ (Letter from Guy Butler to Jeff Butler, 9th November 1993.) In the letter, Butler describes the frustration he experienced in trying to facilitate the acquisition of housing for some of the residents of the townships outside Grahamstown.

⁸⁷ Enslin, ‘Contemporary Liberalism and Civic Education in South Africa’: 78. For Enslin, the conflict between these two principles is the major challenge facing civic education in diverse societies.

CONCLUSION: Flowers of synthesis

Towards the end of *The Prophetic Nun*, Butler quotes at some length from Ernest Mancoba, including an observation that ‘in Africa as in Ancient Greece, you are only a Man when you, like Homer’s hero Achilles ... are able to conquer yourself, and at last, see in the enemy himself, yourself, in his old white-haired father, your own.’¹ For Butler, Mancoba’s ‘double heritage’ is proof of the legacy left by the artist-activist nuns; it no doubt gave him great satisfaction that Mancoba identified the same parallels with ancient Greece on which he had first declaimed thirty years before. There is, of course, an important difference in phrasing. Mancoba’s act of seeing ‘in the enemy himself, yourself’ does not carry the connotations of Butler’s racial alignment as professed in ‘The Republic and the Arts’: white people ‘dread’ black people because they symbolise ‘an anti-self’. Yet we should not dwell too much on the limitations of the Apollo-Dionysus model. Butler acknowledged that it was inaccurate to essentialise Europe and Africa, but did so – insisting all the while that ‘primitive, savage and barbaric’ are not necessarily ‘pejorative’ terms, while ‘civilised, European and Western’ are not necessarily ‘words of praise’ – for two reasons. Firstly, it provided an impetus towards the cultural synthesis that would accompany and facilitate the reversal of socio-political conditions prevailing under apartheid: a synthesis that is, to an extent, being enacted in South Africa today. Secondly, it was an expression of a personal quest for identity and, simultaneously, an artistic credo. If it is true that ‘in all of us two continents collide’ (‘Home Thoughts’) then this ‘basic dualism’, as Czeslaw Milosz proposes, is a spur to the artist’s creativity: ‘Whoever has had the occasion to experience that controversy in his own soul will agree that contradictions can be fruitful.’²

The second of these twin strands is foregrounded in Butler’s essay, ‘A Search for Synthesis’. In the completed draft of this piece – it was shortened appreciably by the time it was published in 1984 – Butler dwells on a little known poem, ‘To an Artist Friend, Florence, 1947’, describing it

¹ *The Prophetic Nun*, pp.114-115. Mancoba was speaking in acceptance of an honorary doctorate (University of the Western Cape, 1994).

² Milosz, *Native Realm*, pp.89-90.

as ‘a serio-comic early articulation of concerns which are still with me’.³ Indeed, this verse letter from ‘a would-be poet’, Gus, and ‘an amateur, since-defunct painter’, Corduroy (‘two sides of my nature in debate’) contains or alludes to subject matter that would preoccupy Butler throughout his writing life.⁴ There is the need for close attention to indigenous ‘Geography’ in order to foster an indigenous English literature in which the symbols of Africa will have a symbolic resonance: ‘climate, flora, fauna, such/matter, artistically, much’. There is “the mind in the cave” who paints ‘on the rock/dim palimpsests of beast and buck’, archetypal precursor to the would-be African artist. The drawings left by this ‘primitive artist’ point to Africa as the cradle of humankind but also indicate continuity: an ancient artistic tradition independent of European settlement (‘excellent and accurate’ eyes, ‘trained by our air and sun/before white Africa began’) that can be revived. This is the argument presented by ‘The African Renaissance – A Long View’, over fifty years after Butler first penned the letter from Gus to Corduroy, as the aged author found himself ‘getting deeper and deeper in Stone Age art and hominid debate and speculation’.⁵ There is the idea that, in order to engage with Africa and its people – in order to become an African – the ESSA must ‘find out just what you think you mean/... by “European”’; that is to say, explore your origins and heritage (the culture from which you have been dislocated) as a preliminary step to understanding your new African identity.⁶

There is also the exhortation to be uninhibited in responding to and revelling in sense-data:

So, open your senses, let things seep
 into the mind’s absorbing deep.
 There Africa and Europe will
 coalesce and fuse until,
 suddenly, out of your brain’s abyss
 will shoot the flowers of synthesis.

³ Butler, ‘A Search for Synthesis’ (draft typescript, August 1982), p.1. NELM. The poem is in fact titled ‘To an Artist Friend, Florence, 1944’ in this version, but the year is 1947 in Butler’s *Collected Poems*.

⁴ Butler assigns the name “Corduroy” to two separate coloured characters in *A Rackety Colt*; perhaps in ‘To an Artist Friend’ the nickname is given to the painter as an indication of “mixed identity”.

⁵ Butler, letter to David Butler, 12th May 2000. NELM. Butler was then in the final year of his life, writing to his son, ‘If only my legs were as lively as my mind.’

⁶ The *Collected Poems* version reads ‘find out what you feel and mean’, not ‘what you think you mean’.

Yet, Butler admits in the original version of 'A Search for Synthesis', the 'confident belief' that 'a generous receptivity' forming 'a properly composted unconscious' which will, in turn, 'spontaneously perform the task of artistic symbiosis and creation' is naïve.⁷ 'Give yourself to Africa', urges Gus – but simply to 'stare long at her' (absorb African sense-data) is not enough; the artist must also 'learn discipline' (or, as Butler puts it in 'A Search for Synthesis', be 'prepared to go to school all over again').⁸ The essay also quotes from 'Home Thoughts', rescinding that poem's description of South Africa as a 'land of artless shapes/where no ghosts glamorise the recent graves'.⁹ Butler regrets his 'blindness and deafness to my own and others' ghosts, shades, *izinyanya* and *amadlozi* but modestly affirms that this ignorance 'is no longer absolute'.¹⁰ He is, of course, overstating the case – even before he took on the mantle of academic, Butler was never a purely "sensory" poet or painter, pursuing interests in history, anthropology and archaeology with a scholarly rigour – but he emphasises a concerted effort to familiarise himself with the histories and cultural practices of South Africans (quite apart from his research "speciality" in 1820 settler and Eastern Cape history) as an example of the diligent effort required to achieve synthesis.¹¹ It is easy to live according to our prejudices against those from different cultural, racial or national groups, for to do so is merely to indulge the pleasure principle; it is more difficult, but necessary, to overcome this instinct with a deliberate attempt to engage with these "others".

⁷ 'A Search for Synthesis' (draft typescript), p.3. 'I was deep into Freud and Jung at the time', adds Butler in parenthesis – a fascination recounted in *A Local Habitation* (p.146). Jung himself wrote that synthesis or 'wholeness' is 'not achieved by cutting off a portion of one's being, but by integration of the contraries' (*San Francisco Jung Institute Library Journal* 10 (1, 1991): 24).

⁸ 'A Search for Synthesis' (draft typescript), p.4.

⁹ Butler also notes that when, early in his career, he spoke of 'turning Africa into art', he was not making the 'arrogant' suggestion 'Africa has no art'; the 'context' was one in which 'the art of poetry in my mother tongue, English, a language which is fairly new to Africa' had to develop – partly through learning from 'African poetry and folk lore' (*ibid.*, p.6).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.16.

¹¹ As Akal phrases it, 'Butler was acutely self-conscious of the fact that, in purely cognitive terms, a colonisation process had taken place within his own consciousness and it was a mental subjugation he was intent on decolonising' (*Forms of Community Service*, p.263).

Thus, Butler reasons, synthesis can only be ‘achieved consciously’.¹² Jonathan Hyslop suggests that Butler speaks to current issues of nation-building because ‘in thinking through South African identity’ he did not ‘fall back on simplistic tropes of indigenism’:

Butler does not provide clear solutions to national identification, but because his work treated being South African as something that was to be created through cultural effort rather than as naturally given, it in some senses anticipated the debates of today.¹³

The question of whether or not a common national identity can (or should) in fact be ‘created’ invites antagonistic answers. In a 1995 article, JM Coetzee poured cold water on the celebrations following South Africa’s victory, as hosts, of that year’s Rugby World Cup: global sporting events typically present a ‘mime-show of war among nations’, and the World Cup in South Africa in particular ‘was unabashedly promoted as a nation-building exercise’.¹⁴ The organisers, Coetzee argued, employed the concept of a “Rainbow Nation” as a ‘master-image’, a ‘self-aware ... ideological term’ that would ‘reverse the mindset of a population locked by its former masters into ethnic-political compartments’. This ideology is flawed because ‘it predicates the nation as a mental construct and nationhood as a collective state of mind’, ingenuously trusting that ‘if a group of people can be encouraged to believe they are a nation and to act together as a nation, then they are a nation.’ It was inappropriate that the national rugby team and the event as a whole were used to ‘promote the idea that a nation and a national consciousness are to all intents and purposes the same thing, and therefore that sounds and images, if numerous enough, can create a nation’. The opening and closing ceremonies were pageants presenting a ‘de-historicised vision of Tourist South Africa’, a new form of national mythologising not altogether different to that of the old regime: the spectacles demonstrated that ‘today’s image-makers and image-

¹² ‘A Search for Synthesis’ (draft typescript), p.16 and *Essays and Lectures*, p.207. In ‘The Development of a South African National Character’, Butler did express the belief that ‘a common national character cannot be consciously cultivated’ (p.93), but this was in an address to the apartheid-driven Bureau for Racial Affairs; Butler was undermining the Bureau’s attempt contrive a “national character” of white English-Afrikaans unity while maintaining racial segregation.

¹³ Hyslop, ‘An Anglo-South African Intellectual’, pp.213-214.

¹⁴ JM Coetzee, ‘Retrospect: The World Cup of Rugby’, *Southern African Review of Books* 38 (July/August 1995): 21.

marketers have no interest in complex realities' because 'their trade is not in reality at all: it is in what they call perceptions. In this respect they are continuous with the people behind the South African government of the 1980s', apartheid apologists who created 'a theatre of images' to foster (Afrikaner) nationalist feeling and blind loyalty to the state.¹⁵

The Rugby World Cup is one example among many attempts to build national unity on the "rainbow" model, and there are those who would vehemently disagree with Coetzee, defending campaigns that aim to elide South Africa's different racial, cultural and linguistic groups into an umbrella identity.¹⁶ Butler would have concurred with Coetzee that "branding" South Africa through exoticism and the excision of disquieting historical actualities will not establish an authentic national identity, or set of identities; but he did insist that a conscious effort of the imagination was required if 'flowers of synthesis' were to grow amongst South Africa's disparate peoples.¹⁷ A uniform national identity or mentality is by no means desirable, as Butler could attest after his experiences on the battlefields of World War Two – any advocacy of patriotism must avoid nationalist extremes. Just as multi-party politics is of paramount importance in protecting political freedoms, so cultural and linguistic groups must maintain distinct identities in order to prevent the development of a monoculture. Over-familiar terms such as "New South Africa" and "Rainbow Nation" have, at best, ceased to invigorate and, at worst, ring hollow to those who hear them; all the more reason, then, to invoke those moments in South African history when the almost inconceivable notion of a mixed society was presciently envisioned without recourse to the conceptual myopia of neo-nationalism. Consider Butler's

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.22.

¹⁶ Ongoing debates about the constituent states of the European Union are also informative in this regard – what, after all, is "European" identity? In *The Meaning of Europe*, Michael Heffernan points to the Treaty of Westphalia which, in 1648, attempted to define Europe by recognising and regulating a balance of power between its nation states; but the nations of Europe remained at war, and the diplomacy between state representatives – supposedly a mark of European "civilisation" – continued to fail. The only European identity that could be affirmed was a cartographical one: 'the logic of "We have made a civilisation, and called it Europe" gave way to "We are in a map-shape called 'Europe', and therefore we have a civilisation."' Europe was and is a geographical territory first, and a collective culture second. See Heffernan, *The Meaning of Europe* (London and New York: Arnold, 1998) and 'What is Europe?', *Guardian Unlimited*, 17th December, 2004 (online: www.guardian.co.uk, accessed 5th April 2006).

¹⁷ Butler may also have assented with Coetzee's view that the World Cup is an 'orgy of chauvanism' – he had, after all, never shown any aptitude on the rugby field, and his autobiographical writing suggests a distaste for the sport.

depiction, in 1961, of

a new idea of the South African nation, which, while allowing for and indeed encouraging certain group attitudes, accords to all the fullest possible participation in the privileges, responsibilities and rewards of the society.¹⁸

These are the measured but firm words of a man who, in speaking out against apartheid, would ‘unobtrusively persuade rather than seize the microphone and pound on the podium with rhetoric and exposition’.¹⁹ This description of Butler by Es’kia Mphahlele perhaps makes him seem more malleable than he was. Butler was not immune to polemic, but his stubborn insistence on a ‘new idea of the South African nation’ did not have the ‘belligerent, apocalyptic tone’ taken up by many other South African writers and intellectuals. These artist-activists were angry (as Mphahlele explains, ‘expression of anger is a way of defining yourself when your dignity is being undermined’) and cursed the aesthetes: ‘Damn art as a thing crafted, that we value mostly for layers of meaning and resonance!’ For Butler, however, the intellectual could not play the ideologue, and the artist had to carve a space free from politics. ‘Total politicisation’, he knew, destroys the soul – like the secularist tendencies of modernity, it removes the ‘cosmic references’ that provide continuity and consolation.²⁰

The year before he died, Butler wrote, ‘I keep returning to my intellectual or artistic roots, Athens and Jerusalem’.²¹ As “cradles of civilisation”, these twin symbolic centres of the pre-modern were matched in his mental topography with the “cradle of humankind” – South Africa’s synthesis denoting a form of redemption from the modern machine. In the same letter, he expressed concern that young black South Africans were losing ‘interest in their peoples’ past’ because of the distractions of ‘the blasted Global Village, of which Soweto is a smart suburb’.²² Here again,

¹⁸ ‘The Development of a South African National Character’, p.92.

¹⁹ Mphahlele, ‘The Function of Literature at the Present Time’ (1996), *Es’kia*, p.420.

²⁰ Butler, letter to LC (Lionel) Knights, 9th November 1976. NELM. Butler was referring to work he had done on *Coriolanus*.

²¹ Butler, letter to Jeff Opland, 14th August 2000. NELM.

²² *Ibid.* The correspondence is about Opland’s research into parallels between the traditions of praise poetry in medieval British (Scop) and isiXhosa (Imbongi) culture; Butler regrets that ‘in some places indigenous culture is kept alive only for the tourist trade. But this tide may turn.’ The “old man’s complaint” does, however, seem

the value of history and tradition is asserted: an awareness of the past is important not only in sustaining fecund ground for artistic and cultural activity, but also in the individual's ongoing quest for self-identity.

This double-headed pursuit characterised Butler's study of his own "African roots", the 1820 settlers, which in turn informed his challenge to contemporary ESSA society. Butler also claimed, however, that the Settler-Xhosa-Griqua-Boer encounters in the Eastern Cape had a metaphorical significance for subsequent South African experiences: while the frontier wars signified a failure in interracial engagement, there were also instances of peaceful trading and cultural transmission that offered a model for success. In 1956, alluding to the early apartheid legislation of the new Nationalist government, he wrote that 'South Africa is still a frontier society; our present constitutional crisis can be seen as springing out of the government's determination to establish or maintain certain frontiers.'²³ In 1980, discussing his descent from 'the old, almost forgotten Eastern Cape Frontier tradition, with its strong liberal and missionary admixture', he went even further: 'the nature of the frontier has changed and spread', and artists have a responsibility to 'take on the role of frontiersmen and/or interpreters'.²⁴ Even in 1994, in the wake of South Africa's first democratic elections, he reminded those who saw him accepting the Freedom of the City of Grahamstown: 'Every South African town is now a frontier town, and the legacies of the colonial and apartheid eras have to be solved by patient, scrupulous negotiation, rethinking and planning.'²⁵

Butler was involved in this process of 'negotiation' throughout his career, 'rethinking' the racial conflict in South Africa in both local and universal mythico-historical terms. He was more than that convenient but vague phrase, "cultural practitioner", suggests; he was a cultural politician, bringing art and scholarship to bear on contemporary public conflicts and infusing those conflicts into his artistic and scholarly work.

to ignore that it was the very processes of nascent globalisation which first brought together the ingredients of South Africa's synthesis.

²³ 'The English Poet in South Africa', p.48.

²⁴ Butler, draft of submission to the third (1980) edition of *Contemporary Poets*. Manuscript, NELM. One is reminded of the shifting role of intellectuals described in Bauman's *Legislators and Interpreters*.

²⁵ Butler, draft of acceptance speech for the Freedom of the City of Grahamstown (1994). NELM.

Such interplay, I have argued in this thesis – because he was throughout his long career a shifting point of reference for those navigating the South African English literary scene – makes Butler a key figure in assessments of literature-under-apartheid.

If he was a key figure, he was also at times a controversial one; and, as we have seen, he was rebuked by members of the academic community on various occasions. Christopher Doherty, offering a “genealogical history” of literary studies in South Africa, downplays the criticism Butler faced, both for his promotion of South African literature in the 1950s and 1960s, and for the supposedly neo-colonial attitudes of “Butlerism” in the 1970s and 1980s. With regard to the latter, Doherty argues, the effect of Mike Kirkwood’s 1974 attack on Butler was minimal because “Butlerism” had not spread to English departments outside Grahamstown: ‘Not only had Butlerism failed to impress the academic orthodoxy, it was unable to offer an acceptable response to the repressive activities of the apartheid state.’²⁶ This does Butler a disservice on two counts that I have attempted to demonstrate in the present study. Firstly, adopting the term “Butlerism” on Kirkwood’s terms limits Butler to certain narrow aspects of a particular cultural programme which was, in itself, only one feature of a wide-ranging career. Secondly, as I have shown, Butler’s life – on the public platform, and in private activities – actually did constitute a substantial challenge to the apartheid state.

As for Butler’s campaign to give indigenous South African literature more stature, both on educational syllabi and in bookshops, Doherty proposes that even when Butler was ‘a lone voice calling for attention to texts of South African origin’, he was ‘too conciliatory at the level of literary value, continuing to acknowledge the superior quality of the great English texts.’²⁷ This is a questionable assertion. Insofar as Butler’s approach was ‘conciliatory’, this may be expected from a young academic confronting a conservative orthodoxy (as happened at the 1956 conference of writers, publishers, editors and university teachers of English held at Wits University), or, years later (at the 1969 English Academy conference in Grahamstown, for instance), from an established “institutional” figure

²⁶ Doherty, ‘Research versus “Prac. Crit.”’, pp.54-55.

choosing to ‘persuade rather than ... pound on the podium’, as Mphahlele has it.

In 1956, Butler sided with William Plomer, RG Howarth and JJ Firebaugh in their advocacy of South African literature as a valid subject for university study – in this, he was indeed a lone voice as a South African academic, Plomer being based in England, Howarth having recently arrived at UCT from Australia and Firebaugh visiting from America. The alarmed reaction (the ‘animus’, as Geoffrey Haresnape describes it) of those affirming a ‘conservative Anglocentric approach’ demonstrates that this stance was perceived as a threat to the very foundations of English literary studies in post-war South Africa.²⁸

By 1969, when the second English Academy conference focused on ‘South African Writing in English and its Place in the School and University’, South African literature was to a degree established in English departments; but the title of the conference itself suggests that the matter was up for debate, and Haresnape describes Butler’s opening address on ‘The Purpose of the Conference’ as marked by ‘caution, and even defensiveness’, attesting to ‘the opposition he was still sensing from many colleagues’.²⁹ Speaking as President of the Academy, Butler introduced one of the ‘likely points of difference’ at the conference by referring to the ‘non-committal modesty of the phrase’ in the conference title (“writing”, as opposed to “literature”) and asking the question: ‘At what point does a body of writing become a literature?’³⁰ Yet he insisted that, in order for local literature to flourish, it needed ‘serious academic attention’ – attention which was lacking circa 1969.³¹

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.52.

²⁸ Geoffrey Haresnape, ‘The Battle for the Books: The Evolution of the Academic Criticism of South African Literature in English 1956-1976’, *English Studies in Africa* 31 (1, 1988): 44-45. Partridge’s (ed.) *Proceedings of a Conference of Writers, Publishers, Editors and University Teachers of English, Johannesburg, 1956* gives some idea of the heated discussion that followed each paper.

²⁹ *Ibid.*: 46. The speech is not included in Butler’s *Essays and Lectures* (instead, that volume records his conference talk on ‘Early South African Diaries and Reminiscences in English’) but the 1969 proceedings were published in *English Studies in Africa* 13 (1, March 1970): ‘The Purpose of the Conference’ is 11-20 and Butler’s ‘Summing Up’ of the universities’ symposium held at the conference is 189-190.

³⁰ Butler, ‘The Purpose of the Conference’: 12.

³¹ There are other aspects of Butler’s opening address – for instance, his suggestion that delegates at the conference should not ‘attempt to solve the great political and social problems that beset our land’ (17), or his return to the ideas expressed in ‘The Republic and the Arts’ (19) – which merit further discussion, but space constraints prevent this here. The reader is referred to my analysis of these elements in Chapter Four: I and Chapter Five: I.

The opposition Butler faced was most pronounced in the position taken by Philip Segal who, despite his own contribution (as occasional editor of *Contrast*) to the development of South African English literature, felt it was 'futile to try to manufacture a local English tradition marked in capitals, "Not Imported"' and saw little place for South African texts at the undergraduate level because 'the first task of an English department is to provide the students with a thorough introduction to the major works and the major periods of the history of English literature' and that, compared to 'the best' that literary study has to offer, South African prose and poetry is wanting in 'its general quality as literature'.³²

Others of a moralistic, Leavisite persuasion continued to defend the teaching of nothing but the canonical English "greats"; reactionary and anglophilic attitudes persisted. As late as 1976, Jack Cope would complain:

In every single English-speaking country the literature of that particular region is taken seriously at school and university levels. The fantastic exception is South Africa. Here the universities ... stand out as bastions of the colonial mentality. For them South African writing does not exist. South African writers are non-people.³³

Cope was careful to point to Rhodes University – driven by 'the keenness and dedication of Professor Guy Butler' – as one of few exceptions.³⁴

Ultimately, we must remember that Butler was crusading for local literature *as a local writer*. This invested his project with a passion for the "indigenous", but did not require him to reject the "alien" – such a rejection would be incomprehensible, not only because 'the great English texts' were fundamental to Butler's heritage and sense of identity, but also because literature is a trans-national as much as a national phenomenon. What Doherty views as Butler 'tacitly admitting the superiority of metropolitan literature' is the homage paid by a poet and dramatist to his poetic and dramatic precursors; it is by no means similar to Segal's

³² Philip Segal, 'The Place of South African Writing in the University', *English Studies in Africa* 13 (1, March 1970): 176-177. This volume of *English Studies in Africa* contains the full proceedings of the conference.

³³ Jack Cope, 'Notes' (editorial), *Contrast* 10 (4, August 1976): 93. Cope's remarks were first made at the South African Prose Conference (part of the UCT Summer School) convened by James Polley as a follow-up to 'Poetry '74'

³⁴ *Ibid.*: 94.

position that ‘permanent disturbance of the spirit’ – the ‘unforgettable intensity of art’ – is the preserve of great literature from the metropole, and that South African literature contributes little more than ‘local flavour’ to the ‘total [English] tradition’.³⁵

If we are to view Butler as first and foremost a writer, however, we must ask an awkward question: setting aside the extensive publishing record of his academic and cultural-political pursuits, is his creative literary “output” sufficient in itself to secure Butler a readership in posterity? Certainly, he may be regarded as South Africa’s most prolific poet of the Second World War; the poetic output stemming from his preoccupation with the Europe-Africa tension (within himself and in the country around him) contains insights and images that remain fresh; and his experimentation with various verse forms is of interest to the technically-minded reader of poetry. There are poems that achieve the transcendence from political and historical reality so often sought by Butler – a quality that enhances longevity, freeing the poet from the restrictions of “apartheid writing”. Even if, as has been pointed out, a prosaic style or a polemical tone occasionally weakens Butler’s poetry, it is likely that his name will continue to be remembered with Livingstone, Clouts, Delius and other white English poets of the post-war vintage.

His dramatic output remains bound in history.³⁶ It would require a highly imaginative director to bring the words as they currently exist on the page to life on South Africa’s stages. This is a pity, as the plays engaged audiences across four decades by addressing issues of race and reconciliation, revivifying ghosts from various cultural pasts, and entertaining with comic touches. Butler’s plays of the 1950s were among the first properly *South African* plays to be performed in English. Perhaps his most significant contribution as a playwright is the confidence he gave

³⁵ Doherty, *A Genealogical History of English Studies South Africa* (Master’s thesis. Natal/UKZN, 1990), pp.152-153; Segal, ‘The Place of South African Writing in the University’: 178.

³⁶ This is paradoxical, considering Malan’s verdict: ‘the ontological or religious vision offered in Butler’s plays’ compares unfavourably with the ‘instances of modern tragedy ... in the social and political realities of South Africa’ depicted by other playwrights (*Guy Butler: Poet and Dramatist*, p.235). One would expect that the atemporal ‘vision’ Malan describes would give the plays greater longevity; yet, quite apart from their shortcomings in dramatic terms, it is precisely because Butler did engage with ‘social and political realities’ from a given – necessarily limited – historical perspective that the plays are not oriented towards current audiences. Even by the 1980s (before *Demea* was staged), Butler’s original audience had ‘dwindled’, and ‘the worlds he created onstage’ were displaced from contemporary theatregoers (Malan, p.238).

to those who followed him, such as Athol Fugard, to “tell South African stories”. (The value of his work in establishing Speech and Drama as an autonomous academic field at South African universities – especially at Rhodes – is, of course, immeasurable.)

Butler’s prose is more difficult to assess. The autobiographies, particularly *Karoo Morning* and *Bursting World*, rank as his most popular works. Read and enjoyed initially by ESSAs both for their narrative appeal and out of a certain nostalgia, the books are now almost cultural artifacts. If *Thirst* sees publication, it may modify Butler’s public image somewhat. The *Tales from the Old Karoo* deserve to be read more widely – but, with stories based on (largely white) rural life of a bygone era, this is unlikely.³⁷ Similarly, *A Rackety Colt*, with its young settler hero, has not become the *Huckleberry Finn* for South African boys and girls that Butler had in mind. It is, nevertheless, worth noting how all of the above works constitute some form of “life writing”, that rather amorphous genre currently enjoying much popularity.³⁸

The overlap between Butler’s “fiction” and “real” people or places brings us to the definitively non-fiction work that constitutes the remainder of his oeuvre, from scholarly work on the 1820 settlers to the ‘amateur’s attempt’ of *The Prophetic Nun*. Butler also described his forays into evolutionary biology and anthropology (such as ‘The African Renaissance – A Long View’) as ‘an amateur’s reaction’. Here, in the final years of his life, having taken off the professorial or professional gown, he could pursue his interests in various fields under the more comfortable vestment of the erudite amateur. Although he found in Shakespeare studies an area of specialist research, Butler was temperamentally a generalist *savant* and a literary critic in the style of the anachronistic “gentleman of letters”.

As John Gross narrates in *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters* (1991), the institutionalisation of literary studies has led to increased

³⁷ The publication of Athol Fugard’s recent *Karoo and Other Stories* (Cape Town: David Philip, 2005) perhaps suggests otherwise. Nevertheless, Akal disagrees with my affirmation of the *Tales*’ literary merit: ‘[they] do not successfully manage the transfer of poetic intensity to the genre of the short story. Butler temperamentally is not a Herman Charles Bosman; his stories remain anecdotal without the surprise or suggestion possible to the short-story form’ (*Forms of Community Service*, pp.3-4).

³⁸ See the author’s ‘The Trouble with Life Writing: A New “Cult of Personality”’. *Scrutiny* 2 11 (1, 2006): 109-114.

specialisation such that ‘men of letters’ have given way to ‘academic experts’ at universities and ‘cultural functionaries’ in the public media.³⁹ Butler filled both of these roles; with his vocation as a writer, they formed a triangle of, at times, complementary and, at times, conflicting intellectual identities. Certainly, there were times that Butler felt the sheer scope of his activities prevented him from achieving greatness in any of them: his public responsibilities detracted from his writing, his position in the academy separated him from public life, and the ‘fatal Cleopatra’ of his poetry kept him from other intellectual pursuits. Taken singly, each of these aspects of Butler’s career could be considered disappointing – not a failure, and by no means mediocre, but simply less successful (insofar as success can be calculated by acclaim) than other South African “literary lives”. Collectively, however, they represent an enduring legacy. His assorted literary parts (poet, playwright, autobiographer, anthologist and historian) produced a considerable collection of published material. There are numerous contemporary enterprises that bear his mark as professor and cultural politician: the National Arts Festival, university departments and affiliated institutions of public culture across the country, literary journals and more. His public opposition to apartheid legislation and his private acts of goodwill are less quantifiable, as is his influence as mentor to generations of South African writers.

Taken as “one life”, then, the subject of this thesis merits a more substantial and celebratory tribute than his poem ‘Epitaph’ offers:

He strove, both in and out of season,
to use his modest gift aright;
still went on rhyming without reason
far into the night;
rhymes of the desperate word,
absurd
as the flounderings of a beheaded bird.

He hammered for help on the doors of the sky,
he heard the dead silence of God;
lost in the syntax of how and why
to and fro he trod.
At last he halted, numb,
struck dumb
by his long suspended sentence to the tomb.

³⁹ Gross, *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters*, p.9.

We cannot be sure whether Butler wrote this for himself in a moment of vocational and spiritual despondency (it dates to 1977), or whether it is a more impassive portrait of a real or imagined fellow-poet. Either way, the poem gives expression to two sources of anxiety that are alluded to elsewhere in Butler's work. The first is the possibility that his poetry (his literary creativity) is 'absurd' – that frustrations with his own writing result from 'the exhaustion of a small talent'. The second is the profound doubt accompanying his religious faith. 'A Search for Synthesis' dwells on this 'sceptical streak in my nature, as a result of which the excitements, dangers and gratifications of overwhelming convictions, religious or political, have been withheld from me'.⁴⁰ Yet in his conclusion Butler affirms that, precisely because 'I am capable of only limited, unheroic responses to party, church or state', such beliefs as he does hold 'have been granted to me':

I do not retain them by an act of will – the strength to hold them comes from what I take the source of those beliefs to be: the love of God for all men, and their limited ability to respond to it, and in responding to find each other.

'Synthesis' is thus related to 'sanctity', which is 'not entirely a matter of conscious choice'. Despite all his doubts, Butler maintained that Providence is a *sine qua non* of 'the creative role of conscious thought'. In terms of literature, or art, or aesthetic-intellectual activity more broadly, this 'creative role' is twofold. Gross insists that

the first qualification for being a good critic will always be an interest in literature for what it is, rather than for the ends which it can be made to serve. But the second qualification, no less essential, will be a commitment to the life which lies beyond literature, by which it must finally be judged.⁴¹

Butler's career – as writer, as critic, as "man of letters" – certainly meets these criteria. This reassessment of his life and work has attempted to show that, whatever the generational, cultural, linguistic or political

⁴⁰ 'A Search for Synthesis' (draft typescript), p.17.

⁴¹ *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters*, p.319.

distance between Butler and post-apartheid readers, he will remain a significant figure in the history of South African literature.

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