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FANTASY AND POLITICS IN SOUTH AFRICAN
LITERATURE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE
USE OF THE FANTASTIC IN SELECTED WORKS OF
CHRISTOPHER HOPE, IVAN VLADISLAVIC AND
ANDRE BRINK

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the way in which Christopher Hope, Ivan Vladislavic and Andre Brink make use of the fantastic to respond to and explore historical and contemporary South African realities.

In the Introduction, the imaginatively and aesthetically restricted nature of much English-language South African fiction during the apartheid era is examined. Many South African writers in English still seem unable to transcend these limitations. There is therefore a need for freer, more imaginatively charged literary approaches, such as the fantastic.

In the first chapter, reasons for many South African writers' and critics' antipathy to this mode are touched upon. Various definitions of the fantastic are discussed and the role that this mode, particularly in its carnivalesque aspects, can play in South African literature is considered.

In the second chapter, we see how, through his use of satire and black comedy, Christopher Hope emphasises the warped absurdities of life under apartheid. Authority is subverted and controls are eluded, as Hope suggests the possibility of creative, liberated ways of apprehending reality through his use of the carnivalesque.

The playful nature of Ivan Vladislavic's fantastical engagement

with 1980s and 1990s South Africa is manifested in the sense of Barthian jouissance his fiction evokes, his Nonsense elements and his teasing postmodern games with potential meanings. Sometimes his work suffers when intellectual concerns take precedence over their fictional realisation. More significantly, however, Vladislavic's fiction depicts carnivalesque freedoms that take place in spite of the various factors that appear to work against them.

Through fantastical re-imaginings of South Africa's past, Andre Brink seeks to reclaim the latter, offering visions of healing and reconciliation. But Brink is too self-consciously programmatic in his approach, and he is unable to bring his fantastic elements to life.

In conclusion, there are undoubtedly various difficulties associated with the fantastic and certain social, cultural and material factors presenting obstacles to the development of this mode in South African literature. Nonetheless, there is an ongoing need for the fantastic, with its special ability to investigate and illuminate aspects of this country's reality and to expand South Africans' still circumscribed imaginative horizons.

Felicity Wood, 15 February 2000

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INTRODUCTION: THE SOUTH AFRICAN LITERARY CONTEXT

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This thesis examines the way in which three writers, Christopher Hope, Ivan Vladislavic and Andre Brink, in four of his more recent novels, make use of the fantastic to explore the aspects of the South African historical and socio-political situation.¹ While these authors utilise fantastical features in very different ways in their work, their novels and stories are especially significant for the same reason: they represent a dramatic departure from long-established tendencies in South African fiction in English.

Obviously, this literature incorporates a range of very diverse texts, in which radical aesthetic and ideological differences, indicative of the heterogenous, divided nature of the society from which they arose, have seemed the norm. At first glance, a novel such as Nadine Gordimer's The Conservationist (1974) seems to have little in common with, say, Mongane Wally Serote's To Every Birth Its Blood (1981). Yet, for J.M. Coetzee, they have both been part of "a literature in bondage ... a less than fully human literature, unnaturally preoccupied with power and the torsions of power, unable to move from elementary relations of contestation, domination and subjugation to the vast and complex human world that lies beyond them" (1992: 98). If, as Coetzee suggests, South African literature has tended to be characterised by a sense of constriction and an avoidance of specific areas of human experience, this would obviously entail circumscribed aesthetic and imaginative expression.

At the outset, it needs to be established that certainly not all

writers in English have been fettered in the way that Coetzee refers to above. A collection such as Njabulo Ndebele's Fools (1983) encompasses a range of areas of experience, from the spiritual in "The Prophet" to the sensuous in "Uncle". In the latter story, as in the work of the Drum writer Casey Motsisi, we participate imaginatively in vibrant, spirited revelry that takes place despite, and even, at times, in defiance of the dull, brutal forces of political oppression that overshadow their protagonists' societies.

Yet, exceptions like these only serve to prove the rule. When we consider other South African novels and stories in English, it is clear that not many writers seem to engage with their country's reality in this way. While much English-language South African fiction in the past might be commended for its moral stance and courageous commitment--for being virtuous (in the best sense of the word)--finally it fails to satisfy one's sense of what life is (or indeed could be) like. Ultimately, all critical positions which are cultural criticism rest on a foundation like this, which, though it cannot easily be theorised, cannot ultimately be gainsaid. (One knows one is hungry if fed stones, rather than bread.)

Does this mean, then, that Coetzee is essentially accurate in his assertion? In order to evaluate this, we need to examine, at the outset, broader tendencies within South African literature in English. In doing so, we will also need to consider whether or not the type of qualities described by Coetzee are still in

evidence in fiction in English today. There are indeed a range of factors--preceding apartheid and extending beyond its demise--that lend weight to his judgement.

"A sense of space seems to have oppressed us in our souls as well as in our bodies", Nadine Gordimer lamented in 1973; "we have shut ourselves in" (39). Implicit in this perception is the belief that the state of physical, psychic and spiritual enclosure experienced by South Africans has contributed to a state of imaginative imprisonment. After all, the historical, social, political and cultural factors go back a long way. Firstly, there was the cultural isolation and deprivation that characterised South Africa's history as a colonised country. This extends back to the beginnings of colonial settlement and intensified over time, becoming particularly marked from 1948 onwards, when Nationalist government policies resulted in South Africa becoming increasingly shut off from the outside world. This isolation was, however, the result of both external forces and deliberate choices. In the latter case, it stemmed in part from the conservatism that has been an essential feature not only of Calvinist Afrikanerdom but also white English-speaking society in its complacent parochialism. It goes without saying that both these features were characteristic aspects of the South African reality long before the advent of apartheid.²

In consequence, aesthetic revolutions and other intellectual developments have been slow to take root in South Africa. Modernism is a case in point. In his autobiography, Bursting

World (1983), Guy Butler acknowledges the shock he felt on encountering this mode: "1939 was a painful year for me as a would-be writer. I was reading more modern poetry, and finding the generally anti-romantic and unheroic attitude difficult to accept" (99). That Butler, who was undoubtedly in the literary and intellectual forefront of his generation, should have responded to modernism in this way is indicative of the backward-looking nature of the cultural circles in which he moved. Although it could be argued that his reaction to modernism resembles many earlier European responses to this movement, the point is that, unlike writers in the latter societies, South African authors have tended, for the most part, to shy away from modernism until many decades after its European advent. In fact, it was only in the 1960s that modernism made its presence strongly felt in South African fiction--and in Afrikaans literature, rather than English, with the advent of the *Sestigers*.³

White writers suffered as a result of the conditions outlined above, but the situation was obviously far worse for black writers. They were cut off from international literary developments, including--and Lewis Nkosi argues that this was particularly damaging--from the literature that was being produced elsewhere on the African continent. Furthermore, unlike their white compatriots, they were deprived of the opportunity to travel and of easy access to higher educational institutions, which prevented them from gaining an awareness of contemporary aesthetic movements (Nkosi, 1998: 79-80).

The South African social and political context has affected the creativity of its writers in other ways. Any historical event (such as the Civil War in the United States) can generate dull, commonplace fiction just as easily as it can generate memorable works. However, the specific nature of the South African situation during apartheid gave rise to an imaginative environment particularly conducive to the growth of mediocre and uninspiring writing.

Ahmed Essop, for one, expressed the concern in 1984 that "[u]nder the pressure of a crushing social reality, there is the danger that the creative imagination may become restricted" (19). Gordimer, again, used similar imagery of incarceration and exclusion to convey the effect that life in a society based on principles of separation and isolation had on the literary imagination:

[L]iving in a society that has been as deeply and calculatedly compartmentalized as South Africa's has been under the colour bar, the writer's potential has unscalable limitations. ... [T]here are areas from which, by iron circumstance [black and white writers] find [themselves] shut out, even intuitively, to their mutual loss as writers (1973: 52).

Ironically, in this way South African literature tended to reinforce the concept of racial segregation. T.T. Moyana summed up the damaging effect of this in 1976, describing both black and

white writing as "one-eyed literature; concentrating on one section of the racial spectrum" (1976: 87). As his statement suggests, a slanted, skewed vision leads, all too easily, to stereotypes, fixed approaches and facile polarisations. Even as recently as 1989, Ndebele objected to a "socially entrenched manner of thinking about the South African reality ... an epistemology in which reality is perceived of in terms of a polarity of opposites" (1989: 41). Kaizer Nyatumba likewise complained of the way South African writing depicted, all too readily, "black and white South Africans falling into the categories of angels and monsters" (1992: 93). We encounter this tendency in a great deal of the "struggle" fiction of the 1980s, in aspects of works such as Sipho Sepamla's A Ride on the Whirlwind (1981) and Mbulelo Mzamane's Children of Soweto (1982), for instance. While not all fiction dealing with political issues has been this simplistic (as evident in the writing of Ndebele himself, for example), this has been, nonetheless, a powerful trend in the work of a range of South African writers. Stephen Watson, for instance, comments on the way Gordimer has periodically juxtaposed sterile, tired whites with vital, powerful blacks in her earlier work (1980: 251).⁴

While the above conditions have given rise to artistic deficiencies, the predilection towards realism in fiction in English may not seem another factor necessarily restricting South African writers' imaginative horizons. After all, as the work of authors such as Herman Melville and Joseph Conrad shows us, this mode does not have to be commonplace or superficial.⁵ Yet the

type of realism espoused by many South African writers in English, with its clearly defined parameters and its limited imaginative interaction with its subjects has been, for the most part, disappointing. In fact, it has tended to represent a highly unrealistic--that is, artistically unconvincing--form of realism as a result of the simplified, conventionalised versions of reality that it frequently espoused.⁶

The problems arising from South African writers' particular use of realist approaches took various forms. There was, to begin with, a commonly held perception that, because the South African situation was so dramatic and horrifying in itself, in order to write something correspondingly powerful, all that was necessary was to reflect that situation as plainly and directly as possible. South African literature suffered in consequence. As far back as 1965, Nkosi described a great deal of fiction in English as "journalistic fact parading outrageously as imaginative literature" (1983: 110). Twelve years later, citing Dennis Brutus, Moyana complained that all too often South African literature seemed like "raw experience untransmuted into art" (86).

Further to this, the tendency to view the South African situation as all-engrossing and all-encompassing severely curtailed artistic vision. As Nyatumba remarked regretfully: "For us, the world begins and ends with apartheid within the borders of South Africa" (94). On the face of it, by using apartheid for a source of creative inspiration, South African literature "drew strength

from the illness it describe[d]", as Hope once put it (1985: 41). Granted that a number of works of fiction that powerfully exposed the evil of the political system were produced by writers such as Es'kia Mphahlele, Alex La Guma, Ahmed Essop, Ndebele and Gordimer (Hope: 41), at the same time, much writing risked being infected by the disease it dwelt on. By confining their imaginations in this way, South African writers became trapped, Hope claimed. If they wrote about their country, they had no option but to write about politics (41). This, he argued, inevitably had a restrictive effect on their fiction "because the ideology that limits them, i.e. racial dominance, is itself so narrow, clumsy and boring" (43).

Hope's observation is, of course, not entirely accurate. After all, focussing on issues relating to racial dominance does not make for uninspiring writing in itself--as John Miles's A Deafening Silence (1991), Bessie Head's Maru (1971), Coetzee's Waiting for the Barbarians (1981) or, for that matter, Conrad's Heart of Darkness (1902) amply illustrate. Rather, it is many South African writers' overly heavy reliance on certain basic themes within this racial paradigm, without sufficient creative engagement with them, that has resulted in the sense of tedium Hope remarks upon.

Lauretta Ngcobo's And They Didn't Die (1990) provides one example of a work that derives its effect primarily from the the specific aspect of South African history that it depicts, but which does not get to grips with the issues it deals with in a more

imaginatively engaging manner. The novel depicts the experiences of Jezile, a woman living in KwaZulu-Natal in the 1950s and 1960s. Although her life is irrevocably scarred by the sufferings she experiences as a result of her situation as a black rural woman, she is--as the book's title indicates--a survivor. Jezile's tragic story is simply presented, and this gives it a forcefulness that leaves a strong impression on the reader's mind. But the novel's impact does not go any further than this. Jezile and the other main protagonists in the narrative lack inner life, for they are portrayed primarily from the outside. It is, therefore, as figures undergoing various forms of social and political oppression, rather than fully imagined characters that they strike us.

Even so, Ngcobo's novel is far superior to Richard Rive's stilted, banal Emergency (1970), which lacks any narrative power of its own, thereby severely reducing the extent to which the dramatic event it describes--the 1960 State of Emergency--is able to touch us, as readers. Unfortunately, a novel such as the latter is by no means an exceptional case in the history of English-language South African fiction. Nkosi observed:

We find here a type of fiction which exploits the ready-made plots of racial violence, social apartheid, interracial love affairs which are doomed from the beginning, without any attempt to transcend or transmute these given 'social facts' into artistically persuasive works of fiction (1973: 110).⁷

Es'kia Mphahlele commented even more bluntly on the lack of inventiveness within South African fiction: "The plot is the thing, and as race conflicts provide innumerable facile plots, we are in for a gold rush" (1962: 108).

In a great many cases, time-worn themes have gone hand-in-hand with standardised aesthetic approaches. Ken Barris's Evolution (1998) is a more recent case in point, illustrating the firm hold the theme of sex across the colour bar in isolated rural areas still has on the South African literary imagination. The inter-racial sexual encounter that takes place on an isolated farm plays itself out along predictable lines, utilising figures that we have met over and over again, in Alan Paton's Too Late the Phalarope (1953), for instance: the lonely husband; the withdrawn, repressed wife; and the sensual, enigmatic woman to whom the husband turns.

Nevertheless, the fact that South African society has never allowed much space for imaginative scope and originality is not only the result of the confines imposed by an oppressive political order. In addition, many South Africans deliberately opted for a narrower creative focus as a result of the specific way in which they chose to respond to their environment. More often than not, this decision was not an individually motivated one, but arose from a strong sense of commitment to the anti-apartheid struggle and, consequently, out of an awareness of the demands that were being placed on writers by those involved in, or sympathetic to the latter. Ivan Vladislavic has remarked in

a recent interview: "I think there were more pressures on South African writers in the past to deal with socio-political issues, and there was a framework of radical theory and informal 'policy' emanating from the liberation movement, the universities, the 'alternative' art scene and so on, that supported a particular way of doing this" (Appendix B: 324).

Particularly in the 1980s, the conviction was expressed, often in very rigid, categorical terms, by political organisations and left-wing critics and writers themselves, that writers should produce a certain type of work that tackled particular themes and conformed to a specific realistic mode. Coetzee's remark that "discourse about what people are writing in South Africa slides so easily nowadays into discourse about what people ought to be writing" (1992: 339) is borne out by the preamble to the resolutions adopted at the 1989 Culture in Another South Africa (CASA) conference in Amsterdam:

[A] great responsibility devolves on artists and cultural workers to consciously align themselves with the forces of democracy and national liberation. ... The idiom of this democratic culture must strive for authenticity and be accessible to the mass of our people by speaking to them in language and symbols they understand (215).

The implication of this injunction was, that, to be effective, writers' work should be straightforward, readily accessible and directed towards the expression of a strong, uncomplicated

message. Although literary accessibility does not necessarily entail realism, in the South African context the two tended to be synonymous. This is all too evident from the (often limited and stereotypical) realism of the fiction of political protest, which groupings such as CASA, literary-political groups such as the Congress of South African Writers and the ANC Cultural Desk endorsed.⁶ Because this type of realism came to be viewed as part of an expression of commitment, on a literary level, to the people's struggle, this had the effect of further entrenching the realist mode within fiction in English.

This subsuming of art into resistance politics gave rise to a number of further related problems. In 1989 Ndebele complained that the South African writer had not questioned his or her role and practice adequately. All too often the task was handed over to the political activist (46). Heather Robertson, who worked for the Congress of South African Writers, said in 1991 that COSAW paid too much attention to its political--not literary--role. Staff were employed not so much because of their knowledge and love of literature, but as a result of their involvement in union, community or political organisations. Such conditions obviously did not allow much space for exploration or innovation (18).

Gordimer, for her part, in her essay "The Essential Gesture" (1984), depicted only two options for the South African writer. He or she could "ready-package his [or her] creativity to the dimensions of a social realism" which can be--and Gordimer

implied, was--demanded by those involved in the struggle against apartheid. (Her words "ready-package" suggest the inevitable creative restriction that this process entailed.) On the other hand, if writers decided that they were responsible only to themselves, she warned that they ran the risk of appearing irrelevant (1988: 294-295). Whether or not one agrees with Gordimer's view, it is a matter of record that many South African writers did feel that these were the only options available to them.⁹ The desire to appear serious and relevant, rather than face the possibility of being viewed as frivolous or self-indulgent did indeed exert a powerful influence on many such authors.

Of course, this did not mean that all South African writing inevitably fell into one or other of these extremes. For example, even though Gordimer intimates that she felt trapped in the dilemma she outlines above, in her fiction she avoids containment in one or other of these opposing approaches. While she has produced novels as politically committed as Burger's Daughter (1979) or A Sport of Nature (1988), these are not transparent, uncomplicated works, conforming to the type of demands outlined by CASA. On the other hand, many South African writers clearly formed part of the first category described by Gordimer. Eschewing complexities and subtleties, they curtailed themselves to an artistically reduced, clear-cut form of realism, through which directly and unequivocally a political message could be expressed. Such an approach had the added advantage of being relatively imaginatively undemanding. That is to say, it was

straightforward realism, it precisely fulfils Mothobi Mutloatse's injunction of 1981: "We need a writing that records exactly the situation we live in, and any writing which ignores the urgency of political events will be irrelevant" (in Seroke: 42). For the writer, the content itself--an expose of police abuses--is clearly regarded as enough to provide the passage with sufficient force. While some readers may have found the scenario it depicts a shocking revelation, on an aesthetic and imaginative level there are few surprises. The passage does not so much revisit a situation, expanding perceptions or deepening awareness, as to set out to reflect it as clearly as possible. Stylistically, this extract is limited to the linguistic commonplace. "[R]oam our dirty streets", "the banners of the law", "to rise up in protest" and "the powers that be" are phrases intended to be instantly recognisable to the reader, making the intended political message of the passage immediately accessible. All these factors have the effect of firmly entrenching the extract in the prosaic--thereby preventing it from taking off on any potentially distracting or confusing flights of the imagination. In this way, it restrains itself to immediate political imperatives--issues such as the need for engagement on an emotional, imaginative level becoming irrelevant, in terms of this type of fiction's self-proclaimed agenda.

In consequence, while this is relatively effective as protest fiction, it does not hold our interest in a way that, say, Mphahlele's Down Second Avenue (1959) does. Despite many South Africans' beliefs to the contrary, political urgency alone does

not make for compelling writing. But the fact that not everyone who sets out to depict the South African situation under apartheid in fictional form has the ability to artistically convey the latter has often been overlooked. This is apparent in Nise Malange's claim, cited, in another connection, by Cecily Lockett that "each person has a story to tell ... you do not have to be specially gifted to be able to tell the story" (1989: 158). Not only does this assertion discount the amount of skill and effort that goes into making a work of art convincing, but it also patronises the audience, implying that the latter will be content with relatively little. Indeed, there is a connection between Malange's assumption and the degree of condescension underlying the CASA resolution, when it intimates that the majority of South Africans will only be able to grasp the most basic, most clearly understandable literary approaches.¹⁰

But it is not only such attitudes, combined with an all-absorbing engagement with a dramatic political struggle, that have contributed to the constraints on South African literary creativity. The liberal realism that has predominated in white writing in English has also played its part.¹¹ Because liberalism represents a "middle path" between extremes, emphasising moderation and rationality, it has a tendency to shy away from the darker, more irrational aspects of human experience, which arise from the disturbing turbulence of the human unconscious or other political and historical forces (Watson: 70-72). In consequence, as Watson argues in his study of the liberal ideology in white South African literature, the

liberal realist tradition has been unable to engage adequately with many of the the realities within which it is situated. At various points, novels such as Olive Schreiner's Story of an African Farm (1883), Paton's Cry, the Beloved Country (1948) and Dan Jacobson's A Dance in the Sun (1968) are characterised by a sense of inadequacy and failure, at narrative and artistic levels. They cannot but evade, fall silent or acknowledge defeat in the face of the powerful social, political and historical forces that refuse to acknowledge or be contained within the orderly, reasonable world views expressed by their narrators and central protagonists (Watson: 91-104, 160-218).

On the other hand, Watson observes that an "increasingly existential element" has arisen in white English-language South African literature; after the Nationalist Party victory in 1948, English speakers found themselves occupying a peripheral position in South African politics. From the 1960s onwards, this impression would seem to have intensified. In 1961, South Africa was expelled from the Commonwealth and thereafter government policies became especially repressive. Under such conditions, the inadequacies of that liberal ideology upon which much white English-language fiction was based would have appeared even more glaring. In novels such as Gordimer's The Late Bourgeois World (1966) or C.J. Driver's Elegy for a Revolutionary (1969) and even more markedly twenty years later, with books like Menan du Plessis's A State of Fear (1983), Coetzee's Age of Iron (1990), Michael Cope's Spiral of Fire (1987) and Rian Malan's (only nominally non-fictional) My Traitor's Heart (1991) the emphasis

is on angst, alienation and confusion, as isolated individuals struggle to find a sense of place and meaning in an environment in which they and their values seem to count for very little (Watson: 55-59). In their self-absorbed protagonists and with the sense of estrangement, impotency and loss they project, such novels portray a diminished potential and a narrowed vision. These tendencies have continued well into the 1990s, finding a more recent, popular manifestation, for instance, in the tiresome narcissism of Jo-Anne Richards's The Innocence of Roast Chicken (1996).

The following extract from Gordimer's The Conservationist conveys a sense of the sterility that lies at the heart of much white South African writing in English:

He walks on and on, following the black, reading the topography of the new boundary, pacing it all out measuredly: what is it that he has? It is something they would never believe. It's not convenient for any to believe, it's contrary to all ideology; stop your ears, cover your eyes, then, if you don't like it. He is striding slowly. He hears his own tread, boot following boot, exploding faint puffs of brittle burned vegetable membrane, breaking traceries that are the memory of what is already consumed by fire. His thoughts space beautifully to the tread. ;)

My--possessions--are--enough--for--me.

Who dares say that?

He has not spoken. There's no one to speak to, on the farm. He's aware that he's accountable to no one. There is no answer. You are not here, nor he. You are not here, nor she. The season is not suitable for picnic parties from town. The colleagues on the Board, the mining connections, the chairman who has a place of his own like that, the women who set him beside them at dinner, the daughter who offers still the child's good-night kiss, they are not invited. A dead man, but he doesn't speak the same language. The coal-blue water's chapped by the wind. The dust has raised a second horizon, edged with mauve, all around the sky. Even in this wind, the burned reeds are all silent, all strings broken (110).

This passage tellingly reveals the emotional and spiritual void in Mehring's life. As he tramps across his land, marking it as his own, his thoughts, in their terse assertions, their arrogance and finality, leave no space for argument or dissent. It is up to us, as readers, to take note of the ironies that undercut this. The concept of beauty applies not to the landscape, but to Mehring's own sense of how his physical actions, that crush everything beneath them, are in tune with the tenor of his thoughts, which obliterate the need for emotional, personal ties. The farm is peopled, yet its inhabitants are discounted, an indication of Mehring's self-absorption (which he proudly views as self-sufficiency) and his self-destructive inability to take anything else beyond his immediate sphere of interest into account. Finally, the presence of the dead man evokes all those

aspects of experience which Mehring believes can be safely concealed from view, but which will finally assert themselves.

While the passage works effectively in conveying all these concerns, the opening image of Mehring measuring out the borders of his land symbolically suggests the way in which Gordimer's work itself takes place within clearly demarcated boundaries. This is prose that takes itself seriously and--unlike the life of the character depicted in the above passage--remains well under control. The fictional world of The Conservationist is a carefully ordered one, characterised by cool, contained ironies. There is, however, a further irony involved. These qualities also contribute to the impression that, aesthetically, there is something missing in the passage. It has a certain sense of lifelessness, as if the hollowness of the white South African society it describes has infected Gordimer's writing. The lyricism of the extract--its descriptions of the natural surroundings--seems drained of the vitality and vibrancy that infuse the physical, a picture intelligently and artistically composed, but lacking animation.

It could be argued that the shortcomings of such prose are a reflection of the essential emptiness within Mehring himself, as well as the spiritual bleakness of the society he inhabits. Let us turn, then, to a novel that deals with a protagonist who, in her sensitivity and emotional depth, contrasts utterly with Mehring: Rosa Burger, daughter of left-wing parents, struggling to evolve a sense of her own identity, in Burger's Daughter. The

following passage, in its focus on natural beauty and sensuality, conveys the private, sensuous side of Rosa's nature:

The wavy galvanised iron roof was painted blue and so were the railings of the wooden veranda. From an abandoned tennis court brilliant with glossy weeds a mournful bird presaged rain. The bauhinia tree lifted from shrubs and ornamental palms become a green-speared jungle; the two rooms were sunk in it like a hidden pool. It was safe and cosy as a child's playhouse and sexually arousing as a lovers' hideout. It was nowhere.

She came in out of the sun and the traffic of the highway straight from the prison and he got up from some dim piece of furniture where he made no pretence not to have been lying, probably all afternoon, and kept her standing just within the doorway, rubbing himself against her. The directness of the caress was simply the acting-out, in better and more appropriate circumstances, of what was happening in the coffee-bar. Desire can be very comforting (21).

The brightly painted house surrounded by lush vegetation represents a secluded, hedonistic space existing outside the sphere of political responsibilities by which Rosa feels constrained. Yet, as in the case of the first extract, this passage lacks a sense of energy and immediacy. We see this particularly in the second paragraph, with its measured, detached expression, which diminishes the sense of physical warmth and

colour that this extract seeks to express.¹² Despite their differences, Rosa and Mehring are enclosed within similarly distanced, restrained stylistic worlds.

These limitations in Gordimer's novels are, then, not purely the result of the particular nature of the context within which she was working at the time. They are also the product of her own particular style of fiction. After all, the South African political system may have changed, but as a recent novel such as The House Gun (1998) indicates, the basic nature of her writing has not. While Gordimer's specific position as a white English-speaking South African obviously influences the nature of her fiction in a particular way, it also would seem to have exacerbated already existing qualities within her writing. In any case, in its sometimes earnest solemnity and its degree of emotional and aesthetic circumscription, her work forms part of a broader tendency within South African fiction in English.

While some of the deficiencies outlined above relate to specific situations experienced by either black or white writers, one factor that has had an equally detrimental affect on both groups is that South Africa has been--and, in many essential respects, still is--a society with highly authoritarian qualities. For example, Hein Willemsse and various others have pointed out that Albie Sachs's paper, "Preparing Ourselves for Freedom" (1989) made a powerful impact not so much because of what was being said, but because an "authoritative voice" was speaking (in Brown and van Dyk, 1991: 99). Furthermore, there are the monologic,

closed views of events expressed by those in positions of power (whether literary or political) which those around them are expected to endorse unquestioningly. In 1985, for instance, National Party advertisements all over South Africa proclaimed: "Revolutionaries may stamp their feet, Communists may scream their lies, but here [the National Party's own ideological stance] is the reality." On the other hand, in his discussion of Sachs's paper and Ndebele's article "Redefining Relevance" (1989), Tony Morphet comments that both Sachs and Ndebele conform to a set vision of history and political struggle which, it is implied, other South African writings should share (1990: 141-143).

Out of this authoritarianism, a moralistic, sermonising quality often arises. While it goes without saying that this tendency has occurred in a diverse range of literatures and literary periods, from Milton's Paradise Lost to a contemporary work of African literature such as Ayi Kwei Armah's The Healers (1978), it is a particularly marked feature of both liberal and radical South African fiction in English. The latter form is often weighed down by its "solemn formulas of commitment" (Sachs, 1990: 21). In 1994, in a review of Gordimer's None to Accompany Me (1994), Mark Devenney objected to the "moralising" quality of Gordimer's work. He remarked critically: "The South African novel invariably has been a tract, and instruction--rather than esthetic appreciation--is its excuse for being" (1994: 14). While a comment such as this excludes the work of writers such as Coetzee, Devenney's point is nonetheless significant.¹³ We encounter an early

instance of this tendency in the lengthy sermons preached by Schreiner's Lyndall in The Story of an African Farm. They are not there to provide aesthetic pleasure; in fact, they contribute to the artistic failures in the novel. They are intended for our moral and intellectual upliftment--just as the message outweighs narrative and artistic concerns in the Matshoba extract and in other writers dealing with the South African political struggle.

The extent to which conditions during apartheid gave rise to a climate within which dull, even bad writing could thrive became particularly apparent in the 1980s, when indifferent fiction had the opportunity to flourish in a way that it would not have done otherwise. There were many opportunities available for aspirant writers during this period, particularly as a result of the international funding to which South African political organisations and many publishing firms had access.¹⁴ More South African literary journals existed than is the case today and writers had a range of local publishing houses to choose from, including larger, established firms such as David Philip as well as smaller concerns like Buchu Books, which dealt especially with the work of hitherto unpublished writers. There was also Ravan Press, which was particularly active in printing the work of both new and established authors during this period.¹⁵ This was, of course, good, for a great deal of South African writing was produced during this period. However, it was not an unqualified good.

While publishers such as Ravan were particularly keen to publish

fiction relating directly to the political struggle,¹⁶ all the above groupings were committed to printing works dealing with the South African situation--even if such books were not necessarily aesthetically or imaginatively satisfying. A woodenly written novel like Richard Rive's Emergency Continued (published by David Philip in 1990) is one instance of this. Once published, politically relevant writing was often well received, irrespective of its shortcomings, as was the case with du Plessis's A State of Fear. The central protagonist is sympathetic to the struggle, yet essentially an onlooker, and the novel deals with her own sense of anguish and despair, as the political situation unfolds around her. While du Plessis is certainly capable of fine writing (there are some beautiful lyrical descriptions of natural surroundings, for instance), the book tends to become bogged down by the way in which it takes up the well-worn subject of white liberal angst. The heavy intensity of the soul-searching that forms its principal focus makes for wearisome reading. Nonetheless, du Plessis's novel received a great deal of acclaim (for example, she won the 1985 Olive Schreiner Prize and the 1986 Sanlam literary award).¹⁷ It would probably not have encountered such an enthusiastic reception if it had been assessed purely on artistic, imaginative criteria.

In short, then, in more cases than not, South African conditions of life did not so much aid the development of the country's literature, as provide an aesthetic and imaginative cul-de-sac in which a great deal of it was trapped. The fact that many of the writers who were published during the apartheid era (such as

Matshoba) have subsequently fallen out of sight cannot only be attributed to the way in which the overseas funding that was channelled towards the production of local fiction has dried up and the general decline in the South African publishing industry. It seems just as likely that, a result of the changes of 1990-1994, a number of authors no longer have a ready-made subject, and lack the imaginative resources to develop new themes and directions for their writing.

A great deal of radical and liberal fiction in English has doubtless fulfilled an important political role: conscientising, informing, recording and keeping the spirit of resistance alive. Yet, while some of this literature has certainly proved inspirational, the bulk of it has had a negative, even detrimental, effect on South Africans, intellectually and creatively. As part of the culture of resistance, such writing adhered to restricted, inflexible notions of good and evil, of how things were, or should be--which were neither constructive nor helpful for South Africans attempting to negotiate a post-apartheid society. In consequence, as Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly observe, much of this fiction has proved "reactionary rather than liberatory in the post-apartheid context" (1998: 2). What they omit, however, is the fact that these tendencies were potentially damaging even during the apartheid era, primarily because, to borrow Gabriel Garcia Marquez's description of political protest fiction in the Latin American context, they frequently resulted in "a kind of premeditated literature that offer[ed] too static and exclusive a vision of reality" (Marquez

and Mendoza, 1983: 56). As Marquez points out, didactic protest literature can, ironically, lead to intellectual and imaginative circumscription:

I have a great many reservations about what came in Latin America to be called "committed literature" or more precisely the novel of social protest. ...This is mainly because I think its limited view of the world and life does not help anything in political terms. Far from raising consciousness, it actually slows it down (Marquez and Mendoza, 38).

In response to this, many South African writers, activists and critics during the 1980s and earlier might have retorted that they were interested, above all, in winning a war, and that under such conditions, there was little time or space for alternative forms of literary expression. That acknowledged, the fact remains that the combination of political didacticism and the imaginatively straitened form of realism proved to be particularly stultifying. Taking issue with Mutloatse's declaration cited above, Ndebele comments that fiction that seeks to "[record] exactly", runs the risk of limiting itself imaginatively, thereby curtailing the extent to which the reader can engage emotionally with it and impeding emotional and psychological growth (1991: 31-32). He draws a distinction between propagandist art "that 'sells' ideas to people" and art "in which ideas are embraced by the people, because they have been made to understand them through the evocation of lived experience in all its complexities" (1991:

33). The essential problem that Ndebele has with "propogandist" art is that it prevents the oppressed from developing a creative, critical awareness of their oppression. In that way, it can potentially contribute to the oppression that it seeks to understand and undermine (Ndebele, 1991: 82-97).

There is, of course, a wider point to be made here. Catherine Belsey and Patricia Waugh object to the traditional novel's convention of realism on the grounds that it can endorse and help "normalise" specific rigid, potentially oppressive notions of reality (Waugh, 1984: 11; Belsey, 1980: 2-4). As has already been noted, not all realist literary approaches reinforce the kind of secure, restrictive assumptions described by Belsey and Waugh. However, notwithstanding these reservations, a great deal of South African fiction certainly calls to mind this aspect of their critique of realism and its effect: it serves to confirm its readers in a narrow, unthinking view of the world.

The extent to which all the factors that have been enumerated above have given rise to a legacy that has proved hard to cast off is evident when we turn from the past to post-1994 South African literature. When drawing such distinctions, it should, of course, be noted that expressions such as the "old" or "new" South Africa are laden with contradictions and ambiguities.¹⁸ As Attridge and Jolly observe of the latter term: "[It] represents the impossibility of trying to narrate the future as though it were severed, in some sort of originary beheading, from the past" (4). Citing Rob Nixon, they remind us that the phrase "the new

South Africa" was first used by F.W. de Klerk as "an indisputable asset in the astute marketing of his regime" (4).

Gareth Cornwall claims that the South Africa of the 1990s is "a decentred and less symbolically oversimplified society" (in Brown and van Dyk: 17). Similarly, Nyatumba declares: "Gone is the certainty of yesterday, and in its place is the uncertainty of a future whose exact nature we cannot yet fathom" (91). Yet, while issues do not appear as clear-cut as they seemed in the 1980s, and there is less uncritical allegiance to "official versions" of the socio-political reality, various features that characterised the "old" South African literary imagination still persist. Nkosi, for instance, argues that an "unhealed split" continues to exist between black and white writing (1998: 75) and Attridge and Jolly remark that

relinquishing determinism, in the sense of relinquishing ideologies which designate fixed values by assigning negative and positive attributes in accordance with stereotyped notions of essential verities, rather than a sense of the particular possibilities of a given context, is a difficult process (2).

While political changes may have opened up new imaginative spaces and, in theory, as Graham Pechey optimistically asserts, "[t]he field of South African writing is now in every sense without bounds" (1998: 73), this "determinism" still remains a force within South African literature. Moving beyond the barriers it

imposes is a long, slow business that, even in 2001, is far from completion.

Evidence for this can be found in the recent work of one of South Africa's most interesting and complex writers, J.M. Coetzee. If we were to accept one implication of Pechey's argument, we might expect Disgrace (1998), set in post-apartheid South Africa, to open onto wide imaginative vistas. Instead, it systematically strips its central protagonist, David Lurie, of all that he values, as is conveyed in the following extract, in which the latter accepts the failure of the opera on which he has been working:

Plink-plunk squawks the banjo in the desolate yard in Africa. ...

Yet despite occasional good moments, the truth is that Byron in Italy is going nowhere. There is no action, no development, just a long halting cantilena hurled by Teresa into the empty air, punctuated now and then with groans and sighs from Byron offstage. The husband and the rival mistress are forgotten, might as well not exist. The lyric impulse in him may not be dead, but after decades of starvation it can crawl forth from its cave only pinched, stunted, deformed. He has not the musical resources, the resources of energy to raise Byron in Italy off the monotonous track on which it has been running since the start. It has become the kind of work a sleepwalker might write. ...

Of the dogs in the holding pens, there is one he has come to feel a particular fondness for. It is a young male with a withered left hindquarter which it drags behind it. Whether it was born like that he does not know. No visitor has shown an interest in adopting it. Its period of grace is almost over, soon it will have to succumb to the needle (214-215).

This passage, like of a great deal of Coetzee's work, is characterised by its spare, distanced quality. Its forcefulness arises from its pared-down starkness, which is very far removed from the watered-down, simplistic nature of much South African fiction. This latter type of writing gives rise to a sense of security, in that it reinforces preconceptions, or remains within the safety of the familiar and the established. Coetzee, on the other hand, produces work that we cannot feel at ease or at home with. His novels challenge his readers imaginatively and intellectually by leaving them, like his central protagonists, deprived of comforting props (such as the easy assumptions they may rely on or the warmth and reassurance of sentiment and emotional engagement) alone in a vast, "desolate" and disturbing world that they have to negotiate by themselves.¹⁹

Why then, does a passage such as this one, which contrasts so radically with much South African fiction, provide (in my view) yet another instance of the sense of confinement that hems such prose in? In common with the latter, it represents a shutting down of possibilities, shrinking in upon itself in the diminished

capacity for life it expresses. To an extent, this quality is indicative of the nature of Lurie himself, for he suffers from profound emotional, psychological and spiritual impoverishment, which impedes his capacity to reach out beyond himself to other, fuller ways of being. The novel is also underpinned by a vestigially Christian ideology, in terms of which the renunciation of all that one has--or desires--becomes a form of transcendence. Yet, over and above these factors, it is clear that Lurie inhabits a world in which resigned acceptance of constraints--however harsh they may be--does seem to be the norm. (The behaviour of his daughter, Lucy, provides a further case in point.) The only option open to Lurie is renunciation, as is emphasised by the closing words of the novel. In such a world, there is no chance of warmth and delight, whether in the construction of an opera or in the company of a dog.²⁰ Neither will Romantic imaginative capacity avail him, for it is exposed as feeble and inadequate.

It could be argued that it is not general tendencies within South African literature, but rather what Lurie regards as the "dark times" (216) in which Disgrace is set that gives the passage these particular qualities. This, however, would be to ignore the way in which this extract embodies central features of Coetzee's work. His novels dealing with South Africa may be set in different times and places, yet they all take place in an age of iron, in a harsh and rigid world full of barriers that are, for the most part, extremely difficult, not to say impossible, to negotiate. While this extract is undeniably powerful writing,

like much of the rest of the novel, it closes itself off from a great deal of human experience. In this regard, like so much other South African fiction in English, it does not strike a fully human chord.

There are certain similarities between novels such as Gordimer's The Conservationist and Burger's Daughter and Coetzee's fiction. The restrained qualities in the former's prose find their counterpart in the sense of disempowerment that we frequently encounter at a narrative, thematic level in Coetzee's novels. In both writers' cases, we are made very aware that there are certain areas of life from which their narrators or central characters are excluded. These aspects of Gordimer's and Coetzee's writing are suggestive of the sense of inadequacy, and, at times, powerlessness that many white English-speaking South Africans have experienced--and continue to experience.²¹

Moreover, when we focus on the lack of vibrancy, colour and joy in Coetzee's work, it is clear that this lack is perfectly appropriate on a number of levels. In terms of his particular response to South African realities (before and after apartheid), there are legitimate arguments for the kind of austerities embodied in Disgrace or earlier works such as The Life & Times of Michael K. (1985) and Age of Iron. Clearly, this quality of Coetzee's work is very much suited to his fictional ends--as is also the case in the work of a writer such as La Guma. In literary and ideological terms, there are various differences between these two authors, but for both of them, those aspects

of the South African reality with which they engage can be best apprehended in relentlessly sombre terms. To expect "sweetness and light" from such writers would be to ignore those features that give their work its particular power.

But should this be the final word on the South African reality? Albie Sachs declared in 1989: "[I]f you look at most of our art and literature you would think we are living in the greyest and most sombre of all worlds, completely shut in by apartheid" (1990: 21). While the political system based upon apartheid has long been superseded, a comparable sense of emotional and psychic enclosure still prevails in much post-apartheid fiction. The fictional worlds in recent novels such as Disgrace and Andre Brink's The Rights of Desire (2000) are ones of reduced potential, in both a physical and spiritual sense, overshadowed by a deep sense of gloom and despair.

Various South African writers might argue that the situation--before and after apartheid--does not lend itself to more imaginatively lavish, wide-ranging fictional possibilities. However, a writer such as Toni Morrison, who deals with tragic subjects such as slavery, racial oppression and racially motivated acts of violence in contemporary American society, produces novels filled with colourful, sometimes extravagant images and descriptions. These possess a vitality and a luminosity--often intertwined with a sense of the magical and the numinous--that transcend and transform the brutal nature of the historical and contemporary realities with which she deals.

Similarly, while describing the desperate poverty and political corruption in post-independence Nigeria in The Famished Road (1991), Ben Okri turns the latter country into a multi-hued, fabulous realm in which dreams, visions, hallucinations and mundane realities are interwoven. While it goes without saying that such approaches do not rule out the validity of those adopted by writers such as Coetzee or La Guma, there is room for both kinds of perspectives in fictional explorations of the South African reality--a point that many writers in English have ignored.

To use Coetzee's words in a different context, "the imaginative impulse ... may not be dead, but after decades of starvation" it is hardly surprising that far too much South African fiction "crawl[s] forth from its cave only pinched, stunted, deformed". The dearth of imaginative options that characterised South African fiction before and during the apartheid years has meant that, in many cases, writers have emerged into post-apartheid South Africa ill-equipped to respond creatively to a changed context, as Attridge and Jolly also point out (1998: 7).²² Nevertheless, this thesis seeks in part to evaluate some of the most significant attempts to rethink, in fictional form, the imaginative possibilities of South African literature in English.

In 1985, Hope complained of "a certain sameness, a predictability, a certain familiar ache in the heart of the South African novel which has become increasingly burdensome" (43). Further to this, he asserted: "It must change, the English novel

in South Africa--or become moribund" (1985: 44). Ndebele uttered similar sentiments in 1989, emphasising that, in order to grow, local literature should "[free] the creative process" from "the laws of perception that have characterised apartheid society" (45). Over ten years later, however, South African fiction in English still risks stagnation and sterility. Certainly, this is not entirely the result of the legacy of the past, for--as will be outlined later in more detail--current conditions such as the depressed nature of the local publishing industry and the lack of a culture of reading within South African society as a whole have also contributed to this state.

Yet there are, and always have been, other literary styles that offer potential for liberation from the kind of conditions that Hope and Ndebele describe. Although they may have been taken up on a very limited scale by writers in English, they point the way towards freer, more imaginatively charged ways of perceiving and exploring the changing nature of South African society. One such form, I will argue, is the fantastic. Whether or not the latter is likely to be adopted by more South African writers in the future; and whether it really does have the capacity to contribute towards the transformation of this country's literature are other issues entirely--and ones that will need to be considered later in this study.

But it is the essence of this thesis that the place that the fantastic can occupy in South African fiction has long been overlooked. This is evident, for one thing, in the paucity of

studies on the fantastic in this literature.²³ It is evident, for another, in the following comment by Elleke Boehmer, who describes literature in English as "impaled on that two pronged fork which is history versus discourse, or reality versus fantasy. The predictability of South African English-language fiction calls for some sort of disruption--an unsettling of carefully observed familiarity" (1998: 53). What Boehmer ignores, however, is the "unsettling of carefully observed familiarity" which takes place in the fiction of writers such as Hope and Vladislavic, as well as in the more recent novels of Brink, to a lesser degree. Through their use of the fantastic, the novels and stories of these writers have the capacity to transcend the very polarities she objects to. Furthermore, Boehmer's comment is itself indicative of the way in which the ability of the fantastic to offer a means of engaging with South Africa's past and present has often been overlooked or disregarded in the country's literary studies. This study will, therefore, focus particularly on this aspect of the fantastic, examining how it explores the South African situation in a particular way that realistic fiction in English has not been able to.

Notes

1. Several other South African English-language writers have made use of the fantastic, most prominently Zakes Mda, J.M. Coetzee, Mike Nicol and Anne Landsman. A number of Afrikaans writers have incorporated fantastical elements into their work, such as Breyten Breytenbach, Jan Rabie, Etienne Leroux, Andre Letoit, Marita van der Vyver and Etienne Van Heerden.

This thesis does not attempt to be a comprehensive study of the South African fantastic, and therefore focusses only on the work of Hope, Vladislavic and Brink. This is, in part, for reasons of length, but also because these three writers have certain significant areas in common in their use of the fantastic. Moreover, their fiction provides an especially clear illumination of the way in which the fantastic can function as a mode within South African literature and of some of the difficulties it presents. Finally, these writers' novels and stories offer areas of interest as a result of the way in which they make use of the fantastic to respond to particular periods in this country's history.

2. Vladislavic attributes the particular type of realism that South African fiction in English has, in general, tended to favour to "the particular British cultural tradition we have inherited" or "the conservative, provincial cultural world" that South Africans inhabit (App. B: 324).

The term "realism" is used somewhat guardedly here, for, when applied to the South African fictional context, this category becomes somewhat problematic, for various reasons that will be outlined in the course of this chapter. In the context of this study, therefore, "realism" is used to denote those works of fiction that conform to certain established notions of the real and deliberately avoid the use of forms or techniques that might be deemed non-mimetic.

3. The reason why modernism should, eventually, have found more of a home in Afrikaans literature than in English is suggested by Joan Hambidge. In her view, Afrikaans writers felt the need to develop a literary tradition, and in doing so, sought to be innovative and experimental in their work (in Brown and van Dyk: 35). The Sestigers, for instance, attempted to keep in touch with international literary trends by incorporating these into their writing. Writers such as Leroux, Breytenbach and Rabie drew especially on forms of European modernism in their work.

4. Gillian Slovo's Ties of Blood (1989) also falls prey to racially and sexually determined typecasting in its depiction of both white and black South African political activists. Her black male protagonists are extra manly, while the women are beautiful courageous revolutionaries (if white) or strong, silent, suffering Mother Africa types (if black).

5. Citing Harry Levin, Patrick Parrinder argues that, in a historical sense, realism developed a dialectic of "fabulation and debunking", rather than straightforward depiction. Furthermore, it involved a synthesis of reality and romance, thereby containing the potential for differences and contradictions. It has, therefore, the capacity to be an extremely complex form (1987: 29).

6. Some of the problems inherent in the use of the term "realism" become apparent here. Blinkered, stereotypical world views and the expression of various political myths can constitute as much of a departure from reality as the most overtly fantastical work

of fiction.

7. Ironically, Nkosi's own novel, Mating Birds (1987) succumbs to various forms of cliché.

8. Vladislavic argues that the term "realist" is not an accurate indication of the nature of this writing, in that while it "documents or explores or challenges the social and political conditions of the day, ... [g]enerally it does not have that technical polish that 'realism' in art or literature presupposes" (App. B: 324).

9. This is evidenced, for example, in the interviews Duncan Brown and Bruno van Dyk conducted with a range of South African writers in Exchanges (1991), in which writers were asked to comment on the relationship between individual creativity and the political struggle.

10. The dubious nature of this claim is obvious when we consider the oral poetic tradition, the most mass-based of all South African literary forms, which certainly did not lack depth and subtlety, as is evidenced in its rich, detailed imagery.

11. Terms such as "liberal realism" and "realistic fiction of political protest" are used in a very loose, general sense, given the historically sheer number and varieties of realism adopted by South African writers in English.

12. It could be argued that when desire provides a form of escape from reality--as it does here--it can become tedious, hence the nature of this particular description. But many of Gordimer's descriptions of sexuality in her other works have a comparable quality to them. For example, Hillela, the central protagonist of A Sport of Nature, has a highly sensual nature, yet apart from an early encounter with her cousin, her sexual experiences tend to be discreetly hinted at or laconically summed up in a remote, carefully moderated manner. As a result, Hillela's sexuality exists somewhere beyond the confines of the book, as if it is something that the narrator cannot fully understand or convey. This is, arguably, a way in which Gordimer can avoid having to deal too closely with the sensual side of human experience.

13. Coetzee's fiction, of course, differs in a number of respects from most English-language South African fiction. There is the way in which he makes use of non-real elements and techniques in his work, for example.

14. One case in point was the Danish government's funding for COSAW.

15. Publications such as Staffrider and AKAL, the COSAW literary journal, have vanished. Like most South African publishing companies, David Philip operates under far more stringent financial constraints at present. Buchu no longer exists, and while Ravan continued to publish fiction, it did so on an extremely limited scale. It has recently been absorbed by

Macmillan.

16. The various Staffrider collections were published by Ravan, for instance.

17. A number of books far inferior to A State of Fear have been awarded South African literary prizes (Marita van der Vyver's sentimental Breathing Space (2000) which was awarded the M-Net Prize is a recent example). There are, of course, a variety of reasons why unexceptional novels win literary awards (one explanation being that the judges may have had a very limited range of books to choose from, and another is that literary awards themselves are not necessarily any guarantee of artistic excellence). Nonetheless, du Plessis's novel provides one example of the fact that, while a number of novels that addressed the political situation in the 1980s may not have made particularly stimulating or artistically engaging reading, this was not acknowledged as a major shortcoming.

18. Ivan Vladislavic, for example, explores some of the ironies contained in these terms in Propaganda by Monuments (1996).

19. This quality is evoked, for instance, in the ending of Age of Iron: "And in that embrace there was no warmth to be had" (181).

20. While I am aware that terms such as "warmth" and "delight" are not particularly current in contemporary critical usage, it seems to be, in pointing to a signal lack I see in much South African fiction, that one cannot but fall back on terms like these to suggest what is missing from the latter.

21. While, as has already been noted, Gordimer's fiction contains various politically committed protagonists, who play an active role in the struggle against apartheid, such characters are not necessarily depicted as representing significant forces for political change. This is evident in A Sport of Nature, for example. Although Hillela's aunt and uncle are deeply involved in the political struggle, their commitment seems to count for relatively little in the end. It is Hillela, heedless and hedonistic, who drifts into politics because she has an affair with someone in the ANC, who becomes a prominent figure in the struggle against apartheid. She is accorded a place of honour at the ceremony marking the birth of the new South Africa (by virtue of her position as wife of the head of the OAU). In contrast with her aunt and uncle, and indeed, most of the white South Africans in the novel, Hillela is "a sport of nature", an anomaly, differing radically from the white community from which she originates, and this, in part, seems to account for the various factors that result in her being accepted into the black community, and into the struggle in a way that her relatives are not.

22. Indeed, given that the inhabitants of this country have been deprived, deliberately and inadvertently, of intellectual and cultural stimulation, it could hardly have been otherwise.

23. In one of the most recent surveys of local literature, Michael Chapman's South African Literatures (1996), there is almost no discussion of the place or the role of the fantastic in South African literature. In earlier surveys, such as Stephen Gray's Southern African Literature: An Introduction (1979), there is very little on the fantastic.

University of Cape Town

CHAPTER ONE: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FANTASTIC

University of Cape Town

Given that this thesis argues in favour of the fantastic, it should be established why this mode can, potentially, play a significant role in the South African literary context. This is particularly pertinent because we know that the fantastic is not always a liberatory form. For instance, myths can be used to shore up reactionary ideologies, as Roland Barthes shows us in Mythologies (1973) and a destructive, disastrous political fantasy of racial superiority lay at the heart of the belief system that gave rise to apartheid. Indeed, sometimes deliberately and sometimes unintentionally, Hope, Vladislavic and Brink make us aware that the fantastic can easily lead to warped, damaging approaches to reality. Notwithstanding this, the importance of the fantastic lies in the way in which it can offer access to those areas which have often been excluded from the South African literary imagination. Such will be a further critical point in my argument to follow.

Further reasons for this tendency in South African literature, already touched upon in my Introduction, can be considered here. During apartheid, the general consensus among many writers and critics in English seemed to be that fantasy was an inappropriate approach for a literature that sought to do battle with a violent and oppressive government. They argued that the multi-layered unpredictabilities of the fantastic would make it inaccessible to many South Africans and would also dilute the force of the all-important political message. The contrast between the subtleties and complexities of, for example, Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children (1981), Lewis Carroll's Alice books or,

locally, Etienne Leroux's Welgevonden trilogy (1972) on the one hand and the straightforwardness and clarity of, say, the poetry of Mzwakhe Mbuli or the Sarmcol Workers' Play of the late 1980s on the other, bears this out. In 1991, the poet James Matthews stated categorically: "We haven't got time to write fantasy!" (Wood, 1991). Matthews's expostulation indicates how he and many others like him regarded the mode as essentially irrelevant, frivolous ornamentation that could not get to the heart of the matter as effectively as realistic fiction. Similarly, when referring to Latin American magical realism, Ari Sitas emphasised: "We cannot transpose [this mode] onto our reality as a voluntary act. I might be able to do that, but we're not talking about the majority in this case, we're talking about someone who has the 'comfort' to do that" (in Brown and van Dyk, 1991: 65-66).¹

Another, especially powerful factor working against the use of the fantastic in South African fiction is that this mode tends to be highly complicated and artistically demanding, as the above examples indicate. In a literary climate characterised by the type of imaginative and aesthetic limitations outlined above, many writers in English would have preferred to avoid the fantastic for this reason. Certainly, in the following chapters, some of the difficulties that the fantastic entails will be considered more closely.

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In general, South African writers and critics during apartheid endorsed the Aristotelean concept of art as essentially mimetic.

In contrast to this, fantasy seemed a marginal, secondary impulse.² But it is not only South Africans who have felt this way towards fantasy. As Lance Olsen notes, this inclination to denigrate the mode is characteristic of a certain tendency in Western society:

There seems to have always been a need to condemn or apologize for the fantastic, a need that is peculiarly ethnocentric, stemming from the deep belief in Western culture that "reality" is somehow morally "better" and aesthetically more "serious" than "fantasy", that the conscious is somehow objectively preferable to the unconscious (1987: 15).

The above criticisms echo the type of condemnations of the imagination as superfluous self-indulgence cited by Ursula K. Le Guin in her essay, "Why Are Americans Afraid of Dragons?":

We tend, as a people, to look upon all works of the imagination as either suspect or contemptible.

"My wife reads novels. I haven't got the time."

"I used to read that science fiction stuff when I was a teenager, but of course I don't now."

"Fairy stories are for kids. I live in the real world"
(1989: 32).

Le Guin disputes such attitudes, arguing that they arise from a puritanism in white Protestant English-speaking North American

society, which she links to a fear of the imagination and, in particular, a fear of the fantastic, as the most extreme, unfettered form of imaginative expression (32-34). Her arguments are, of course, also applicable to certain powerful and established sections of South African society.³ The blinkered, reactionary nature of the white English and Afrikaans-speaking communities has already been noted. But while Le Guin implies that the puritanical attitudes she describes stem from political conservatism, more radical convictions can also easily take on a dour, strait-laced quality--as the South African critiques of the fantastic cited above show us. Jean-Philippe Wade makes the following observation:

South African marxism's obsession with "negative" ideology-critique seems to me to be derived more from the Protestant ethic than any philosophy of social liberation. That austere rational control of a text, bringing its carnival sensuous pleasures to heel in the name of profound moral seriousness (the "truth" behind ideology) ultimately reveals a fear of the productive excesses of language (1992: 121).

In terms of the puritanical consciousness, the imagination is undoubtedly dangerous. It is unpredictable, often transcending rational controls and can only submit itself to outside authorities at the risk of stifling or distorting itself. As both Wade and Le Guin point out, this fear of the imagination is particularly evident in a resistance to opening oneself up to the

pleasures a work of art can provide. Instead, it is asserted that art should teach one something--and one should not necessarily expect to enjoy it (Le Guin: 33-34). Such pleasures have in fact been viewed as perilously profligate, distracting one's attention from the more weighty matters at hand.⁴ The value of aesthetic bliss may have been emphasised by critics such as Roland Barthes and, most recently, Wendy Steiner,⁵ but nonetheless this is something that many South African writers and critics still remain unable to grasp. This antipathy to pleasure is characterised in part by an inclination to look down on laughter within much South African fiction in English. While the work of a writer such as Herman Charles Bosman shows that not all of the latter has been unrelievedly serious, nonetheless there has often been (and, to a degree, still is) an underlying assumption that literary heavyweights cannot afford to laugh too much.⁶ (This is certainly applicable to Nadine Gordimer and, in a different way, to J.M. Coetzee.)

There are many different modalities of the comic, as is evident when we contrast, say, Aristophanes's plays with the work of writers such as Swift or Voltaire. One should not, therefore, ignore the fact that certain types of humour do find their way into South African fiction in English. For instance, Lurie's own perceptions of himself and others in Disgrace contain a wry acknowledgement of the absurdities of many aspects of the human condition. But this evokes a rueful grimace, rather than mirth. It is the latter quality that is particularly lacking in fiction in English.

This situation arose, in part, because many writers under apartheid felt beleaguered and, at the same time, had a deep conviction that their writing could play an important role--even if simply as a means of recording events and making others aware of injustices. This tended to give rise to a sometimes self-absorbed sobriety. Under such conditions, humorous, imaginative play often seemed undignified or inappropriate. Andre Brink acknowledges this: "I think in a dramatic situation, like the one which [prevailed] under apartheid, one tended sometimes to take oneself a bit too seriously" (Appendix C: 347). Notwithstanding the fact that, as the work of Woody Allen makes clear, humour can be intensely self-regarding, one of its most important functions remains its capacity to reach outwards, deflating pretensions and ridiculing sacred cows. But in contrast to Afrikaans works of literature, which contain a strongly satirical vein (as in the writing of Leroux, Andre Letoit and Breyten Breytenbach, for example) literature in English makes relatively little use of laughter in this way. Herman Charles Bosman's fiction forms one notable exception in this regard, and there are also the ironic aspects of the work of Drum writers such as Nat Nakasa and Can Themba.⁷

This inclination to downplay or even condemn the fantastic and those aspects of imaginative and aesthetic expression that can be associated with it accounts in part for the resistance to modernism--and later, postmodernism--in the South African literary context. A mistrust of that which cannot easily be contained, controlled or explained is one reason why the latter

two approaches, which shift beyond the confines of the strictly realistic and clearly explicable, in their emphasis on the subjective, irrational aspects of human experience, have not been widely taken up in South African fiction in English.

Bearing in mind the elusive, complicated nature of the fantastic, some definitions of this concept should be briefly considered at this point. A number of writers and critics have interpreted this concept very differently or, as in the case of Tzvetan Todorov, in his seminal critical study, The Fantastic: a Structural Approach to a Literary Genre (1975), battled to reach a conclusive definition of the term. According to Todorov, the fantastic is situated midway between the uncanny and the marvellous, its central defining characteristic being a hesitation between a natural and supernatural explanation for events in a text (25). However, as Lucie Armitt notes, the fact that Todorov sees the need to impose additional sub-categories such as the "fantastic-marvellous" or the "fantastic-uncanny", indicates that the fantastic cannot be contained within his rigid compartmentalisation (Todorov: 44; Armitt, 1996: 31).

Various other descriptions of the fantastic have been characterised by a comparable exclusivity. Complications also arise from the way in which fantasy takes on a range of very different forms. Indeed, as Olsen suggests, it would be more appropriate to talk of fantasies, rather than fantasy (1987: 4). As a result, in their attempts to define the fantastic, critics often focus only on certain specific manifestations of this mode,

leading to some vastly divergent depictions of its nature and function. According to Rosemary Jackson, for example, the fantastic is a literature that "expresses" desire for the forbidden: by telling of it or showing it. The fantastic can therefore act as a safety valve, giving symbolic, fictional expression to transgressive longings, when they could otherwise threaten the stability of the established order (1981: 3-4). However, through this, this mode

opens up, for a brief moment, on to disorder, on to illegality, on to that which lies outside the law, that which is outside dominant value systems. The fantastic traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made "absent" (4).

In this way, Jackson argues that the fantastic is essentially subversive--although she acknowledges this subversion is subject to re-containment.

Yet her view contrasts radically with that of J.R.R. Tolkien, who sees the fantastic as ultimately reinforcing his Christian convictions. In his view, fantasy offers three key experiences: "Recovery", through which the mundane and familiar are made to seem new and startling, "Escape" from the ugliness of modern life, and the "Consolation" of a happy ending, which Tolkien terms eucatastrophe. This latter aspect provides a glimpse of evangelium, an epiphanic spiritual bliss which finds its full

expression in the joyous outcome of the Christian story (1966: 55-73). While such descriptions explore particular dimensions of the fantastic, Kathryn Hume argues that "like blind men describing an elephant", they focus on the parts at the cost of the whole, dismissing or ignoring many texts which, in one way or another, depart from reality. For instance, Tolkien deals only with fairy stories, while Jackson reduces the significance of specific types of fantasy, such as the non-subversive or popular fantastic escape fiction (Hume, 1984: 21-22).

To begin, then, we need some type of broad, inclusive definition of the fantastic. Hume's description of the latter as "any departure from consensus reality" (21), with its implication that concepts of reality can themselves be artificial and even fantastical constructions, provides a starting point. Even this definition, while applicable to a great deal of fantasy, including the works examined in this study, is subject to certain qualifications. The oldest forms of literary expression, such as are found in mythology and folklore, are deeply fantastical, although at the time when they were produced, they did not necessarily conflict with accepted notions of the real.³ Nonetheless, for the purposes of this study, Hume's definition is appropriate, since the term "the fantastic" is used in a broad, general sense, denoting anything that creates a non-real effect, including areas such as the grotesque, the surreal, the bizarre, the uncanny and the absurd.

While acknowledging the way in which the fantastic contrasts with

or contradicts prevailing definitions of reality, it is important not to fall into the trap of separating it from the latter. As Hume points out, when this takes place the significance of the fantastic is reduced, and it can easily become perceived as peripheral (20). This occurs, for instance, in the case of Amaryll Beatrice Chanady who, in her study of magical realism, states that in fantasy (as opposed to this former mode) the irrational or supernatural seems strange and unreal. According to Chanady, both readers and characters are disconcerted by the fabulous events that take place, and seek a rational explanation for them (1985: 23-24). In this way, the contradiction (or, in Chanady's terms, "antinomy") between the real and the supernatural remains unresolved in fantasy (69). In a similar fashion, Erik Rabkin claims that the fantastic only arises when "the perspectives enforced by the ground rules of the narrative world are diametrically contradicted"--and the characters acknowledge this. Accordingly, when the fantastic becomes viewed as normal, it ceases to be fantasy (Rabkin, 1976: 8). Both Chanady and Rabkin ignore the fact that in a great deal of fantasy the protagonists do not regard the outlandish or inexplicable events they experience as improbable, but rather accept them, or are encouraged to accept them, along with the readers, as part of a different, more complex notion of reality.

In contrast, T.E. Apter's description of the fantastic, which acknowledges the way in which it participates in both the real and the unreal, provides a more flexible definition of its nature and function:

The initial impact of fantasy is its deviation from the norm. The further and more fascinating impact of fantasy derives from its connections to the norm, from the way in which it highlights the instability, inconsistency and underlying preposterousness of the normal (1982: 111).

Apter's observation leads us into a sense of the fantastic as a combination of the marvellous and mimetic, the rational and irrational, situating itself in an "interstitial" zone between these opposites (Jackson: 65). Through the way in which it is integrated into reality, the fantastic makes the "real" world seem "unreal", astounding, unpredictable and unfamiliar. In Jackson's words, "[t]he fantastic exists in the hinterland between the real and the imaginary, shifting the relations between them through its indeterminacy" (35). The word "indeterminacy" is significant here. As we will see, reality slips in and out of fantasy in the work of writers such as Christopher Hope, Ivan Vladislavic and Brink, and it becomes hard to separate the one from the other.

The novels and stories of these writers contrast sharply with much South African fiction in English. With its clear-cut, straightforwardly apprehendable rationality, its sharp divisions between light and shadow, such literature reflects the day-time world. "We like to think we live in daylight," Le Guin observes, "but half the world is always dark." The fantastic represents the other side of human experience, and it "speaks the language of the night" (Le Guin: 5). Many may find it easier and more

reassuring not to venture into this shadowy, perilous night-time world. C.G. Jung writes that "[t]he ordered cosmos [man] believes in by day is meant to protect him from the fear of chaos that besets him by night" (1971: 95).

As we shall also see in the course of this study, the fantastic offers us access to certain areas of experience that the types of realism favoured by most South African writers in English cannot reach so easily. In this way, the fantastic has the ability to expand our mental horizons. As Marcel Brion puts it, this mode "opens into the widest spaces" (in Jackson: 22). Likewise, Todorov tells us that it "permits us to cross certain frontiers that are inaccessible so long as we have no recourse to it" (158).

While many South African novels and stories belong to what Jung terms the psychological mode of creation, in which "we need never ask ourselves what the material consists of or what it means". the "night-world" (Jung: 91, 95) of the fantastic has its roots in aspects of the visionary mode, which has a completely different effect on us:

We are astonished, confused, bewildered, put on our guard or even repelled, we demand commentaries and explanations. We are reminded of nothing in everyday life, but rather of dreams, night-time fears, and the dark, uncanny recesses of the human mind (Jung: 91).

The visionary mode draws upon the strange, yet deeply familiar realms of the unconscious:

However dark and unconscious this night-world may be, it is not wholly unfamiliar. Man has known it from time immemorial It is only we who have repudiated it ... building up in its place an apparently safer and more manageable world of consciousness within which natural law operates like human law in a society (Jung: 95).

Certainly, the power of fantastical images derives in part from the way in which they are connected to the world of dreams and the depths of the human psyche. Through fantastical imagery that "translates into verbal images and coherent narrative the intuitions and perceptions of the unconscious mind" (Le Guin: 5) the overly heavy reliance on the rational, conscious world can be compensated for. In this way, these forms of creative expression "can have the effect of bringing a one-sided, unadapted, or dangerous state of consciousness back into equilibrium" (Jung: 97-98).

This would be endorsed by Brink, who believes that it is the role of the imagination--particularly in its more magical, fabulous manifestations--to remedy the emotional and spiritual deprivation from which South Africans have suffered:

I think writing imaginative literature ... is a kind of respon[se] to the dreariness of a merely linear, merely

realistic approach to the world. ... [F]or half a century at least, an extremely rational kind of ideology was imposed on us, which makes it all the more necessary for the resources of the imagination to be tapped by all kinds of imaginative artists And the drier, the more arid the intellectual climate within which an ideology like apartheid takes root becomes, the more urgent it becomes for the survival of the fullness of the human spirit to turn to these other resources, these other areas and dimensions of the mind, to amplify them (App. C: 332).

By cutting ourselves off from the fantastic, we are denying a vital aspect of human experience, Brink argues. A number of writers and critics of the fantastic dwell on this. For example, Tolkien describes fantasising as a natural human activity (54), while in The Uses of Enchantment (1976), Bruno Bettelheim sets out to prove that fairy tales address essential human needs. In this way, Brink, Tolkien, Bettelheim and Le Guin suggest that the fantastic has the ability to assist in the development of individual psychological and spiritual resources.

The philosopher Martha C. Nussbaum expresses similar sentiments in Poetic Justice: the Literary Imagination and Public Life (1996). In the following passage, she describes the type of creative activity which forms part of the imaginative continuum that eventually slides into the fantastic: "[N]ovels embody and generate--to Mr Gradgrind's chagrin--the activity that he calls "fancy", that ability to imagine nonexistent possibilities, to

see one thing in another, to endow a perceived form with complex life" (4). For Nussbaum this imaginative activity is not self-indulgent frippery, but a crucial means of enlarging and enhancing the type of perceptions we bring to bear on the reality we inhabit.

One of the most significant functions of the fantastic is the latter's capacity to deepen our sense of the real by making us aware of the extraordinary, complex, even marvellous nature of human experience--what Le Guin refers to as "the incredible realities of our existence" (1975: 29). Gabriel Garcia Marquez tells us that his own writing arose from an awareness of this: "I was able to write One Hundred Years of Solitude simply by looking at reality, our reality, without the limitations which rationalists and Stalinists through the ages have tried to impose on it to make it easier for them to understand" (Mendoza and Marquez: 56).

As we have suggested, already, the danger of simplified versions of the real is that they can imprison us, intellectually, imaginatively and psychologically. Fantasy, on the other hand, can offer us release. Tolkien, again, emphasises this aspect of the fantastic when he describes the effect of Recovery, "the regaining of a clear view" (57), which enables us to view the familiar from original, unexpected perspectives:

Creative fantasy ... may open your doors and let all the locked things fly away like cage-birds. ... [Y]ou will be

warned that all you had (or knew) was dangerous and potent, not really effectively chained, free and wild; no more yours than they were you (58-59).

As Marquez's above comment suggests, the fantastic springs from a refusal to be bound by accepted, commonplace notions of reality. In the alternatives it offers to conventional beliefs and dominant ideologies, it has the ability to perform what Rushdie regards as a crucial function of literature:

One of the things a writer can do is to say: Here is the way in which you're told you're supposed to look at the world, but actually there are also some other ways. Let us never believe that the way in which people in power tell us to look at the world is the only way we can look, because if we do that, then that's an appalling kind of self-censorship (in Appiganesi and Maitland, 1990: 23).

In contrast to the security of long-established certainties, the fantastic can give rise to amazement and bewilderment. Olsen regards the fantastic as "a mode designed to surprise, to question, to put into doubt" (23) because it calls our definitions of the real and the imaginary into question. In a comparable way, Chanady describes the disorientation experienced by a reader of fantasy (10), while Rabkin emphasises "astonishment" (8).

A particularly vivid depiction of this type of response evoked

by the fantastic occurs in Rushdie's The Satanic Verses (1988). When various characters are confronted with the miraculous, they "were amazed, and retreated with confounded expectations, that is to say with a hole in their pictures of the world that they could not paper over" (488). In turn, this calls to mind Jung's description of the effect of the visionary mode, which "[rends] from top to bottom the curtain upon which is painted the picture of an ordered world" (90).

Far from being merely a temporally startling or confusing novelty, the special value of this effect of the fantastic lies in the way in which it leads us into richer, more intense and more varied images of the real, which all too often are obscured by settled, habitual perceptions. One fantastical realm that embodies such alternative visions of reality is the carnival, which exists as the antithesis of the "official", established world. Unsurprisingly it is an area that South African literature in English has preferred to steer clear of, with a few exceptions.⁹ When Mikhail Bakhtin depicts what he calls the "official feast", he could almost be outlining the qualities we encounter, over and over again, in much South African fiction in English:

[It] asserted all that was stable, unchanging, perennial: the existing hierarchy, the existing religious, political, and moral values, norms, and prohibitions. It was the triumph of a truth already established, the predominant truth that was put forward as eternal and indisputable.

That is why the tone of the official feast was monolithically serious and ... the element of laughter was alien to it (1984: 9).

On the other hand, the carnival is a sphere in which gleeful misrule reigns supreme and vibrant, prodigal abandonment triumphs over rational, authoritarian checks and controls. With its startling twists, inversions, exaggerations and distortions, the carnivalesque readily lends itself to the fantastical:

We find here ... the peculiar logic of the "inside out" ..., of the "turnabout," of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings. A second life ... is constructed; it is ... a "world inside out" (Bakhtin, 1984: 11).

In varying ways, the carnivalesque lies at the heart of Hope's, Vladislavic's and Brink's use of the fantastic. Indeed, it represents an important constituent of a great deal of contemporary fantasy, characterising many of the non-real elements in the fiction of writers as various as Thomas Pynchon, Kurt Vonnegut, Marquez, Rushdie, Ben Okri and Angela Carter and a number of others. However, the concept of the carnival is particularly significant in the South African literary context for it brings to the fore particular aspects of human experience that have been disregarded or censured within that country's fiction and more broadly, within our society as a whole.

Importantly, the carnivalesque opens up a space for uninhibited hilarity and sheer delight in life. Its sphere is one in which seriousness seems a ludicrously inappropriate response, for the carnival takes in all the preposterous absurdities of human experience, seeing the world "in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity" (Bakhtin, 1984: 11). All the rituals and ceremonies taking place during the carnival were based on laughter (Bakhtin, 1984: 9, 5) and, in the same way, laughter forms a crucial feature of the fantastic in the case of all three writers. In the context of South African literature, these humorous aspects of the fantastic can, potentially, free us from the fears, constraints, the self-righteousness as well as the stiflingly reverential attitudes for certain figures, hallowed South African icons and historical events that mark or mar much fiction in English. As Bakhtin puts it: "Laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object, before the world" (1981: 23). The realist retort to this might be that laughter never won a war. This may be true, yet it shows us other vistas beyond that of the battlefield.

Hand in hand with laughter goes the ludic impulse, which the carnival affirms as a fundamental human activity. Play is part of the inherently carnivalesque for, in Roger Abrahams's words, it "invokes the power of licence or excuse just at the point where society would begin to impinge with its 'but seriously...' rules" (1980: 122). Furthermore, the delight that arises from unconstrained imaginative play is clearly an essential part of aesthetic experience. Yet the value of this has been long denied

not only by South African writers and critics, but also in theoretical approaches to fantasy. Jackson, for instance, sees her study as attempting to militate against the notion of fantasy as a simple pleasure principle (2). She acknowledges the enjoyment of reading fantasy, yet she asserts that by allowing works to remain as closed, "innocent" or pleasure-giving, one ignores "what might be going on under the cover of this pleasure" (10). In this way, she reduces aesthetic delight to a potentially deceptive surface quality, concealing issues of greater importance. This study also seeks to demonstrate that pleasure plays a central part in the nature and effect of the fantastic. To diminish its role or leave it out of the equation is to deprive the fantastic of a great deal of its force. As Robert Scholes maintains, literature that does not give pleasure is devoid of life:

There is a lot of writing going on today which is technically admirable and in accordance with all of the standards for literary excellence that have been established over the past generation. But not many people want to read this fiction. ... This is a crucial aspect of the situation of contemporary fiction, so that when Jerry Klinkowitz says that self-reflexive fiction can be fun, I would answer that it had better be fun, it has to be. When it isn't fun, it is as dead as any type of writing that has ever appeared--deader perhaps (1979: 213).

There is a further dimension to the matter that merits

consideration here. In his discussion of the carnivalesque elements that infuse grotesque imagery, Bakhtin focusses, first and foremost, on the liberatory quality of the former:

In all [its literary manifestations during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries] ... the carnival-grotesque form exercises the same function: to consecrate inventive freedom, to permit the combination of a variety of different elements and their rapprochement, to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from cliches, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted. This carnival spirit offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things (1984: 34).

Much South African literature in English has evidently been powerfully influenced by what Bakhtin terms necessity. "[F]orms of inhuman necessity ..." he tells us, "direct the prevailing concept of the world. Necessity in every concept which prevails at any time, is always one-piece, serious, unconditional, and indisputable" (1984: 49). But the carnivalesque has the capacity to offer a release from necessity. Bakhtin continues:

But historically the idea of necessity is relative and variable. The principle of laughter and the carnival spirit ... destroys this limited seriousness and all pretense of an extratemporal meaning and unconditional value of

necessity. It frees human consciousness, thought, and imagination for new potentialities. For this reason, great changes, even in the field of science, are always preceded by a certain carnival consciousness that prepares the way (1984: 49).

In his discussion of Rabelaisian laughter (which is rooted in folklore and expresses qualities of the carnival), Bakhtin observes that not only does such laughter destabilise established structures and systems of control but it also brings together that which has traditionally been separated and disunited (1981: 170). This forms part of Rabelais's "fantastic realism" which, according to Bakhtin, is affirmative in that it strives to recreate "a spatially and temporally adequate world able to provide a new chronotope for a new, whole and harmonious man, and for new forms of human communication" (1981: 169). Through the destruction of customary connections and hierarchies and "the creation of unexpected matrices, unexpected connections ... a new picture of the world necessarily opens up" (1981: 168).

However, before proceeding any further, it needs to be borne in mind that the carnivalesque does not necessarily always free us from the constraints that it seems to defy. As Bakhtin emphasises, when he describes the carnival as a form of "temporary liberation", the "official" world always reasserts itself over the latter.¹⁰ The carnival is thus ambiguous, containing both the capacity for subversive liberties and also the potential to entrench the established order by creating a

temporary space in which dissident, anti-establishment views can find brief expression, all the better to contain them in the long run.¹¹ This study will, therefore, take cognizance of the possibility that, through the carnivalesque elements that it employs, the fantastic forms that we encounter in Hope's, Vladislavic's and Brink's fiction might ultimately lead back to--rather than serve as a release from--the types of imaginative confinement against which they appear to revolt. We will need, therefore, to examine whether or not the three writers in question succeed in negotiating these hazards in their search for greater imaginative freedoms.

Before examining the way in which these three writers make use of the fantastic in their fiction, one final aspect requires attention. Like Rabelais's work, their novels and stories could also be described as "fantastic realism". But here an important distinction must be noted. Neither Hope, Vladislavic nor Brink are primarily fantasy writers. Instead, they make use of fantastic elements in their work. As an element, the fantastic is fraught with special potential. A number of critics have commented on the way it can exist, as a force for expansion and transformation, within the realistic. "Now we can look at the fantastic as a form of writing which is about opening up subversive spaces within the mainstream rather than ghettoizing fantasy by encasing it within genres", declares Armitt (2).

The fantastic's ability to exist as a disruptive, challenging presence, within other types of writing, represents a prominent

trend in contemporary fiction. Brian McHale, for instance, refers to the fantastic "charge" which seems to be diffused through much postmodern writing (1987: 83). The term "charge" is especially significant here. Like an electrical current, the fantastic works within the familiar, transforming the well-known and the commonplace in dramatic and often unforeseen ways. Furthermore, an electrical current is invisible and cannot be pinned down. Likewise, the fantastic is a vital, moving force at work within texts, and it cannot be contained in a clear-cut, unitary description.

As McHale's image also suggests, in a society such as our own, which has long been--and, in many respects still is--beset with numerous checks and controls, the fantastic is valuable precisely because it contains the capacity to elude these. Within the small enclosed space that is South African fiction in English, it can serve as a window, letting in light and fresh air, and opening out onto vistas that have long been closed off. The extent to which this is accomplished in Hope's, Vladislavic's and Brink's novels and stories will be examined in the next three chapters.

Notes

1. As Sitas's observation indicates, many writers and critics--including prominent Latin American writers such as Alejo Carpentier and Gabriel Garcia Marquez--view magical realism as an essentially Latin American phenomenon (Carpentier, 1995: 105-106; Mendoza and Marquez, 1983: 35). In this study, however, the category "magical realism" is used more broadly, to denote

writers who seek to express a more fluid, multifarious vision of the real by incorporating the mythical and the supernatural into historical and political realities in their work. The term is employed in a particularly wide-ranging sense in Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris's collection of critical essays on magical realism (1995), given that the fiction of writers as diverse as Toni Morrison, Graham Swift and Gunther Grass is discussed in this anthology.

2. Hume comments on the way in which this perception has influenced various theoretical approaches to the fantastic (8).

As has already been noted, the whole issue of the mimetic nature of art is a complex one, given the specific nature of South African fiction in English. We have seen how apparently realistic approaches can, in fact, be "unreal", in the superficial, unconvincing or distorted images of reality they contain.

3. These arguments may seem to be undermined by the fact that Afrikaans literature, which originates from the most overtly puritanical of all South African cultures, contains far more fantastical elements than does literature in English. The reasons for this are too many and complex to examine here, but a few possibilities can be mentioned briefly.

First, many of the Afrikaans writers who have made use of the fantastic, such as Rabie, Leroux, Breytenbach and Van Heerden were literary rebels, and the use of this approach constituted part of their revolt against the repressive aspects of the Afrikaner establishment. Furthermore, having moved away from one set of authorities, they did not submit as readily to another as did their counterparts in English, who eschewed the fantastic because it was not deemed appropriate, given the urgency of the South African political struggle.

Moreover, Brink emphasises that the fantastic in Afrikaans literature owes its existence in part to the role that oral narrative traditions that draw on the supernatural--such as the ghost story--have played in Afrikaner culture (App. C: 331).

4. This is evident, for instance, in Don Dodson's objections to Casey Motsisi's work, with its delight in drunken festivities, ingenious trickery and human eccentricities. For Dodson, such revelry is not only inappropriate in the face of political oppression, but by failing to overtly critique the latter, it serves to reinforce it (1974: 328). In this way, Dodson ignores the subversive possibilities of Motsisi's brand of insouciant humour.

5. See Barthes's The Pleasure of the Text (1975) and Steiner's The Scandal of Pleasure (1995).

6. In contrast, there seems to be more space for the comic in drama. Some of the most prominent anti-apartheid plays of the 1980s like Woza Albert (1981) and Asinamali (1985) offer instances of this, as do the caricatures of the factory owner and Margaret Thatcher in the Sarmcol Workers' Play.

7. Arguably, Tom Sharpe's novels dealing with South Africa constitute further examples of literary satire in this country. Outside the English-language literary arena, the follies and dissonances in South African society and politics have given rise to a number of well-known satirists, including Pieter-Dirk Uys and Robert Kirby, while a range of political cartoonists such as Zapiro have drawn attention to the absurdities that continue to form part of life in their country.

8. Hume disagrees with this, arguing that mythology departs from reality in that it depicts supernatural events that certainly cannot be verified scientifically (33). Nonetheless, she overlooks the fact that the original communities within which such myths arose would have regarded them as reinforcing, rather than contradicting, their specific conceptions of reality.

9. The work of Motsisi is infused with the spirit of the carnival and, so at various points, are some of Ndebele's tales, such as "Uncle". Lokangaka Losambe argues that Mbulelo Mzamane's Mzala (1980) is carnivalesque (2000: 29), but these represent a few exceptional cases.

10. This is, of course, comparable to Jackson's description of the effect of the fantastic, in which she states that it only offers a temporary glimpse of destabilisation and transgression.

11. Bakhtin cites a defense of the carnival contained in a circular letter of the Paris School of Theology in 1444, which states: "[W]e permit folly on certain days so that we may later return with greater zeal to the service of God" (1984: 75).

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CHAPTER TWO: CHRISTOPHER HOPE'S SOUTH AFRICA

I

Christopher Hope was born in 1944, four years before the Nationalist Party came to power in South Africa. He grew up during the 1950s and 1960s, the era of Prime Ministers Verwoerd and Vorster. This chapter examines the way in which Hope explores this period through his use of fantastic elements in A Separate Development (1981), Black Swan (1987) and selected stories in Learning to Fly (1990), a revised edition of Private Parts and Other Tales (1982).¹

The nature of Hope's imaginative engagement with the society of his youth is shaped by his sense of frustration, alienation and displacement as a white English-speaking South African. He describes himself as growing up "this curiously labelled creature, a white semi-Irish, half-Catholic South African" (Appendix A: 304), beleaguered by the forces of Calvinist Afrikanerdom. Both the opening pages of Kruger's Alp (1984) and his semi-autobiographical travelogue White Boy Running (1988) depict his Catholic school being gradually engulfed by Pretoria University:

Our Catholic Alamo occupied roughly four large blocks of prime suburban real estate, ... hard by the spreading campus of Pretoria University, rapidly becoming the largest in the country and flush with funds from the incoming Government, which pressed upon the playing fields, church

and schools within our holy stockade, unable for the moment to swallow us but beginning to spread round the sides of a small estate in a pincer movement (1988: 89).

This image of an ever-encroaching symbol of the state, in the form of a powerful bastion of Christian National Education, taking over the grounds of Hope's school, symbolically suggests the latter's sense that, as a white English-speaking South African, in a National-Party dominated society, the ground had been cut from under him, in an emotional, psychological and political sense. Caught between the forces of white Afrikaner nationalism on the one hand and black nationalism on the other, with no middle terrain that could be securely occupied (Hope, 1996: 111), he felt his own sense of his identity as an English-speaking South African fading into unreality before the more powerful assertions of South African identity expressed by others around him. According to Hope, this did not necessarily disturb the complacency of white English-speakers, who devised a fake sense of belonging and meaning, by "inventing" for themselves a country to which they could belong. The country which they constructed was one for outsiders, immigrants, reassuringly reminiscent of Europe. "No wonder then that I felt homesick long before I ever left South Africa," he remarks (1996: 111).

But it is not solely as a white English-speaking liberal that Hope feels peripheral and alienated. He sees South African writers as lonely, relatively unimportant figures in a society in which cultural activity is grossly undervalued and, indeed,

denigrated. In 1976, he described the position of the poet in South Africa as "negligible, inhabiting as he does a universe distinct from the real world of rugby, separate toilets and pass books" (1976: 91).

To an extent, Hope embraces this sense of isolation and marginality, emphasising the fact that it has had a profound effect not only on his life but also on his concerns as a writer. Over and over again, in critical articles and interviews, he expresses his detestation for established groupings, centralised systems of control and the prevailing authorities. In part, he justifies his attitude in political terms:

[B]ecause I come out of South African society, in which the entire society has been demarcated into groups, where there is no life outside of the group, where all thinking is group thinking, I have a natural abhorrence for any group at all; and so, inevitably, I find it difficult to associate myself with group thinking or group statements (Joffe, 1989: 101).

Of course, not all English-speaking, liberal white South Africans felt the same way as Hope. Instead, some writers (for instance, Nadine Gordimer and Menan du Plessis) working during the 1980s, the period when much of the above-mentioned fiction by Hope was produced, chose to associate themselves, both in their writing and their public utterances, with various groupings with strongly mass-based political agendas, the Congress of South African

Writers and the United Democratic Front, in particular. Hope's solitary, intensely individualistic vision, on the other hand, takes him down paths that such writers would not choose to explore. Rejecting the clear-cut sense of moral certainty that infuses much South African literature in English, Hope declares defiantly: "I wish to see thoroughly and absolutely undermined the easy certainties upon which most societies rest" (Joffe: 102).

Adrift in a society that he felt at odds with and eschewing the emotional and psychological (but definitely not always physical) security of identification with specific groupings and causes, Hope opted for self-imposed exile in 1975. His first novel, A Separate Development, set in South Africa in the 1950s, was begun in the same year. Along with his other novels and stories dealing with life under apartheid, this book constitutes an attack on the political authorities who dominated his youth: "I am out to get the fellows who ruined my Sundays, who put an end to history as we might have known it from 1948, when the shades came down", he declares (1984b: 285). "Anger recalled in exile is my spur," he observes elsewhere. "You need space to swing an axe" (1996: 112). This type of language has an impassioned ring to it, yet unlike the "urgency" of his poetry (Joffe: 92), Hope's fiction has a detached quality. He has described it as "a retrospective ... a long look back" (Joffe: 92). This aspect of his work--and the ironic angle that such distancing often facilitates--sets it apart from much South African fiction in English of the 1970s and 1980s, typified as it was by a sense of emotional involvement,

deep seriousness and, frequently, expressions of political commitment.

Hope does not call himself an exile, an expatriate or an emigrant, but rather "an escapee" (1984b: 285). In the same way, he describes his writing as a form of escape--and, indeed, it is this, more than anything else, that informs the nature of his imaginative interaction with South Africa. "Reality", he remarks, "was so deadly boring when it wasn't lethal that one tried for other ways of being and other ways of writing" (App. A: 304).

He describes the society of his childhood as a small, confined world, with tedium its most characteristic feature, endorsing, for example, Denis Herbstein's view of the Verwoerd era as "the doldrum years" (1986: 75-76). For Hope, life under apartheid was "a siege existence which had about as much joy in it as you will find in Potchefstroom on a wet religious holiday" (1984b: 286). His novels and short stories produced during the 1970s and 1980s, in their unpredictable turns of events, their sense of delight in follies and incongruities and their focus on the bizarre qualities lying just below the seemingly orderly surface of South African life, represent a form of imaginative retaliation against the "achingly dull" society of his youth (1986: 76). Through these means, they offer a release from its constraints. In White Boy Running, he describes the "desperate need" that he felt when he was a child growing up in a white, middle class Johannesburg suburb for "variety, change, movement" (1988: 68). His writing, particularly in its comic, non-realistic aspects, provides a

means of meeting that need.

As has already been argued, the dreariness that Hope so longs to flee from extends beyond South African society to that country's literature in English. Hope critiques the work of Gordimer in this regard: "One might say that she perceives how deadly dull so much of it is, and she can sometimes be boring with it" (1975: 53). He objects to the way the latter expresses her points "tediously and sententiously" (1975: 53) and he disassociates himself from the "earnestness" (App. A: 301) that has been a hallmark of much South African fiction.

The nature of a society based on an ideology of racial dominance is one that, in Hope's eyes, can be best expressed in terms of images of enclosure and imprisonment. He describes South Africa as "the capital of walls" (Joffe: 93), as a lunatic asylum (App. A: 303), a boarding school (1974: 105) and a zoo, "in which we build our own cages, and not only that, but are encouraged to do so" (Joffe: 104). Language is used as a form of mental incarceration, and in doing so, it reinforces what Hope perceives as the soul-destroying, monotonous authoritarianism of South African society. Words function as "the strong right arm of ideology" (1977: 76),² twisting and inverting meaning. A case in point is the way apartheid was described as "equal freedoms"-- whereas, as Hope observes, those who appealed to the ideas of equality or freedom often ended up in prison (1993: 2). He also cites an expression frequently used by the white South African establishment, "our traditional way of life", remarking that it

was "a triple lie since it was neither 'ours', nor 'traditional', nor in the least like 'life', but a siege existence" (1984b: 285-286).

This sort of language can "anaesthetize" its citizens, as Hope puts it, numbing awareness (1993: 2). In fact, he once described South Africa as "a nation of sleepwalkers" (Joffe: 97). But it is also through words that they can be awakened from their stupor. In Hope's own case, part of the impulse to turn to writing arose from a "need either to get out of the environment in which I found myself, or somehow to seek to change it" (Joffe: 92). These two desires are interconnected, for in resorting to writing as a form of escape, Hope constructs imaginative alternatives to the tedious, circumscribed view of life accepted as the norm in white South African society. In this way, his fiction, especially in its non-realistic aspects, constitutes a counter-attack:

[I]t takes one strategy to defeat another...They have not only declared themselves to be in charge of the day-to-day running of the place, but they have taken over the dictionaries as well. They define the terms ... so their definitions work, and everybody is expected to conform to those definitions and to those ways of looking at life. It seems to me that the only way to face that is not by attempting, in some realistic way, to rebut the terminology of the State. What one has to fall back on is a means of subverting it. ... [O]ne wants to take all these

distortions and subject them to yet further distortion ... to see how far you have to twist a shape for it to break up in your hands (Joffe, 97).

In opting for an approach that favours "distortion"--the warped and the grotesque--Hope moves in the direction of the fantastic, away from the realism and the narrow, time-worn approaches that have dominated much South African fiction in English.

In the above passage, and indeed in a great deal of his writing, Hope recurrently depicts South Africa under apartheid in non-real terms. The effect of this is two-fold. In recreating this society, he is redefining it and, in refusing to accept its definitions, he is releasing himself from its control. In addition, Hope's fantastic images of South Africa are filled with irreverent mockery, and in this way his use of non-real elements also serves as a form of satirical revenge against a society that denied him a meaningful, stable sense of place and belonging.

By locating the country of his birth in the realms of the irrational and the supernatural, he takes issue with many South African writers and critics who have endorsed realism as the most appropriate literary mode, arguing that this approach is neither an adequate nor useful means of exploring the nature of South Africa during apartheid. For Hope, this society, with its "fictional, impressionistic quality", "eludes conventional descriptions" and, if writers attempt to represent it in artistic forms, "a strange phantasmagoria" results (Joffe: 98, 103).

Paradoxically, in the South African context, realism becomes a less "real" literary approach than the fantastic:

South Africa does operate without any real sense of substance and completeness. ... [W]e parted company with reality--we embarked on a night-time adventure--a surreal and curious nightmare of our own choosing and of our own direction, which has so emptied the conventional terms of their meaning that we can no longer address each other in any of the languages which seem to apply, except of course the languages of dream and nightmare, and of course, the language of violence (Joffe: 1989: 98).

Hope's refusal to view or depict this society in straightforwardly realistic terms goes hand in hand with a rejection of more conventional expressions of deep distress or moral outrage as effective literary responses. Instead, he chooses ironic laughter, as we see, for instance, in his depiction of Moscow, which he compares to the country of his birth.

[A]fter 15 years out of Africa, I had found a foreign city that reminded me of home.

It was, I suppose, the quality of the lies that attracted me; lies so lush, so many, springing up overnight, fresh crops sprouting among the mossy, rooted feet of official spokesmen; veined toadstools, roseate, so beautifully lethal (1989: 42).

In this passage, Hope chooses to marvel at the lies he encounters in extravagant imagery, turning political utterances and bureaucratic pronouncements into expressions of a poisonous fairytale world, with a compelling appeal. Rather than risking being overwhelmed by the political situation, he revels in the way in which it could be exposed to ridicule: "It always seemed to me that weeping never did very much good. It was perhaps more useful to point to the absurdities of things and to almost defiantly relish those, and that might be more effective somehow" (App. A: 302). (This attitude is, of course, facilitated by Hope's own position as detached ironic outsider.) There is sardonic glee in his remark, for, in exploring the craziness of life under apartheid in this manner, he highlights and magnifies its most peculiar qualities, gaining satisfaction from the process.

Although this moves his fictionalisation of the South African reality from established tendencies within that country's literature in English, Hope's work is not markedly fantastical, in contrast to, for instance, that of Ivan Vladislavic. Yet one of the most distinctive features of Hope's fiction is the non-real quality that infuses the most familiar and typically South African situations he describes. In turning to his first novel, A Separate Development, we are plunged into a world which utilises various standard characters and scenarios from liberal realist fiction (the novel opens in familiar, comfortable white middle-class suburbia and features a protagonist who becomes uncomfortably aware of the oppressive nature of his society) but

at the same time shifts increasingly into the realms of the surreal. This arises, in part, from the way in which Hope turns the most shocking occurrences into occasions for ghastly humour.

The book is set in South Africa during the 1950s, "in doldrum country, where nothing shifts or alters" (193)--except the career and expectations of Harry Moto, the hapless narrator, who finds that, as his racial group becomes more and more obviously indeterminate, reality steadily becomes increasingly incredible and uncontrollable. This is clearly evident in the following passage, in which two inept security policemen attempt to torture Harry. While South African fiction contains many descriptions of police interrogations, Hope refuses to treat such a scene in a manner that many readers familiar with this literature might have come to expect:

Pielletjies took from his bag a contraption that looked like a souped-up meat mincer with a turning handle, electronic gauges and trailing wires. ... I put up a token resistance, skittering around my cell, my bare feet slapping the stone floor like a maniac butcher beating a steak and squealing helplessly. They threw me on the bunk and tied my hands while Stokkies pulled down my shorts and attached wires to my testicles with little clips that nipped like army ants. ...

"Testing!" Pielletjies sang out. "Nod your head when you feel something, Harry." And he began cranking the handle.

"Feel anything?" ou Neels peered anxiously into my face.

I shook my head.

"Dammit!" cried Pielletjies turning the handle furiously until beads of sweat popped out on his forehead. ...

"It's probably bust. Or made in Korea, or something. You can depend on nothing these days. Come see here, Neels. It's all rusty inside, man."

"It rusts because they throw water on it sometimes to jack up the charge," ou Neels explained.

"Bladdy marvellous! How do they expect it to work properly if they let it rust like this?"

"They told me in Stores," ou Neels said defensively, "they told me it had just been serviced."

"Oh well, we all know about Stores." Pielletjies began to untie me gloomily. "They'll tell you anything in Stores." He took the Bible and paged through it. "Sorry about this, Harry. Didn't mean to mess you around. But perhaps it wasn't meant to be--this time. Perhaps we've seen God's hand in this."

"It was the rust," ou Neels muttered, unclipping the contact. He stooped and barked in my ear, "We're getting tired of you, kaffir. Time's running out."

Pielletjies found a bit he liked and smoothed back the pages with a huge palm. "Here, listen ... 'Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken to the fat of rams.' Samuel 15:22."

"He means that next time we'll fry your balls off." Ou Neels was angrily forcing the machine back into its canvas bag (221-222).

More often than not, political prisoners in much South African literature in English are depicted as rising above the primitive level of their captors. Harry, on the other hand, is a pathetic figure of fun, "skittering around" the cell like a trapped cockroach. This image contributes to the general effect of the scene, which rather than steeping itself in moral anguish at the events it is dealing with, careers along on a wave of comic exuberance. But, if Harry is ridiculous, his tormenters are made even more so. The instrument of torture becomes "a souped-up meat mincer" and the scene descends to burlesque with Pielletjies frantically and futilely cranking the handle of the defective electro-shock apparatus. His name itself--the diminutive version of the Afrikaans word for penis--is a piece of intentionally heavy-handed irony. Seen through the distorting, diminishing lens of Hope's gaze, the security police and their interrogation procedures become reduced to little more than features in a twisted farce.

Such satirical effects, arising as they do from the hideously inappropriate behaviour and preposterous responses in the passage, give rise to an atmosphere of non-reality. But yet it is this seeming departure from the real that, paradoxically, draws us closer to it, exposing attitudes and assumptions prevalent in South Africa during apartheid. Hope's fiction operates in terms of contradictions like these, which cumulatively lead the reader into greater and greater realms of absurdity that never lose their familiar aspects at the same time. It is, unfortunately, all too recognisable: the Bible

utilised to reinforce a particular political establishment and the torturer's detachment from the reality of what he is doing. Pielletjies sees himself as a respectable professional carrying out an honest day's work, expressing righteous indignation when he is let down by shoddy tools. The failure of the latter are, unsurprisingly, blamed on someone else: first, foreigners, then, even worse, people in another department.

Hope's concern with language, in the form of the hypocritical euphemisms with which political authorities seek to deceive themselves and others, also comes to the fore here. The greatest irony in the passage lies in the way in which characters condemn themselves not so much through what they do but in terms of what they say. As was frequently the case in South Africa during Nationalist Party rule, decency, humanity and reason are invoked as a means of enforcing their opposites. Ou Neels and Pielletjies, for instance, resemble concerned medical practitioners, ("Nod your head when you feel something") while trying to terrorise Harry into what is hoped will be a full confession. Pielletjies, however, embodies the most striking example of this tendency, for like many of Hope's state lackeys, his cruelty and hypocrisy are displayed in the frank, artless way he expresses himself, as he apologises humbly to Harry for not succeeding in torturing him. He then invokes religion and morality by turning to the Bible. The interpretations of the Biblical passage that follow show how, when language is pushed into the service of the state, its meaning becomes distorted and obscured. For Pielletjies, the archaic injunctions that he reads

represent a command to submit to the particular system of authority he serves, while Ou Neels registers only one word in the whole passage, "fat", which he promptly manipulates to suit the situation. The extract ends on this note, as the lofty rhetoric of the Old Testament is converted into the language of the servants of the Nationalist government, its dictates becoming abusive, racist threats.

A passage such as this one conveys the way the fantastical effects in Hope's South African fiction are generated particularly by his use of black humour. For Hope, the latter suggests an essential quality of life during the apartheid era:

I think that strain of unreality, that capacity for comedy bubbling out of the most unexpected places--often very dark and even violent comedy ... it seems to me it is something that is in the marrow of whatever the South African experience is. ... My impulse is to recognise something that it seems to me has always been there, a mixture of terror and comedy (App. A: 302).

Unlike Hope, many other South African writers in English during the same period would have concentrated on the terror and avoided including the comedy. In choosing to expose and confront political evil as directly as possible in their work, they felt that they could not afford the luxury of the off-beat or the subtle (such as the fantastic, for example).³ In contrast to the way we might respond to a realist novel of social protest, it is

not possible for us to have one clear, uncomplicated--and, possibly, also reassuringly straightforward--reaction to the comical aspects of the above passage. We are entertained and appalled at the same time.

Mathew Winston has pointed to just this in his study of black humour:

[Because it is] simultaneously frightening or threatening and farcical or amusing. ... [t]he violent combination of opposing extremes unsettles us and we do not know how to respond. ... Our emotional and intellectual reactions become confused; this in turn disturbs our certainty of moral and social values and challenges our sense of a secure norm (1972: 273).

The latter sentence describes what Hope views as the key function of the comic mockery in his fiction. He values the satirical, especially because he feels that there has, traditionally, been little space for it in South African literature (1974: 99). While he is reluctant to accord too much importance to the role of the writer in society, he does seem to think that the satirist has a vital part to play, for he asserts the firm belief that writing can--and should--"discomfort" those in positions of power (Joffe: 100). He has a deep antipathy to the shallow, self-satisfied assumptions upon which many white South Africans have based their perceptions of reality. In a society in which too many facile answers have been put forward and various dominant ideologies all

to be easily accepted, all of them contributing, in Hope's view, to the moral and intellectual dullness of South African society, his work does fulfil one traditional function of satire, which is to jolt us out of our complacency. Praising Roy Campbell's satire, Hope remarks: "he succeeded in offending people, and that's always a good thing" (App. A: 314).⁴

Linda Hutcheon provides another definition of black humour as in part "a defensive humour of shock, a humour of lost norms, of disorientation, of lost confidence" (1985: 78). This is borne out by Hope's narrators, such as Harry in the above passage, who frequently express the disastrous events in their lives in farcical terms, such being an indication of their own helplessness. We see too, that the nature of Harry's description indicates that not only has he lost control over his life, but he also lacks the ability to convey what happens to him in terms that could affirm his sense of self, or bestow a saving quality of dignity and significance on the disasters that befall him.

However, by its very nature, black humour has contradictory qualities. While it can be an expression of defeat and nihilism, it has the capacity to fulfil a more constructive function. As Robert Scholes observes, comedy "can look into depths which tragedy dares not acknowledge" (1979, 204). Indeed, Hope's approach enables us to face up to the nature of life under apartheid, with its "terrifyingly funny" ironies (Hope, 1986: 76) in a way that we would not necessarily be able to do in a more straightforwardly realistic work of fiction in English. For

example, although the effect of the above torture scene is predominantly satirical, it also succeeds in suggesting the dehumanising effect that torture can have, emotionally and psychologically, on those subjected to it and it conveys the appalling ingenuousness with which torturers justify their actions to themselves and their victims.

Harry and his interrogators represent the two different types of people we encounter in Hope's fiction. The closed systems in his world are, to use Ivan Vladislavic's words, occupied by "the big bastards who make the rules; and the little people who have to abide by them--or escape" (1992: 5). The majority of Hope's central characters belong to the latter grouping. Lucie Armitte could be referring specifically to Hope's work when she defines modern fantasy as a form of fiction which deals particularly with "the precariousness of apparently fixed structures, their transgression and the problems of the small-scale individual who finds herself amid large scale circumstances beyond her control" (1996: 72). It is precisely these features on which Hope bases the plot in A Separate Development--and many of his other short stories and novels. This leads us towards the next aspect of Hope's work that requires attention.

II

Hope presents us with seemingly insignificant, often confused and

vulnerable main characters--such as Harry, the unnamed orphan narrator in "Hilton Hits Back" and Lucky in Black Swan--who are, unwillingly and unwittingly, brought into conflict with their society's power structures. These may be riven with contradictions, incompetence, fears and inadequacies, yet they resemble a terrifying juggernaut which will inevitably crush them. Through such situations, Hope seeks to reveal how the fantastic is endemic to political ideologies, the social situations they give rise to and the effects these have on his characters. This is hinted at, for example, in the way in which Harry periodically describes the political system that turns his life upside down in terms that draw on the world of the supernatural. As the book progresses, he increasingly feels as if he is in the grip of malevolent forces beyond his control: "I was never again at Jack Wyner's swimming pool," he remarks. "After that the dark forces took over and my separate development began" (17).

The fantastical nature of the forces that turn Harry's comfortable life into a bewildering nightmare is made particularly apparent in the description of Bruno Lochner's and Ralph Swirsky's visions of the future included near the end of the novel. Lochner imagines developing high-speed trains that will move all the black workers between their black tribal reserves hundreds of miles from the cities and the whites-only cities themselves, while Swirsky envisages erecting high, electrified wire fences around those reserves, to "fence the buggers in" (195). From one angle, Lochner's and Swirsky's plans,

along with many of the other political pipe-dreams presented in Hope's novels and stories, could seem nothing other than "the dreams of the insane" (193), the grandiose delusions of eccentrics that should belong only in a work of fantasy. This impression is reinforced by the way Swirsky's plan seems to generate equally unhinged responses. His idea appeals to the newspapers to such an extent that they sponsor "competitions to find fencing designs based on traditional tribal motifs, so as to be in harmony with the tribal homelands through which the fences passed" (195). While this may appear extravagantly far-fetched, it actually serves to reinforce the reality of the situation, as in the torture scene. (We may recall, for instance, the psuedo-tribal images that adorned homeland universities and government buildings.) Lochner's and Swirsky's proposals, crazy as they appear, call to mind various forms of social engineering that took place during apartheid, in this way serving as a comment on the inhuman absurdities of the latter.⁵ In fact, their ideas would have been regarded by some as practical and commonsensical applications of the principles of racial segregation.⁶

The fact that it is hard to distinguish between the fictionalised fantasies described above and the all too real situations that arose from the policy of "separate development" could lead us to wonder if the hyperbolic episodes in Hope's fiction are not surpassed by the strangeness of the actual political situation which they seek to satirize. Certainly, various writers and critics have expressed the belief that the reality of life under

apartheid went beyond the wildest fictional imaginings. In 1976, for instance, T.T. Moyana cited Lewis Nkosi, who described the theme of the absurd as "the theme of daily living in South Africa", drawing the conclusion that in such a society, reality could not be overtaken by the creative imagination (1976: 95). Similarly, in an article on A Separate Development in 1986, Phil Goffe commented that the problem confronting South African satirists such as Hope was that their role had been supplanted by the news media which unwittingly sent itself up (91). Citing Philip Roth's assertion that twentieth century reality outdid the skills of any novelist (1986: 101), Goffe implied that Hope might share Roth's view.

Hope would, however, not agree. If we turn to other instances in his fiction, we see how the fantastic outstrips reality, creating scenarios that expand upon, contort and exaggerate aspects of life under apartheid. This is particularly evident in Hope's most shockingly funny story, the title tale from Learning to Fly. Colonel Rocco "Window Jumpin'" du Preez, a security police interrogator, is renowned for formulating "du Preez's law", his study of the ways in which political prisoners from different racial groups commit suicide in detention:

"Considering your average white man, ... my experience is that he prefers hanging Your white man in his last throes has a wonderful sense of rhythm--believe me, whatever you have heard to the contrary--I've seen several Whites about to cough it and all of them have been

wonderful dancers. ... When it comes to Africans, I have found that they, perverse as always, choose another way out. They are given to window jumping. This phenomenon has been very widespread in the past few years. Personally, I suspect its roots go back a long way, back to their superstitions--i.e. to their regard for black magic and witchcraft. Everyone knows that in extreme instances your average blackie will believe anything; that his witchdoctors will turn the white man's bullets to water; or, if he jumps out of a window thirteen stories above terra firma he will miraculously find himself able to fly. Nothing will stop him once his mind's made up. I've seen up to six Bantu jump from a high window on one day. Though the first landed on his head and the others saw the result they were not deterred. It's as if despite the evidence of their senses they believed that if only they could practise enough they would one day manage to take off" (1982: 2-3).

In this extract, Hope takes the notion of innate racial difference, extending it to encompass not only the way particular individuals live their lives, but also how they choose to end those lives, playing on common racial stereotypes (for example, black superstition and irrationality) in the process. As with the preceding extract from A Separate Development, in which the security policemen's view of themselves and their actions seems deranged, the above passage may seem like a grotesque joke, but the racist assumptions that constitute its starting point and the brutal satisfaction with which the speaker regards the deaths of

detainees were--and are--all too real.

Herman Charles Bosman is a writer Hope deeply admires (App. A: 314) and he provides, to an extent, a literary precedent for a passage such as the above one. We could turn, for instance, to the quotation from Bosman's story, "A Marico Scandal", included as an epigraph to A Separate Development, in which it is announced that Gawie Erasmus is coloured not because of his physical appearance, but because of other, less obvious, factors. (Although this is not included in the extract, it is asserted that Erasmus's racial identity can be deduced from the fact that he sleeps with his head underneath the blanket.) The tragi-comedy of "A Marico Scandal", focussing as it does on the absurdities underlying racism, offers a way of engaging with the South African reality that few other writers in English, apart from Hope, have chosen to explore.

Once again, rather than allowing himself to be overcome by the horror of death in detention, Hope meets it head-on, amplifying it, through the wealth of gruesomely jocular detail contained in du Preez's descriptions of detainees' suicides, which eventually rebounds on du Preez himself. His own inadequacies are exposed in his utterances, for he can only view those he meets as utterly determined by their racial group. He is unable to cope with a prisoner such as Jakes Mphahlele, who regards himself as motivated by essentially the same forces as du Preez. Ignoring the warning--and claim of spiritual kinship--implicit in Mphahlele's statement, "we are your children. We owe you everything" (9), du

Preez refuses to believe that his prisoner is capable of meeting him on his own ground. With hindsight, we become aware that the humourous energy that infuses the quoted extract arises in part from Hope's own sense of glee in his creation of du Preez, for in his unswerving adherence to a rigid ideology, the latter is setting himself up for eventual disaster.

Du Preez's argument unfolds logically, yet like some logical deductions it is inherently ridiculous, allowing for the possibility of huge errors of judgement--as is made obvious in the conclusion of the story:

Now we are out on a limb. We have no more facts to go on. All is buried in obscurity or say, rather, it is buried with du Preez who plunged from his window down to the landing field at the most horrible speed, landing on his head. Jake Mpahlele has never spoken of his escape from Colonel "Window Jumpin'" du Preez. All we have are the stories. Some firmly believe to this day that it was done by a special magic and Mpahlele had actually learnt to fly and the colonel on looking out of his window was so jealous at seeing a black man swooping in the heavens that he had plunged after him on the supposition, regarded as axiomatic in the days of the old regime, that anything a black man could do a white man could do ten times better. Others, more sceptical, said that the prisoner had hidden himself in the steel cabinet with the torture equipment and emerged to push du Preez to hell and then escaped in the confusion

you will get in a hive when you kill a queen bee. All that is known for sure is that du Preez lay on the landing field like wet clothes fallen from a washing line, terribly twisted and leaking everywhere (9-10).

The grisly jauntiness of the earlier extract comes full circle here. At the beginning of the story, du Preez derives cynical, superior amusement from the various ways the detainees under his control commit suicide. Now, at the end of the narrative, he ends up, like many of the other detainees, on the notorious "landing field". His death becomes, in turn, a subject for comedy. This humour is partly generated by the supernatural possibilities that Hope teasingly introduces into his story. In foregrounding the fantastical, the satirical effect is increased, for our attention is drawn to the way du Preez's belief system perilously intertwines the rational with the irrational. The image of "a black man swooping in the heavens" is presented as no more fantastical than the convictions that lead du Preez to his death. In formulating his "law" in the earlier passage, du Preez draws on the logical, superficially reasonable principles upon which apartheid was based. Yet, ironically, these very same principles may have led du Preez to undertake an action of utter lunacy. According to one version of events, he hurls himself from the window, convinced that if a black man can fly, so can he.⁷

Uncertainties pervade Hope's work. Yet, to add to these which permeate this story, we have no way of telling whether or not du Preez is insane. If he is deranged, this shows how madness has

a weird rationality to it, in that du Preez's action arises, with a certain inevitability, from the fundamental beliefs around which his society was organised. On the other hand, du Preez need not necessarily be regarded as demented, but as someone who has made a terrible mistake in basing his actions on fallacious convictions. As is so often the case in Hope's South Africa, the reasonable and the preposterous, the mad and the sane, become so intertwined that it is impossible to separate them. In this way, texts such as "Learning to Fly" and A Separate Development have a contradictory quality, which throws them "off balance" in certain respects--and, in consequence, has a similar effect on the reader.

The fact that Hope's fiction bewilders us in this way is not only indicative of its specific nature but also of certain qualities within the fantastic as a whole. According to T.E. Apter, the fantastic is always paradoxically both natural and unnatural and logical and illogical. He refers to Franz Kafka's Metamorphosis (1915) to illustrate his point:

Gregor Samsa's transformation obviously breaks natural laws: if the tale is not understood as occurring within our world it loses its point. However, at the same time as Gregor's transformation defies nature and logic, it reveals an unexpected order which indubitably belongs to our world. Recognition is puzzling not only because it is disturbing but because of the strangely literal language fantasy employs and the difficulty in marking out that area of

thought, response and perception which is thereby realistically described (1982: 20).

Nothing in Hope's world is fixed and definite. The second extract from "Learning to Fly" is riddled with ironies that undermine all the set assumptions asserted at the beginning of the story. Du Preez's action, although based on racist convictions, invalidates all the arguments supporting racial differentiation contained in his "law". His "supposition" is, in essence, no different from the "superstition" that he so derided in black detainees. When white supremacy is at stake, he is equally prepared to believe in the forces of witchcraft and black magic. Despite the way he derides black prisoners for refusing to accept the evidence of their own eyes, he leaps out of the very window from which he has seen so many of them plummet to their deaths.

In such a climate, no objective truth is accessible, and it is only in the realms of the imagination ("the stories") that meaning, however uncertain and contradictory, can be found. For the narrator in "Learning to Fly", as with so many of Hope's other narrators, any understanding of events is inadequate, and based on dubious, fragmentary hearsay. "Learning to Fly" seems designed to emphasise the difficulty of ever being able to establish a reassuringly secure understanding of the reality around us. By implication, it reveals the inadequacy of the firmly held beliefs that underpin the systems of domination contained in his novels and stories. Hope states categorically that he "can't abide" those "with a sense of mission" (App. A:

305). In the South Africa of his fiction, all such people have, like du Preez, leapt out into an abyss without anything solid to sustain them.

In Hope's eyes, the particular danger is that such figures seek to take others with them in their headlong flight towards disaster. Consider the following two extracts from "Hilton Hits Back." In the first passage, the anonymous narrator, a naive, impressionable first-year university student, has recently been recruited into student politics by the charismatic, arrogant Hilton. The latter decides that the narrator should lead a protest march:

"You will march right out front and tell the so-called electorate exactly what we think of the people they've voted into power and I hope it jolly well stings. ..."

"Don't you think, Hilt, that pushing him out front, especially with that placard, is risky? ... A baby accountant in his blazer and tie."

"But that's just it! There's something symbolic about it, something vestal, even. ... The virgin out front, pure and undefiled" (139).

Hilton assumes that because he is a prominent student leader, the police will arrest him, enabling him, in consequence, to gain further prestige in the eyes of his fellow students. However, the police ignore Hilton, and arrest the narrator instead. In this extract, the latter is addressed by the security policeman,

Swanepoel, into whose hands he has fallen:

"I mean, like I said last night--you've got the theory and I want to see action. Right? So being cooped up like this, the two of us, you are perfectly placed to tell me all I want to know about how to do it" (153).

Although Hilton and Swanepoel may belong to opposite poles of the political spectrum, at bottom they are similar in their unshakable convictions that their particular ideologies are the only valid ones and in the confident, arrogant way in which they coerce the narrator to become a central actor in their personal political fantasies. In this regard, they are typical of all the representatives of different forms of authority in Hope's novels and short stories, be they security policemen and politicians or teachers at Catholic schools. All attempt to inflict their unbalanced visions of how things should be on those around them.

We see the awe or the fear some of these characters induce, or the havoc they wreak in the lives of those around them. But, as with Pielletjies and Ou Neels, there is a great deal that is amusing in Hope's portrayal of figures such as Hilton and even Swanepoel--and in this way, they are undermined. The most powerful characters, on the other hand, the really "big bastards", like Dekker, the security policeman in A Separate Development, who tortures and kills in the service of the establishment he supports, yet weeps as he reads Cry, the Beloved Country, are made even more disturbing through the use of

comedy.* This is particularly the case in Hope's depiction of the biggest bastard of them all, the only real-life political figure to inhabit his fiction, Verwoerd himself, whose image Lucky defaces in Black Swan:

"Please don't do that."

"When my Granny Muriel comes here, when she goes past this picture, she spits. Everyone spits. Do you know this man? He is called the Doctor."

Ilse examined the Doctor. ...The Doctor's face was solid and rectangular, with plump high cheeks and wavy grey hair cut short at the sides. He was smiling faintly and this gave him an air of benignity that persisted until she looked into the light blue eyes which were small and rather narrow. The kindly air faded as she studied the eyes staring out above her head... .It was a curious face in which the dreamy quality of the equable visionary combined with the rock-like determination of the fanatic.

"My Granny says the Doctor wants to eat us" (41).

In this passage, Hope regards Verwoerd through the eyes of Lucky, an autistic black teenager in a South African township, for whom the imagination is more real than the reality he inhabits. Through a combination of realism and suggestions of threatening supernatural forces, Hope transforms the Prime Minister into an almost demonic figure, the Doctor, who "wants to eat us" (41), his huge picture gazing menacingly over the township from a giant billboard. This underlines the near-diabolical status Verwoerd

occupied in the imaginations of many South Africans and at the same time, it suggests the inflated opinion that he no doubt had of himself. There is cynical humour in the passage: in Lucky's terms, Verwoerd is a cannibal, and he is described simply as "the Doctor"--which is bitterly ironic, in that the diseased nature of the society he presided over was enforced by the policies he instituted. (The irony becomes even stronger when we consider that Verwoerd would have regarded himself as having a healing effect on South Africa, installing a healthy political system and purging the country of its evils.) By making Verwoerd appear larger than life, Hope enhances all his most alarming qualities, deepening our awareness of the extent to which he represented a force for destruction in the lives of ordinary South Africans.

We see Hope's preoccupation with the way bland, reassuring surface appearances (expressed in words like "smiling" and "benignity") inadequately obscure the ominous realities of South African life. This is intimated in the reference to Verwoerd's "small", "narrow" eyes. Hope expresses his distrust of political ideologies here, for the most dangerous member of the society in the text is the "visionary", who displays qualities of the "fanatic". While Verwoerd's particular fantasies have been enshrined in an ideology controlling the society in the text, Lucky's dream world is regarded as proof of his craziness.

The distortions and deformities of a society presided over by leaders like Verwoerd are given further concrete expression in the grotesque bodily images that abound in Hope's texts. The

violence that lurks just below the surface in his world erupts from time to time in macabre depictions of mangled bodies. The human body's vulnerability to maiming and destruction is frequently conveyed in absurd terms. We have seen this already, for instance, in the description of du Preez lying "like wet clothes fallen from a washing line, terribly twisted and leaking everywhere" (9-10). Similarly, there is Mama's corpse in A Separate Development, which is wedged face down between two steel stairs and hanging over her fruit stall, "dripping, like an old, over-ripe, weird, too soft fruit" (180).

According to Mikhail Bakhtin, the grotesque originated as part of the carnivalesque impulse (1984: 19, 24-25). In contemporary literature, it occurs especially in postmodern writing (McHale, 1987: 193) most frequently in works with magical realist qualities. Along the way, it has undergone various alterations and mutations. Bakhtin's description of the grotesque in Romantic literature applies equally well to the effect created by the grotesque in Hope's work:

The world of Romantic grotesque is to a certain extent a terrifying world, alien to man. All that is ordinary, commonplace, belonging to everyday life, and recognized by all suddenly becomes meaningless, dubious and hostile. Our own world becomes an alien world. Something frightening is revealed in that which was habitual and secure (1984: 38-39).°

The society out of which Hope's grotesque images of the body arise is one that has spiralled hazardously out of control. Consequently, images of physical vulnerability reinforce a sense of fragility and insecurity on other levels. Hope's characters cannot protect themselves from horrible injuries and death, and neither can they protect themselves from emotional and psychological damage. Images of malformed, mutilated bodies also evoke the disproportion and deformities in the political body, which as Harry remarks, "has based itself absolutely on the sacred belief in sundered, severed, truncated, fractured, split, divided, separate selves" (9).¹⁰

We find images of bodily and psychic disintegration threatening because, as Michel Foucault points out, we experience a particular sense of revulsion "to describing separations and dispersions, to dissociating the reassuring form of the identical", which destabilises the sense of order and control that we derive from a unified sense of self (1972: 12). This effect, of course, is precisely what Hope seeks to accomplish through his use of the grotesque--which, on the surface seems very different from the grotesqueries in the work of Gabriel Garcia Marquez and various other magical realists. These have a celebratory, regenerative quality that Hope's gruesome depictions of twisted, broken bodies lack. Nonetheless, both Hope's and Marquez's use of the grotesque, and all the other varying manifestations of this form fulfil, according to Bakhtin, the same essential function: "It leads men out of the confines of the apparent (false) unity, of the indisputable and stable" (1984:

A further way in which Hope attempts to upset that which, in the eyes of the white South African establishment, would have appeared rational or normal is in his use of the uncanny. On a psychological and spiritual level, the uncanny suggests the sense of dislocation and disruption embodied in physical terms through his use of the grotesque. Bakhtin's account of the Romantic grotesque closely resembles Freud's definition of the uncanny as that which creates a sense of not being "at home" in the world (Jackson: 65), as opposed to its German opposite, heimlich, meaning homely, or heimsich, native (Freud, 1955: 221). In Hope's fiction, the uncanny operates particularly at this level of alienation, in that the South Africa his central characters inhabit is not a place in which many of them feel safe or at ease.

Hope shares his characters' sense of estrangement. In his non-fiction, he consigns South Africa to the realms of unreality, describing it as "little more than a nest of shadows," a non-country (1984b: 284). He justifies this perception on the grounds that, not being able to relate to or identify with the principles upon which South African society was based, he gradually lost faith in a sense of the reality of the country. Belief in the existence of a place, Hope argues, is bound up with "a belief in some of the sad, savage injustices which have been practised there, a belief, in short, in the kind of deity to whose dubious existence many victims have been sacrificed" (1988: 82). In his

fictional works such as A Separate Development, the most familiar, conventional aspects of white South African life seem merely a facade, covering a shadowy, nightmarish world--which Harry confronts at the end of the book.

Mary Smithson and her father in A Separate Development represent extreme examples of characters who experience deep-seated psychological upheaval because they do not feel at home in their society. Their lack of emotional and psychological security is expressed in the form of an obsession with physical protection. Convinced that an ever-present threat of violence and crime hangs over their heads, Mary's father constructs an elaborate (and dangerous) burglar alarm system around his house, turning their home into a prison. (This aspect of the novel provides a prophetic vision of the state of many South Africans in the 1990s.) But this does not prevent Mary from being raped. She describes her father's reaction in these terms:

Daddy ... was delighted. ... You see, for him the long years of waiting were over at last. ... Well, what with the searchlights he had mounted on the roof, the trip wires on the lawn, the dogs howling at the barbed wire, the continual false alarms when Daddy would tear outside and begin blazing away with his shotgun, ... life was hell. But it all stopped on the night I was raped (203).

Hope's characters' responses to the situations in which they find themselves frequently appear eccentric or abnormal, but perhaps

one of the most inordinate of these is Mary's father's "delight" at her rape. We, as readers, may have difficulty finding this passage convincing. It could seem that Hope is going too far in his attempts to depict the lunacies of white South African society. This, however, would be to miss the point. Through the excessive nature of the behaviour it depicts, the passage shows the extent to which Mary and her father's life is warped by his sense of impending disaster. Ironically, his obsession with security has stripped them of all security in life, for the Smithsons' home has become a site of continual alarms and paranoid violence. The passage thus reveals the extent to which, in the society Hope constructs, the heimlich--all that which appears to offer a sense of familiarity, stability and protection on both physical and psychological levels--becomes unheimlich, threatening and dangerous, leading to both physical and psychological damage. Under such circumstances, the only possible relief takes place at the point when the violence the Smithsons dread finally catches up with them.

Unlike the Smithsons, who can at least derive some measure of confidence from the fact that they clearly belong to the upper-middle class, Harry does not fit into the society around him in any way. He is not black or white or even necessarily coloured and his "breasts" cut him off from the various racial, sexual and social compartments available to him in a society such as his own, which is based on the principle "when in doubt, define" (39). He is viewed as a disruptive or even deviant presence. In this respect, he is like many of Hope's other central

protagonists: Ndbele, the black Catholic priest assigned to a conservative white congregation in "Ndbele's People"; the albino Gus in "On the Frontier"; the orphaned anonymous narrator in "Hilton Hits Back"; Joel Wolferman in "The Kugel" and Ilse and Lucky in Black Swan.

Hope values figures like Harry partly because, in accord with his sense of his own marginality, he prefers "borderlands" to "centres". It is on the edge, he believes, that more interesting things take place (App. A: 305), for it is here that the cracks, the gaps and the inadequacies in well-worn assumptions and seemingly securely entrenched establishments become apparent. The fact that the authorities are so obsessed by Harry, for instance, reveals the insecure, precarious nature of the beliefs they hold - for it takes just one nonconforming individual to disturb the whole system. "Dominant social groups," Hayden White remarks, "will ... favour representational practices that produce the mentality of the law-abiding citizen" (1987: 87). His observation is borne out by the fact that A Separate Development was initially banned in South Africa.

Ilse is another case in point, for in her refusal to obey "serious rules" (45) she exposes the idiocies of apartheid. Unlike other white South Africans, she wanders around the township hand in hand with her black pupil, Lucky. The police immediately leap to the ridiculous conclusion that she must be having an illicit affair with Lucky. In so doing, they make Ilse decide that she should do exactly that, as an act of ultimate

defiance. Like the rogue, the clown and the fool, all of whom Bakhtin depicts as playing an important role in the development of Western literary forms, characters such as Harry, Ndbele, Ilse and Lucky assert "the right to be 'other'... not to make common cause with any existing categories that life makes available" (1981: 158-159).

But it is particularly with the fool that these protagonists can be identified. Harry feels incompetent, as he loses the ability to interpret his situation in any meaningful fashion. Ndbele could seem utterly naive, in that he never appears to take into account the nature of the white middle-class society in which he has been placed. Ilse's employer regards her as ignorant and foolish, and Lucky is treated as retarded. The significance of this lies in the fact that, as with the traditional fool in medieval European courts, who drew attention to the follies and weaknesses of his society, Hope needs characters such as these for his satire to function successfully. Theorists such as Foucault and Bakhtin, among many others, have stressed that, in society and literature, this type of apparent folly plays a valuable role. In his description of the concept of the "Wise Fool" that prevailed in sixteenth-century Western society, for instance, Foucault shows how madness was identified with a specific form of wisdom and insight (1965: 35-36). Bakhtin also explores the specific function that the fool can fulfil in the novel:

Stupidity (incomprehension) in the novel is always

polemical: it interacts dialogically with an intelligence (a lofty pseudo intelligence) with which it polemicizes and whose mask it tears away. ...[T]he author needs the fool: by his very uncomprehending presence he makes strange the world of social conventionality (Bakhtin, 1981: 403-404).

Bakhtin regards stupidity in this context as justifiable, in that it represents a failure to understand a lie (1981: 404). Hope would doubtless concur. Dominant discourses and ideologies, contained, for instance, in an expression such as "our traditional way of life" or du Preez's "law", are "normalized", as Hope puts it, by "owners", those who have a secure place at the centre of their societies:

Those are the sorts of people that generally spoke about normality and pragmatism, and things being where they were or how they were, and using words like "reality" a lot. ... They're not words which come easily to the mouths of people who see things at a distance or from the edge (App. A: 304-305).

In their inability or refusal to understand or accept many socially accepted conventions, Hope's marginalised characters expose the hollow, fallacious nature of the fancies and unsubstantiated beliefs that their society enshrines as truths. One further instance of this takes place in the attempted torture scene from A Separate Development, when Piellletjies utilises the discourse of religion and morality to emphasise the righteousness

of his cause. Underlying his behaviour is a conviction that as a servant of the government, he is a custodian of the "Christian and civilised values" upon which Nationalist party ideology claimed to be based. Harry's uncomprehending bewilderment reveals his inability to take these assumptions seriously. For him, they are little more than a bad joke, with potentially lethal side-effects.

In the peculiar situations in which characters such as Harry find themselves and the apparently nonsensical views figures such as Lucky and Ndele hold, we recall Rosemary Jackson's assertion that the fantastic has the potential to open "on to that which lies outside the law, that which is outside dominant value systems" (1981: 4). This interrogation of societal norms and assumptions also suggests the postmodern impetus to "de-doxify", as Hutcheon puts it, those ideologies that are accepted as natural and normal and which find their expression in the social, cultural and political aspects of societies (1989: 3).¹¹

III

While there are parallels between the way in which postmodernism can serve as a "problematizing force" in our culture (Hutcheon, 1988: xi) and Hope's desire to undermine the society in his texts, his fiction cannot really be viewed as postmodern. The reason for this is that Hope ascribes a larger purpose to his

work than the undermining of "fixed and easy certainties" (Joffe, 1989: 102), important though this is to him.¹²

Many critics, however, do not look beyond the bleakness and pessimism which, on the surface, appear to limit Hope's vision. The most significant force in his novels and stories, they argue, is the system of political control that co-opts or crushes his protagonists. On one level, such critical responses seem justified, for more often than not Hope's tales conclude with defeat and death. The nameless narrator in "Hilton Hits Back" ends up as an agent for the security police, while Harry and Lucky face destruction and Ilse destroys herself.¹³

Elleke Boehmer, for one, would regard the conclusions contained in Hope's work as representing part of the "inevitable closing down" which, she argues, characterises the endings of much South African fiction in English under apartheid. These were sometimes manifested in images of failure, incarceration or destruction, such as Andre Brink's A Dry White Season (1980). At other times, novels concluded on a note of indeterminacy, with "[e]ndings arrested in a difficult and frozen now", as in J.M. Coetzee's Age of Iron (1990) (Boehmer, 1998: 49--51). If we are to view Hope in this light, it could be argued that he was, ultimately, bound by some of the same historical constraints that he felt were exerting a stranglehold on the development of South African fiction.

A review of Kruger's Alp is entitled: "There's Not Much Hope Left

for Us" (Molale, 1984: 10). Certainly, the contrast between Hope's name and the vision that his texts appear to express could seem an ironic one. Michael Green takes a similar view in his discussion of Kruger's Alp, arguing that Hope allows no space for political choice and moral responsibility, and the target of his satire is ultimately hope itself (1997: 281). While indicative of his objection to all forms of authoritarianism, the antipathy that Hope expresses towards left-wing beliefs could also be cited in evidence of this.¹⁴ The most optimistic, idealistic character in Kruger's Alp, Looksmart Dladla, retains his faith in his convictions only because he has been brain-damaged during a police interrogation, while a figure such as Jakes Mphahlele who is, underneath, the same as his torturer, embodies Hope's conviction that the possibility of positive, constructive transformation in South Africa is a delusion.¹⁵

Nonetheless, expressions of idealism or political commitment would sit oddly with the satirical nature of Hope's fiction. Satire is, inevitably, a restricted form, in its unrelenting focus on the follies and evils of human nature. It could be argued that the special impact of Hope's fiction lies in the claustrophobic rigidity of the society he presents: a lunatic asylum, hemmed in by insurmountable walls, dominated by all-seeing, all-controlling warders who (he claims) were once the inmates, but have been wearing their white coats for so long that no-one now can tell the difference (App. A: 303).

Such a perception would, however, not be entirely accurate, for

the most remarkable quality of Hope's work is the way that, despite its seeming cynicism and despair, it manages to surmount defeat. Through this, it calls into question the sense of inevitability inherent in Boehmer's assertion that South African fiction during apartheid was unable to conceive of "a convinced and a convincing opening up or testing of options" (44-45). She-- and a range of other critics--have ignored the particular types of possibilities presented by a writer such as Hope.

It is through humour, in particular, that we are made aware of these alternatives. There is far more to Hope's comic vision than the "reduced" laughter (Bakhtin, 1984: 38) of the purely satirical. We encounter an ambivalent mirth which, while it derides, undermines and negates, is at times also celebratory and affirmative. This, of course, is how Bakhtin describes the laughter of the carnival (1984: 13). We have already encountered aspects of this area in the centrality Hope accords to the figure of the fool, in his grotesque bodily images and in the potential for comedy in the most dire of situations. But, above all, the most significant carnivalesque dimension of his stories and novels lies in their fantastical transformations of South Africa during the apartheid era.¹⁶

Through this aspect, Hope seeks to free himself and his readers from the mental shackles that standardised, conventional notions of society and politics impose. The carnivalesque has a particular capacity to effect this type of liberation, in that, as we have seen, its essential function is to provide an escape

from the usual official way of life (Bakhtin, 1984: 5-6). The circus-like, blackly playful qualities in Hope's fiction arise particularly out of the longing that he experienced from childhood onwards for "variety, change, movement":

[I realised] that ... events and incidents could also supply surprises if you looked below the surface of things; if you did so you began to see that the real life lay in the unexpected and the illicit, in unforeseen arrivals, novel departures, in unclassifiable careers and dubious callings (1988: 38).

This calls to mind Bakhtin's description of Rabelais's artistic method, which might have been expressly describing some of the key features of Hope's use of the fantastic:

The essence of this method consists, first of all, in the destruction of all ordinary ties, of all the habitual matrices ... of things and ideas, and the creation of unexpected matrices, unexpected connections, including the most surprising logical links ... and linguistic connections (1981: 169).

Like Bakhtin's carnival, Hope's fiction offers a "completely different, nonofficial ... aspect of the world" (1984: 6) in which rules can be flouted, aberrations and anomalies can flourish and seemingly inapposite juxtapositions can be relished. These aspects come to the fore in the conclusion of "The Kugel",

for instance. In this story, as in many of Hope's tales, narrative twists pull the rug from under the characters'--and the reader's--feet. Both the established campus groupings, the student activists and the husband-hunting "kugels", are threatened by the fact that Joel Wolferman takes neither them nor himself seriously. The story concludes with the Security Police catching Wolferman in bed with Barney Tembisa, the token oppressed black (the students all assumed that he was in bed with one of the kugels).

Wolferman got slowly to his feet.

"Always knew you'd turn up at one of my parties, Springer," he said.

Downstairs, only Belinda was among the crowd who gathered to watch them being taken away. They were marched out by the policemen into the clear morning light. Wolferman in his shorts and rhino teeshirt and beside him, Tembisa, who for the sake of decency had been draped in the gold patterned bedspread which was far too large for him and dragged behind him like a cloak. Belinda through her pain and fury recognized something absurdly dignified in the progress of this strange couple, the tall striding figure of Wolferman and beside him the richly swatched, plump figure of his unlikely queen accompanied by their uniformed attendants, yes, that was it, she thought ... there was something hideously regal about the procession of Wolferman and his kugel to the waiting police van (124).

For a character such as Belinda, who views herself utterly seriously, the only possible response to this unexpected revelation (which exposes the inadequacy of her understanding) is one of "pain and fury". Barney Tembisa's cumbersome finery adds to the incongruous effect of the scene, turning him into a "queen" (in more than one sense of the word) and the lovers' progression to the police van into a parody of a royal procession. However, in true carnivalesque fashion, the targets of Hope's mockery are not the central figures in the procession, Wolferman and Tembisa, but the bystanders: Belinda and the other students. Shocked and outraged, they cannot incorporate this event into their narrow view of how things should be, and their inability to cope with the situation is reflected in the use of terms like "absurd" and "hideous".

This passage is just one of many scenes in Hope's fiction in which the carnivalesque creates opportunities for subversive laughter at the expense of the representatives of various establishments, who "[put forward] the predominant truth as eternal and indisputable" (Bakhtin, 1984: 5, 9). More particularly, through deriding such authorities and the belief systems they endorse, Hope's texts resemble Menippean satire, testing assumptions and ideologies, detaching them from their lofty pedestals and exposing them to unflattering scrutiny (Bakhtin, 1981: 26).

While all Hope's fiction contains carnivalesque features, it is in Black Swan specifically, his last novel dealing with South

Africa under apartheid, that they are most marked. These qualities arise from the behaviour of the central character, Lucky, who is always "determinedly elsewhere" (1), absorbed in his private imaginative world. Inspired by a film of Swan Lake, his life becomes dominated by the longing to dance. The General, a political activist, sees Lucky's determination, misinterprets his desire to dance as an expression of unshakable commitment to political liberation, and recruits him into the armed struggle. It does not take long for Lucky to be captured and at his trial township youth appear, brandishing ballet shoes as revolutionary symbols. (Of all the incongruous images in Hope's work, this is perhaps one of the most irreverent.) Before he is sentenced, Lucky announces:

"I know that a small bird can break a big egg. An ostrich can speak with the voice of a lion. And one day we will all dance." ...

There was a surge of excitement from the gallery and several more pairs of ballet shoes were displayed defiantly by their laces (88).

Lucky's desire for a post-apartheid South Africa in which all may be able to dance is deeply important to both him and his creator. As Hope has repeatedly stressed in both his fiction and non-fiction, South African society does not allow enough space for individual artistic and imaginative expression. Figuratively speaking, it does not let people dance. Through the seeming foolishness of utterances such as Lucky's in the above extract,

he obviously emphasises what he regards as a serious deficiency in our society.

In its fabulous quality, Lucky's statement is also a parodic echo of the bombastic nature of many political utterances. Its portentous images seem, on the surface, to suggest a profound symbolic message, but are, in actual fact, meaningless--although this does not matter to his ardent supporters, who read into his words what they wish to hear. Lucky's ludicrous responses also undermine the solemnity of his trial and all attempts by the authorities to bring him under their control. In Bakhtin's terms, his behaviour represents "a critique on the one-sided seriousness of the lofty direct word" (1981: 55).¹⁷

It could, nonetheless, be argued that this type of ridicule is powerless in itself. After all, it does not have the capacity to alter the inevitable fates that await either Wolferman or Lucky in any significant way. As we know, carnival laughter can mock established structures and authorities, yet it cannot overcome or destroy them. That granted, the carnival remained an important symbolic presence in the lives of those who took part in it. In his Prologue to Bakhtin's Rabelais and His World, Michael Holquist draws attention to the fact that Bakhtin was writing during the 1930s, at the height of Stalinist repression (1984: xiii-xxiii). Similarly, state control was at its strongest during the period when these novels and stories by Hope were set. In such a climate, although the carnivalesque obviously did not have the capacity to create physical freedom in any lasting sense of

the word, it did, through its subversive forms, affirm psychological and spiritual liberation.¹⁸ Bakhtin is, therefore, justified in claiming that a "striking peculiarity" of carnival laughter was "its indissoluble and essential relation to freedom" (1984: 89). In a comparable way, art exerts its power at a symbolic level and while it does not necessarily serve to bring about freedom in actual life, it can open up possibilities for imaginative, emotional and psychological emancipation, through its capacity to touch us profoundly in these areas. Moreover, by creating a mental climate within which the idea of freedom is kept alive, art can prefigure liberation in a physical sense.

Foucault describes the way in which the prison and other carceral mechanisms exist to exercise "a power of normalization" over members of a society who are regarded as disrupting, or deviating from the norms--in other words, the rules--of that society (1977: 308). In the extended prison that is Hope's South Africa, characters who are beyond the reach of this sort of "normalization" play a crucial role. For example, the central protagonists in "The Kugel" and Black Swan are not bound by the rules and restrictions that their societies seek to impose on them. Instead, they are determined, at all costs, to live their lives the way they feel they should be lived. They are the focal point of the carnivalesque in the narratives in which they appear. Through their contrary behaviour, they assert certain freedoms within the prim conformity of the societies they inhabit.

Lucky is a figure particularly close to Hope's heart:

In a sense he doesn't accept anything he's told because he will be neither saboteur nor bomber nor soldier nor good upstanding muscular South African, and yet what he wants is entirely modest. It's not particularly notable, but in the context of our country it's both misunderstood, dangerous, reprehensible--all the reasons for which one applauds the way Lucky is, and would like to see more people the way he is (App. A: 307).

There seems little that is enviable or appealing about Lucky's situation. His name in fact seems deeply ironic, for he is consigned to the poverty and violence of township life, treated with bewilderment and scorn as a result of his autism and is eventually condemned to death. Yet, of all the protagonists we have encountered in this chapter, he possesses what is, in Hope's eyes, the greatest gift of all--a powerful imagination, through which he turns his situation, dismal and disastrous as it may be, into a source of marvels. He periodically "flies away", recreating people and his surroundings in the process:

She knew that look. He was doing things with the prophetess. It was not right. You should not do as you liked with other people the way Lucky did. Nor should you fly away in your head whenever you felt like it. Muriel feared for the boy in the township. Some day someone would get angry with him.

Lucky felt none of her concern. He was watching Marigold greedily. He saw her in the sky, floating heavily in her green clothes, a dark storm cloud full of rain that drifts over fields of young maize--round, fat and full of promise (13).

At this point, we should consider the possibility that some of Hope's readers might endorse Granny Muriel's views. Lucky's type of fanciful reconstruction of reality has, all too often, been denigrated. In certain respects, Black Swan puts one in mind of Ben Okri's The Famished Road (1991), which dwells on the corrupt, materialistic nature of the political power structures that dominate the lives of its protagonists, yet also affirms the deep joy and significance that the imagination can bestow on an otherwise miserable, seemingly meaningless existence. "A dream" Okri states, "can be the highest point of a life" (500). A very obvious criticism that could be levelled against this aspect of Hope's and Okri's fiction--and, indeed, against much fantasy--is that it appears to advocate a form of individual escapism to dream realms that have little or no connection with real life. Lucky is, after all, deranged.

Hope, on the contrary, defends the impulse to escape, pointing out that it represents an integral aspect of creativity. In terms that call Lucky's "fly[ing] away" to mind, he describes his own delight in reading, which he links, later on, to his desire to become a writer. After depicting how, at the age of four, he experienced a sense of loneliness and dislocation as a result of

the death of his father, the remarriage of his mother, and his family's decision to move away from Balfour, he states:

[A]ll combined to give me the most frantic need to escape. Now the means of escape open to a four-year-old are limited at the best of times but I was lucky, for close at hand lay a means of flight more effective and long lasting, and ultimately, more potent than anything dreamed of in the fairy tales on which I doted.

It was about this time that I learnt very quickly, and hungrily, to read. ... [E]ach time I sat down with a book, ... I knew at least that I was off and elsewhere (1988: 47-48).

Words like these do not necessarily invalidate the criticisms cited above. Instead, some might choose to quote Hope's description as evidence in support of such objections, positing that if artistic creativity springs from a dissatisfaction with reality it will inevitably result in a withdrawal from the latter. However, as is made clear in Hope's assertion included earlier in this chapter, he does not view his fiction as a means of fleeing from the South African situation, but rather as a way of "fac[ing]" it (Joffe: 97). In doing this, he draws our attention to those areas of life that various centralised notions of the real that prevailed in South Africa during the 1950s and 1960s ignored or attempted to suppress. Indeed, it is the "owners"--to borrow Hope's term (App. A: 305)--who promulgate such versions of reality who would be particularly eager to

condemn fantasy as escapist.

Such criticisms of fantasy often convey a strong sense of moral disapproval. This is, for instance, very evident in the reaction of that respectable pillar of the community, Lucky's Granny Muriel. The nature of this type of objection needs to be considered further. Ursula K. Le Guin, as has already been noted, believes that hostility to the imagination is, firstly, rooted in a Puritan antipathy to the pleasure that forms an integral part of the fantastic. Granny Muriel's horror at the ecstatic delight Lucky derives from his imaginary world arises, in part, from the strict, morally upright nature of the social codes to which she subscribes. Le Guin also stresses that in terms of the capitalist work ethic, something that does not bring immediate gain is generally dismissed as meaningless (Le Guin, 1989: 31-33).¹⁹ In material terms, Lucky's imaginary flights are completely worthless, as is his dream of becoming a ballerina. Hope himself emphasises this: "What Lucky wants to be is that which in South African terms is that most useless of creatures, a ballet dancer" (App. A: 306). This is especially why Lucky's ambition seems particularly alarming to those around him. Finally, Le Guin observes, fantasy sometimes tends to be associated with those aspects of life which are regarded as "womanish" or "childish" (33-34). The fantastic in Hope's work is most closely connected to the naive, sensitive, childlike figures who value the creative and the intuitive such as Lucky and Ndbele, neither of whom conform to typical South African definitions of adult masculinity, and who are treated with

contempt for that reason.

All this suggests that Hope takes the imagination seriously precisely because it is neither insubstantial nor unimportant. The fact that apartheid was based on a fantasy of innate racial superiority indicates how the imaginary can have colossal significance in the real physical world.²⁰ For Hope, one of the horrible ironies of Nationalist Party-dominated South Africa lay in the way in which it repressed and denigrated the imagination, while imposing a version of reality in which a range of areas associated with the fantastical were interwoven with the pragmatic and the commonsensical. Accordingly, in Hope's view, it seems particularly apt to confront such a society at the level of the imagination.

Certainly, when we look more closely at Hope's use of the fantastic, it becomes evident that it is more than equal to the situation with which it engages, extending beyond the reach and the comprehension of the power structures otherwise dominant.²¹ Even its ridicule of figures of authority and systems of power plays an important role in this regard, for we recall that Bakhtin defines one of the principal functions of parody as being "the corrective of reality that is always richer, more fundamental and most importantly, too contradictory and heteroglot to be fit into a high and straightforward genre" (1981: 55).

The most recently quoted extract from Black Swan, for instance,

leads us towards vistas that texts such as A Separate Development and "Learning to Fly" suggest, but are not intended to attain. Lucky's world, although different from the white middle-class society inhabited by Harry and the young Hope, is an equally conservative environment that restricts its inhabitants psychologically and spiritually. Each individual occupies a specific place and—as Granny Muriel's thoughts indicate--Lucky causes such distress and even anger in this society because he evades all social categories, and refuses to behave in any of the various socially acknowledged ways. Imaginative stimulation is restricted to radio soap operas and "the American gangster movies so beloved every Saturday night at the Bantu Men's Social Centre" (6); the main form of excitement lies in the ganster-related violence that periodically erupts. With its drab little dwellings located in a wasteland amid the mine dumps, it is deliberately designed to strip its inhabitants' lives of anything that might brighten, augment or enhance them. As the above extract makes clear, Lucky does not see these aspects of his situation. Instead, he looks beyond them, and through his eccentric imaginative inventiveness, his environment becomes astounding and marvellous--in this way affirming all those aspects of experience that all the other members of his society lack access to. Through his apparent evasion of reality, Lucky in fact opens it up to new dimensions. This, of course, is the essential point. For Hope is intent upon showing how the imagination has the capacity to recreate the real in such a way that it overrides those definitions of the latter intended to enforce submission to established systems of control.

Even the bodily grotesque becomes a source of delight when it contributes to this fantastical re-inscribing and expansion of the real. When the landmine Lucky has planted goes off, it "rain[s] policemen" (83). In the way in which it turns the explosion of a limpet mine into an occasion for a verbal flight and in the association of "rain" with a sense of growth and regeneration, this image implies that Hope's vision extends far beyond the death and destruction that critics such as Green regard as a predominant feature of his work.

Certainly, as Black Swan progresses, it becomes increasingly clear that the real significance of Lucky's situation lies in its symbolic implications, rather than in the physical fate that befalls him. The loss of his leg in the explosion becomes not so much a means of emphasising the terrible violence that apartheid gave rise to, but serves, primarily, as a way of revealing that the representatives of that system were not as all-encompassing as they wished to seem. As in some postmodern fiction, in which body parts take on lives of their own--the giant adenoid in Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow (1973) or the talking anus in William Burroughs's The Naked Lunch (1971), for instance--Lucky's severed leg becomes a self-sufficient entity:

Once having set off on this last flight, he had expected never to return. ... Once he had taken off he had hoped to keep travelling At least his leg had gone. He envied his leg, which had gone on a decent journey. He imagined it traipsing through distant forests, across deserts (87).

Through losing his limb, Lucky regains his sense of freedom, embodied in his ability to transform his surroundings and "fly away", which had temporarily deserted him. This is intimated too when Hope tells us that "[o]ne leg less seemed to release him from the ground, and he swung nimbly on his crutches like a trapeze artist" (85). In this way, the missing leg's travels prefigure the mental journey Lucky embarks on at the end of his trial. In contrast to the despair he experienced earlier, after planting his landmine, when his situation and his surroundings seemed to overwhelm him, Lucky finds his trial a fabulous, intriguing event. The voices of his accusers turn into music and the judge becomes part of "a three-eyed truck" (84) determined to run him down, but failing to do so, as Lucky evades him by "tak[ing] off" (88) into his private world at the end of the trial. Hope makes the following comment:

[W]hat Lucky does is not so much as to escape. Escapism is an unreal thing, it's not that. What Lucky possesses is imagination and the form of imagination that he possesses is deeply subversive. It turns things on their heads. ... [E]ven at the end it seems to me that it's the power of Lucky's transforming imagination and his capacity for subversion, above all, that frees him. Not accepting what he's told, indeed hearing more or less what he's told and then remaking it, reworking it in his own fashion (App. A: 306-307).

More than anything else, it is forms of mental control--William Blake's "mind-forg'd manacles"--that Hope objects to, and which he seeks to undermine through his use of the fantastic. In Discipline and Punish, Foucault shows how, from the early nineteenth century onwards, there was an increasing shift towards non-corporal forms of control and chastisement, which focussed on the soul, rather than the body (1977: 14-31). In a society like South Africa's during apartheid, which sought as much to subjugate the human spirit as the body, it is entirely appropriate that Hope, who engages with this society at the level of fiction, presents his characters attaining freedom in an imaginative sense, rather than a physical one.

Even though they are not open to the possibilities for the kind of fantastical transformation in the same way as Black Swan, various of Hope's earlier works also emphasise the power of the imagination, particularly through the act of story-telling. Harry, confined in detention, acknowledges the power of his own imagination to hold death at bay, even if only temporarily.²² Asked to write his life story by Dekker, he affirms: "As long as I have a story to tell, life goes on" (224). Without stories to give life meaning--however contradictory or provisional those narratives may be--there would be nothing. We see this at the end of "Learning to Fly", when all we are left with are the stories. In this way, the imagination transcends the constraints of the situation--and also indeed the limits that Hope himself appears to impose on it when he discusses the role of the writer in South Africa in his critical work.

In closing, then, we can conclude that while the transformation of his protagonists' physical circumstances may not be possible within the world of Hope's texts, transformation can take place in terms of the way in which we come to perceive certain established aspects of that world. We have one well-known precedent for this in the fantastical, metaphorical description of Coketown in Charles Dickens's Hard Times. Martha C. Nussbaum puts it well:

Even while it depicts the monotony and soul-crushing dreariness of the Coketown factory, it triumphs over it in language, comparing the coils of steam to serpents, the moving machine parts to "melancholy-mad elephants"The novel cannot describe its opposition without doing battle with it, approaching it through Fancy and playfully surmounting it (1995: 43).

Likewise, in Hope's fiction, a torture device becomes a "souped-up mincer" and we are offered the siren-like spectacle of a black man soaring through the sky, which lures that bastion of apartheid-style brutality, du Preez, to his doom. Over and above such examples, however, one of the clearest instances of this fanciful overcoming of reality occurs in a story that is filled with apparent defeat and humiliation, "Ndbele's People". Here the black priest, Ndbele, is rejected by his white congregation; the tale concludes with Ndbele's return to his desolate, poverty-stricken homeland. A traditional liberal realist account of these events would, most probably, highlight Ndbele's sufferings,

emphasising how he is emotionally and psychologically crushed by the uncomprehending selfishness and callousness of the white community within which he finds himself. Hope, however, adopts a completely different tack, emphasising what it is that Ndbele creates as an alternative to his congregation:

The dancing policemen were the first of a set of monumental figures which soon were to occupy every corner of the garden. ... Next came the Dying Priest Attended by a Child [I]t was with a terrible shock that Father O'Shea recognised that the features were modelled on his own. A moment's inspection showed him that the two dancing policemen had the faces of Stockenstrom and Sam Mervyn

[Ndbele's] last great work, a tableau of no less than sixteen figures, the Virgin attended by her Golfers, took him almost three months to build and showed the Virgin upon a rock, rather reminiscent of the Little Mermaid, receiving a deputation of golfers ... (75)

As is evident here, Ndbele's parishioners are incorporated into figures involving the banal, the religious, the sentimental. Various hallowed South African icons, such as sport and the police, are also included. Faced with misunderstanding and abuse from the white community within which he is placed, Ndbele seeks to remodel it, literally. In the world of his art, conflict, division and contradiction are overridden and resolved into a fanciful, ironic, heterogenous whole. A similar type of transformation takes place when Ndbele and his people find an

eventual place of refuge on the rugby field in the grounds of the giant casino complex in Ndebele's homeland. The rugby field, a symbol of the white South African establishment, and the casino (a central feature of the bantustan system) become, instead, parts of a space within which the fantastical and the mystical are allowed free sway. Control is thwarted, as Ndebele and his people come to represent the potential for the uncontrollable, even within a society as dictatorial as that of South Africa during apartheid.

It is in his capacity to suggest precisely this, particularly through his use of the fantastic, that the most significant feature of Hope's work lies. It is all too easy to view his fiction as memorable primarily for its darkly satirical vision, yet the most remarkable quality of his writing lies not so much in this aspect as in the way in which, in creating a South Africa that is "the capital of walls", he presents us with instances in which those walls are surmounted and what lies beyond them is glimpsed.

Notes

1. Only a few stories from this collection will be focussed on in the chapter. The stories that have been selected provide particularly clear illustrations of broader tendencies in Hope's work.

2. In the same book review, Hope quotes an extract from a poem by Sipho Sepamla: "we are talking of those words/ that stalk our lives like policemen" (1977: 76).

3. Stephen Watson, for instance, deplores the fact that such literature generally restricted itself to the well-trodden and the immediately obvious, remarking, for instance, that while there are many "caricature[s] of brutal policemen, it hardly ever explores the cruel sensuality that underlies human evil" (1990: 472).

4. Hope would most probably be gratified by the fact that his particular brand of fiction has upset a range of people. There are, for example, the criticisms--often couched in somewhat prim, superior terms--expressed by various reviewers of his texts. A reporter in The Natal Witness, for instance, described the stories in Private Parts as "mischievous" and "distasteful" (C.W., 1981: 18).

5. South African history is littered with attempts at comparable types of social engineering (although less grandiose in scheme, they were essentially the same in spirit). For instance, there was the plan to move the entire black population of Cape Town out to Khayelitsha (which, ironically, translates as "our new home") situated at a safe distance from Cape Town on the desolate Cape Flats. Once outlying suburbs such as Mannenberg and Gugulethu had been vacated by their black inhabitants, it was assumed that the coloured population of Cape Town could be moved into these areas.

6. In this regard, Hope's work is reminiscent of one of the few South African satirical writers in English, Casey Motsisi, whose sketch detailing the political ambitions of a bug, "If Bugs were Men", depicts contemporary Nationalist political aspirations, thereby holding them up to ridicule (1978).

7. Structurally, the conclusion of this story calls to mind Franz Kafka's "The Penal Colony" (1919). At the end of this tale, the inventor of a machine used for executing prisoners by tattooing their own crimes on their bodies is destroyed by his own device.

8. For Hope, Dekker's behaviour proves that weeping can easily be little more than a superficial surface display. In an interview, he refers to this scene to prove his point that "weeping never did very much good" (App. A: 302).

9. Bakhtin states that from the Renaissance onwards, with the changes in views of the body and its relation to the world, and as a result of the domination of the classical canon during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the grotesque began to lose its festive ambivalence and thus its potential to regenerate (Bakhtin, 1984: 29-38).

10. This type of imagery has been used in a range of works of fiction, as a means of commenting on history and the contemporary political situation. Hutcheon observes that in a postmodern novel such as Rushdie's Midnight's Children (1981), the fragmentation of the body that occurs can be related to the sense of historical fragmentation that arises as attempts to make sense of the past collapse, thus providing an example of the way in which "postmodernism establishes, differentiates, and then disperses

stable narrative voices (and bodies)" (1988: 118).

11. Hutcheon utilises Roland Barthes's concept of the doxa, the voice of general opinion, common sense and apparent rationality (Barthes, 1977: 165).

12. In addition, Hope's distrust of all systems would probably extend to an objection to seeing his writing contained under the label of postmodernism--now safely established as an authoritative critical discourse.

13. An extreme example of this tendency occurs in Kruger's Alp, the darkest and most paranoid of all Hope's narratives dealing with South Africa. The plots, counterplots, betrayals, manipulations and machinations (inspired in part by the Information Scandal of 1977-1978) that fill the novel have an increasingly claustrophobic effect on both the characters and the reader, as the central protagonists' options become more and more limited. In the end, they are simply helpless pawns in the hands of the power structures that control the events in the book.

14. Hope asserts:

It seems to me there is no one more intolerant than a liberal under a left-wing regime. ... [A]ny wing, any badge, any belief that puts ideas before individuals and ideals--worse still--before individuals seems to me to have within it the seeds of destruction. It's force by another name, and I think if there's one thing worse than those who wish to do you harm for malign reasons, it's those who wish to do you harm for the best of all possible reasons, because on top of it they're unctuous (App. A: 307-308).

Citing Raymond Williams, Green relates Hope's stance to what has become a firmly established trend within South African liberalism: "[W]hat is now called 'minority culture' has to find its reservation, its hiding place, both beyond the system and the fight against the system" (279-281). Certain well-known South African texts by writers styling themselves as disillusioned liberals, such as Jill Wentzel's The Liberal Slide-away (1994) and Rian Malan's My Traitor's Heart (1991) epitomise this attitude. Both writers are, like Hope, particularly condemnatory in their treatment of liberals and left-wing activists. But, unlike Hope, they express firm support for certain right-wing political ideologies and, are, as a result, not cynical about political convictions and organisations that endorse such ideologies. Also, they are supposedly non-fiction writers, although in many respects their versions of the South African reality represent fictionalised constructs. Their interpretations of that country's political situation would therefore be regarded by many as more objective--and thus more authoritative--than that of a writer of fiction such as Hope.

15. Hope recently stated: "South Africa is the capital of hypocrisy, with the ANC as its high church. The saddest thing is to see the exhaustion and disappointment of white liberals"

(Schoonakker, 1999: 33). His most recent South African novel, Me, the Moon and Elvis Presley (1997), while highlighting many of the very real absurdities of post-apartheid society, also shows that Hope is as cynical about the the new South Africa as he was about the old.

16. Kruger's Alp tends to lack these festive qualities, and for this reason this chapter has focussed on novels and stories which share more comparable fantastic features.

17. Similarly, the official ceremonies of the white left-wing student establishment, student protests, are parodied in stories such as "The Kugel" and "Hilton Hits Back".

18. Motsisi's characters, for example, claim this form of liberty for themselves through their defiant delight in riotous festivities--which the political order is unable to take away from them.

19. The forms of the fantastic that receive widespread, enthusiastic endorsement in contemporary North American society are precisely those that have proved hugely profitable, such as the Star Wars films, the Star Trek series and Disneyworld. All these represent popular, trivialised versions of the fantastic and, as such, they tend to embody some of the basic features of the patriarchal, capitalist value system that Le Guin critiques in her essay.

20. A range of writers who make use of the fantastic to explore the political emphasise this point. One such example occurs in Okri's The Famished Road, in which political evil is fuelled by bloated, destructive fantasies of unlimited material opulence and total control over the lives of others.

21. This emphasis on the value of the imagination--a concept which has been interrogated by many postmodernists--is the main reason why Hope cannot really be viewed as a postmodern writer. As a novel such as Black Swan shows us, the concept of the imagination involves the valorization of individual creative ability. Further to this, the latter is frequently connected to a Romantic and Neo-Romantic incorporation of the spiritualised into physical realities. Neither of these perceptions would seem to be compatible with many of the tendencies in postmodern thought.

22. Despite the harshness of its vision, even Kruger's Alp asserts the value of stories:

Stories have brought you this far. From the most powerful member of the Regime to the lowest gardener, cook or nanny, we all need stories. We owe our lives to stories. Would I be here now? Or you? Or any of these people if it weren't for the stories of another place. ... Do not spit on stories, Mr Kipsel, or stories might spit on you (1984a: 267).

As the warning in this passage reveals, we ignore or undermine this world of the imagination at our peril.

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CHAPTER THREE: IVAN VLADISLAVIC'S SOUTH AFRICA

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There are four areas in Ivan Vladislavic's fantastic that merit particular consideration: the heterotopic quality that gives rise to a state of Barthian jouissance, Nonsense, the postmodern, and the carnavalesque. No one aspect should take precedence over the other, for in terms of the final significance of Vladislavic's work, these sometimes interconnected features all need to be taken into account.

I

While the South Africa of Christopher Hope's fiction is a society dominated by fixed, monolithic power structures, the same country in Ivan Vladislavic's work becomes a fluid, unstable place of sudden inversions or dissolutions, startling fusions or metamorphoses and hilarious, fanciful or downright crazy interventions. Anything goes in his world: two characters travel down Ben Schoeman highway in a motorised rocking chair; a pair of hands bursts into flames; a Prime Minister is pulled out of a television set and, drastically reduced in size, is kept in a cage; and, through the power of their music, a Black Salvation Army Band overcomes a white right-winger who attempts to disrupt them, bearing him off in their midst.

The nature of the society in which Vladislavic grew up cast its shadow over his life and also, obviously, over the nature of his writing. The latter acknowledges:

I am very much a child of apartheid: I started school two years after the Sharpeville massacre and finished two years before the Soweto uprising. I am sure that being "white" shaped every aspect of my identity under apartheid and continues to do so now. To the extent that writing is implicated in this identity and my place in this society, being white affects everything (Appendix B: 318).

For the most part, Vladislavic's stories and his novel are set in the South Africa of the 1980s and 1990s, a shifting, changing period marked by increasing political upheaval and transition. While the early 1990s were characterised by the radical political changes that resulted in the African National Congress taking governmental control in 1994, the 1980s were a time of intense oppression.¹ Yet despite this, Nadine Gordimer felt able to assert as early as 1982, "I live ... in a society whirling, stamping, swaying with the force of revolutionary change" (1988: 262). In many respects, the violent and authoritarian actions on the part of the government during the 1980s represented a desperate attempt to retain control of a situation that was moving beyond its grasp. The earlier 1980s, for example, were characterised by a great deal of organised resistance to the government.² Other indications of cracks in National Party control occurred in 1982, for example, when the Conservative Party split away from the National party, reflecting serious divisions within Afrikanerdom.³

The dramatic nature of the period with which Vladislavic's

fiction engages and the fact that his work deals with recognisable South African historical figures and events has led many critics to ascribe highly specific political purposes to his writing. Andries Oliphant, for instance, claims that "When My Hands Burst into Flames" contains, as its social subtext, "the horrific public burning of people in recent times" (1990: 23). Marlene van Niekerk sees "We Came to the Monument" as depicting, in allegorical terms, the actions and the ideology of the pioneers (1990: 15) and Ina Gräbe views The Folly (1993), in its depiction of the "squatter", Niewenhuizen, as an exploration of the condition of the homeless (1995: 35). These critical analyses all seem to imply that Vladislavic should be viewed in more or less the same terms as any South African realist writer. Their one-to-one correlations between his work and his country's situation suggest that they feel that, essentially, his writing reflects political and historical realities--albeit in the shadowy, distorted mirror of the fantastic.

But Jack Kearney takes a completely different critical tack, declaring in a review of The Folly, that his "neat labels and reputable categories begin to wilt and crumple". The novel, he continues, "seem[s] spirited and independent enough to interrogate me, rather than the other way around" (1994: 91). As Kearney's response suggests, any interpretation that attempts to pin Vladislavic's work down to the expression of one particular, straightforwardly serious message about contemporary South African society is likely to fall short. Indeed, this type of reading misses the essential point: we encounter a number of very

different literary approaches, discourses and perspectives in his writing. These give rise to what Michel Foucault terms a heterotopia, a collision between worlds that are mutually exclusive: "In such a state, things are 'laid', 'placed', 'arranged' in sites so very different from one another that it is impossible to find a place of residence for them, to define a common locus beneath them all" (Foucault, 1970: xviii).

This heterotopic quality arises from the fact that, above all, Vladislavic is a deeply playful writer. His work is infused with a sense of unbridled glee in imaginative possibilities, and his pleasure in game-playing--with words, characters, ideas and his readers--is the essential impulse behind his use of the fantastic.

We see this, for example, in "The Box" in Missing Persons (1989).⁴ When Quentin, a bored and frustrated white middle-class South African, inadvertently hauls the Prime Minister out of the television set, the following events take place:

The Prime Minister began to struggle, kicking and punching at the air. Quentin smiled and rocked him back and forth.

"Please, Quentin," Mary said, tugging at his sleeve.

"All right then. What do you think we should do with him?"

"We could keep him..."

"Keep him!"

"My mother has a printer's tray full of little things

that would be perfect for him: beermugs, teacups--" ...

The first meal Mary gave the Prime Minister consisted of a morsel of mashed potato, a sliver of steak, and a pea, all carefully laid out in the lid of a milk bottle. The Prime Minister took one look at it and threw it in a corner. The whole of the next day he refused to eat. On the following morning he ate some oats and a raisin, and banged his plate against the bars for more.

That night Mary got up for some water and heard a strange squeaking sound coming from the kitchen. Going quietly nearer she saw the Prime Minister, stripped to his underpants and with his tie knotted around his head, jogging on the treadmill (48-49).

The story was published during the 1980s, when South Africans were confronted nightly with the image of P.W. Botha haranguing them from their television screens. This extract could therefore easily be viewed primarily as a satirical response to a specific political situation. Its subversion of political authority is all too evident: the Prime Minister is reduced to the status of a pet hamster. In contrast with Hope's unshakable, totalitarian society of the 1950s and 1960s, the representatives of the Nationalist government are not all-controlling; instead, they are reduced to objects of ridicule. In fact, it is their power that makes them seem especially ludicrous; for the Prime Minister in the above extract appears particularly comical precisely because of his status in South African society.

The passage is more complex than this, however. To read it purely as the undermining of a leading representative of an oppressive system would be to ignore the fact that the Prime Minister is a far more sympathetic figure than Quentin, whose vindictive, sadistic nature is suggested in the way in which he relishes tormenting the former. We also see later on that the Prime Minister has a supportive, loving relationship with his wife, in contrast to the coldness and lack of concern that exist between Quentin and Mary. Like Quentin, the latter is not a character that a reader would choose to identify with. Her loneliness is evident from early on in the story, and her eagerness to keep the Prime Minister (whom she feels is "cute" (48)) incarcerated in a cage is both pathetic and alarming. The ornaments from the printer's tray that she envisages serving his food on and the little meals that she prepares for him make her seem like a small child playing at tea parties with her dolls, indicative of the extent to which she has cut herself off from the reality of her situation. Through the feeble protests that she occasionally ventures and her attempts to care for the Prime Minister, Mary would seem to suggest, in certain respects, the ineffectualness of liberalism in a society impervious to appeals to liberal values. Like many other proponents of liberalism, she retreats into an unrealistic little world of her own, while remaining complicit in an unjust system.

But these analyses of the passage do not do it full justice, for they leave out the picture of the Prime Minister as disgruntled domestic pet, energetically trundling away on a hamster wheel.

This cannot simply be regarded as a means to a specific end; for it is a marvellous image in its own right. It has as its impetus a profound sense of delight in the transformative potential of the fantastic. Moreover, "The Box", exists, importantly, on the level of a fancifully ludic flight of the imagination that begins with the image of a six-inch high Prime Minister being dragged out of a television set and kept in a cage. The extract playfully pursues the possibilities this idea raises.⁵ In this way, it illustrates the degree to which play and artistic creativity can be closely intertwined. In Homo Ludens, a study of the play-element in culture, Johan Huizinga cites how, in various languages, musical instruments are "played" (1949: 42). This suggests the way in which play is both the well-spring of creativity and the means through which the latter can find expression. There is, also, Ursula K. Le Guin's definition of the imagination as "the free play of the mind" leading to the spontaneous "recreation, re-creation, the re-combination of what is known into what is new" (1989: 33), which seems particularly apt when applied to Vladislavic's work.

This passage also brings to the fore the importance of play as an end in itself. One of the most distinctive features of the former is that it is highly enjoyable. Yet all too often, we, as critics, tend to avoid including this aspect in our critical response. As Wendy Steiner reminds us in The Scandal of Pleasure, while "I like" is at the heart of our criticism, our culture prefers to forget this (1995: 7). Steiner's theory of aesthetic delight owes a great deal to Roland Barthes, who asserts that The

Pleasure of the Text arose from a desire to "un-repress" the idea of pleasure, as a reaction to the intellectual language of the day, which seemed to be "submitting all too easily to moralizing imperatives that eliminated all notion of enjoyment, of bliss" (1985: 205).⁶ On a fictional level, Vladislavic's use of the fantastic in stories such as "The Box" seeks to accomplish something similar within the South African literary context, inviting us to relish the lively imaginative revelry that lies at the heart of the tale. The special value of this latter quality of "The Box" lies in the way in which play, to quote Huizinga again, "adorns and amplifies life" (1949: 9). This is not mere frivolous self-indulgence (as a number of writers and critics of South African fiction would have us believe), but a necessity, for without play, we are deprived of an ~~an~~ integral part of existence. For too long, South African writers in English have been discouraged from playing, and we are all the poorer for it.

Just as Barthes's concept of jouissance appears especially meaningful in the light of the specific character of his intellectual climate, so the pleasure we obtain from Missing Persons acquires a special potency as a result of the way in which Vladislavic's imaginative play is rooted in a particular political context. For instance, "The Box" would not give us so much delight if it did not represent such a satisfactory fantastical subversion of an especially loathed political figure. In addition, as a tool of government propaganda the television had particular meaning for South Africans in the 1980s; the

notion of a TV set out of which political figures could be pulled is a highly appealing one. More broadly, this tale acquires particular force as a result of the sombre, threatening nature of the political backdrop against which it takes place. A novel such as Menan du Plessis's A State of Fear (1983) clearly captures the sense of tension, dread and despair experienced by many people during the 1980s. On the other hand, in "The Box", the darkness of the South African situation and also the general tendency to gloom and sobriety in fiction in English make Vladislavic's quirky, humorous episodes and images stand out all the more strikingly. Paradoxically, therefore, the lightness of the latter's fantastical comic touch in this passage arises and derives its impact from the heaviness of his political context.

Significantly, Vladislavic acknowledges the influence of Afrikaans writers--who, as we have noted earlier, contrast sharply with writers in English, both in terms of their use of more innovative techniques and their interest in the fantastic:

I was fortunate to discover Afrikaans literature as a student. ... Reading the sestigers and prominent writers of the seventies like John Miles and Breyten Breytenbach gave me a very different set of models for writing about South Africa; going back to your earlier question about the sources of the "fantastical" elements in my work, here are some of the culprits (App. B: 327).

Yet although play lies at the heart of the extract from "The

Box", we are made very aware that this activity is not always pure and wholesome. For Quentin, pleasure lies in the sadistic way in which he toys with the Prime Minister and later on, the other unfortunate people whom he hauls out of the television set. To an extent, we participate in the former's sadism in that we are entertained by some of the sufferings he inflicts on the Prime Minister. For example, later in the story he pelts the latter with peanuts. So our enjoyment is by no means entirely innocent. In part, Vladislavic's use of the ludic derives some of its vitality from its transgressiveness.⁷ He entices us to delight in the play present in his work, while simultaneously reminding us that the latter can be cruel, and that we are sometimes drawn to it precisely for that reason. We could think, for instance, of the way in which a cat plays with a mouse, or the vindictive, hurtful games small children can engage in; and we are reminded that part of the fun of the carnival involved the ritual humiliation of others. Similarly, violence and sadism, albeit at a fantastically hyperbolic level, form an integral part of the revelry in Rabelais's work.⁸

In short, as the Marquis de Sade and others have pointed out, pleasure has its nasty side.⁹ While one tends to think of many South African writers in English seeking to appeal to the finer aspects of human nature--such as the sense of moral outrage at the sufferings of others and the desire for a more equitable, harmonious society--the attraction of Vladislavic's fiction lies, in part, in the way in which he appeals to our taste for the more sinister aspects of life. This does, not of course, rule out the

way the latter takes issue with some of the most destructive features of the South African experience during apartheid, but to focus on this aspect at the expense of the other qualities in his work would be to ignore the way in which his fiction is filled with cross-currents that tug us in a variety of very different directions.

We see another instance of these contradictory forces at work in the same story, "The Box", when a tension arises from the way in which the established idea of the Prime Minister as leader of the nation is juxtaposed with the notion of the Prime Minister as household pet. This provides one illustration of the dialogism of many of Vladislavic's stories, which allows him to play various games with his readers. His texts act upon ordinary objects, historical events, famous political figures and established South African symbols, catching us between contrasting levels of meaning that exist in a dialogic relationship to one another. This gives his work a teasing quality, for it makes it difficult for us to establish exactly where he is headed or what he means. We see this, for example, in the following passage from "Tsafendas's Diary" in Missing Persons. In this tale, the life of the central character, a child, is ruled by his grandmother's obsession with finding the diary of Tsafendas:

Granny is knitting a long black ribbon, Its fanged head is buried in the fleshy folds of her hands. The throat curves to the floor, where the blade of the rocker pins it, lets

it go, pins it, lets it go. The body is flat and bloated, heaped coil upon coil. The narrow tail flicks in the corner of the room.

"What is it?"

Her fingers twist, easing the ribbon from her skin.

"What do you think it is, child?" (94)

The repeated question "'What is it?'" intensifies our own sense of uncertainty, heightening the edgy, ambivalent atmosphere in this extract. We do not know how exactly to respond, for the object in the passage is both long black knitted ribbon and snake. There is a dialogic connection between these two manifestations of the piece of knitting, for we never lose sight of its familiar nature, yet at the same time we are deeply aware of the fantastical and ominous aspects it has taken on. We are not quite sure what to make of this juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated, irreconcilable images and yet they invite imaginative engagement. This in turn is fraught with pitfalls, as we risk being caught in one of the many traps that Vladislavic lays for overly-earnest readers, anxious to confine a particular aspect of his work to one or other relatively straightforward interpretation.

For example, it could be argued that the sense of revulsion the image of the snake engenders is intended to emphasise the presence of evil in the story. But, in that case, where is the evil located--in the all-seeing, manipulative figure of Granny or in the looming spectre of Tsafendas or in the political

establishment, represented by Pretoria, the seat of government power, the destination of the central characters? Conversely, the ribbon itself, described as snake-like, could be one of Vladislavic's many images of the banal horrors of middle-class suburban domesticity. But if the narrator is deranged, the snake could be no more than a harmless ribbon and we ourselves are allowing his paranoid vision of things to guide our response to the story.

In entertaining any one of these ideas too strongly, we lose sight of all the others, and the many possibilities that Vladislavic juggles in the air through the dialogic image of ribbon and snake come crashing to the ground. By allowing our imaginations to close, like a fist, too firmly around one particular notion, we reduce the image, and our own imaginative capacity as a result. In the way in which it allows very different things, people, events and ideas to speak to, or even argue, with each other, the play that takes place through Vladislavic's use of the fantastic offers a vision of South Africa in which it becomes clear that long-established perceptions, such as the simplistic polarities of good and evil, oppressor and oppressed, do not provide an adequate way of apprehending things. Instead, we are presented with an image incorporating both domestic cosiness and repellent menace, and we ourselves have to attempt to find a way of engaging with them both at once. In this manner, the dialogic opens up imaginative spaces within which new attitudes and approaches can be entertained. As Mikhail Bakhtin observes: "[An idea] begins to

live, that is, to take shape, to develop, to find and renew its verbal expression, to give birth to new ideas, only when it enters into genuine dialogic relationships with new ideas, with the ideas of others" (1984b: 88).

In its games with contrasting, even conflicting images and ideas, as well as the divergences and dissonances this gives rise to, Vladislavic's use of the fantastic is reminiscent especially of Barthes's theories of language. The latter observes how "language is redistributed", for instance, in de Sade's texts, commenting on the pleasure that can arise from this. "[C]ertain breaks or collisions" take place; "antipathetic codes" come into contact. Barthes could be describing Vladislavic's fiction in the following passage:

Two edges are created: an obedient, conformist, plagiarizing edge (the language is copied in its canonical state, as it has been established by schooling, good usage, literature, culture), and another edge, mobile, blank (ready to assume any contours) (1975: 6).

These oppositions of which Barthes speaks are embodied particularly well in "The Terminal Bar" in Missing Persons. The tale has the double-edged quality that Barthes alludes to in the above passage, for differing types of discourse create a description that is enthralling precisely because of its incongruities. The story depicts a group of white South Africans gathered at an airport, waiting to flee their country, bearing

with them various trappings typifying their way of life, such as a Cadac Mini-Braai and a Kreepy Krauly. The latter is accidentally "killed" by a trigger-happy member of the group in the following passage:

Instinctively, in one fluid motion, the captain raises his pistol and fires.

The bullet hit the Kreepy Krauly in the head. A gout of slime laced with cogs and sprockets splattered against the wall. A terrible spasm started in the Kreepy Krauly's neck, ran along its body and burst into the cash register, so that the drawer sprang open and the bell rang. ...The Kreepy Krauly was in its death throes. The sucker slurped desperately at the surface of the wall, but could not find purchase. The neck bent, the head slid slowly down to the floor, the head rolled over, exposing the sucker, which rattled and spat slime. The Kreepy Krauly moaned once, a low cry full of anguish and yearning, and was still (112).

This story clearly illustrates the particularity of pleasure: it is not a tale that all readers might enjoy equally. This is, in part, because of the way in which it focusses so closely on various South African stereotypes, turning them and the combination of tediousness and brutality that characterise the lives of its central characters into the subject of comedy.¹⁰ Certainly, Vladislavic's fiction has a very specific type of appeal, for aspects of his writing that may appeal to one reader will not automatically have the same attraction for another. This

is borne out by the radically contrasting ways in which different critics have responded to Vladislavic's work. Kaizer Nyatsumba, for instance, finds "Journal of a Wall" "enchanting", while Oliphant views the tale as essentially sad and bleak, "evok[ing] themes of social isolation and the desire for human contact" (1990: 8; 1990: 23). Tony Morphet describes the stories in Missing Persons as "extraordinary" and "exciting", yet Stephen Coan feels that the collection is unsatisfactory, complaining that, after finishing it, he was left with "a sense of hunger--I was empty, I hadn't had enough" (1990b: 8; 1990: 6.)

As we consider the above extract, once again a number of interpretations immediately present themselves. The death throes of the Kreepy Krauly could, as Verna Brown argues, suggest the demise of white South Africa (1990: 129). The passage also serves as a comment on that society, providing a vivid image of the paranoia and random violence that characterise it and prefiguring the family murder carried out by Boshoff (a particularly thuggish member of the group) later on. The Kreepy Krauly is anthropomorphised and the fact that it displays greater emotional capacity than any of the human beings in the story is also a critique of the emotional life of the type of white South Africans--self-absorbed, aggressive and paranoid--that it depicts. On another level, the "murder" of the Kreepy Krauly satirises commodity fetishisation. The special significance attached to this object by many white South Africans stems in part from the fact that it is a quintessentially South African product (it was invented in this country) and it serves as an

indication of material prosperity (swimming pools being an essential feature of comfortable middle and upper class suburbia). But in the world of the story, everything that the Kreepy Krauly represents is lost or has been rendered meaningless, and the casual, almost off-hand way in which the object is destroyed symbolically indicates the precariousness of a sense of security and superiority based on a valorisation of material possessions.

Because this passage can readily be interpreted as exploring certain pressing social and political issues it could be argued that it dutifully conforms to the requirement imposed by various political and cultural authorities that South African literature produced during apartheid should situate itself within social and political realities. Yet this argument fails to take into consideration the way the passage sends itself up by the very ridiculousness of the event it describes. This contradictory quality is reinforced by the verbal instabilities with which the extract is fraught. For instance, the hackneyed world of a thriller ("[i]n instinctively, in one fluid motion, the captain raises his pistol and fires") is juxtaposed with the elevated realm of tragedy ("[t]he Kreepy Krauly moaned once, a low cry full of anguish and yearning, and was still"). The name "Kreepy Krauly" combines the trite with terminology redolent of a children's horror comic; and, finally, the object's long drawn-out death is described in terms that combine the farcical and the ghastly.

A further ambiguous aspect of this passage lies in the way in which it parodies death by violence. As in Rabelais, this is essentially non-realistic brutality. (The Kreepy Krauly is, after all, not really alive.) However, unlike Rabelais's tales, which are situated within an imaginary realm in which impossible physical recoveries take place, as when the first Catchpole bounces back completely after his terrible beating, this story is set in a realistically depicted South Africa, albeit at some point in the near future, inhabited by clearly recognisable types of people. The society in the story, in which violence is always close at hand and the innocent and the vulnerable (like the Kreepy Krauly and Boshoff's wife and child) are killed for no meaningful reason, is all too real. There is also the fact that while Vladislavic's episodes depicting cruelties and physical destruction have an immediacy and a strongly realised sense of bodily and emotional anguish they are cast in a comic mould. As a result, such scenes leave us feeling uneasy--and yet, they intrigue us for the same reason.¹¹ Vladislavic comments on these kind of tensions and ambiguities that surround his use of the comic: "Even when I write on the most serious subjects, I sometimes find the text cracking jokes despite me. I believe that some readers have also been moved to tears by my more humorous passages" (App. B: 327).

In setting competing discourses up against one another, the passage depicting the death of the Kreepy Krauly teases us by offering us seemingly irreconcilable angles on events simultaneously, taking us on a roller-coaster ride as it swoops

between contraries. In consequence, we are drawn into a slippery, perilous realm, in which meanings expand outwards, in irrepressible proliferation, like ripples in a pond. This suggests, of course, the Barthian concept of textual plurality:

This is not simply to say that [the Text] has several meanings, but that it accomplishes the very plural of meaning: an irreducible (and not merely an acceptable) plural. The Text is not a co-existence of meanings but a passage, an overcrossing; thus it answers not to an interpretation, even a liberal one, but to an explosion, a dissemination. The plural of the text depends not on the ambiguity of its contents but on what might be called the stereographic plurality of its weave of signifiers (1977: 159).

For Barthes, the significance of this process lies in the way in which it gives rise to textual bliss, jouissance. Michael Moriarty's description of the latter is applicable to a great deal of Vladislavic's work, conveying, for instance, the effect created in the above extract from "The Terminal Bar":

The Text, like the erotic, suspends our sense of ourselves as unified subjects: we have no secure identity as receivers of a message; we cannot relate to its discourse, for we do not know who is speaking and are confronted with bottomless possibilities of irony; the multiplicity of voices we hear multiplies our response and divides our

subjectivity; the text violates the symbolic barriers on which our culture, and therefore our place in it, depend (1991: 149)

However, this type of symbolic "violation" could affront certain readers. Indeed, the polyphonic multitude of textual voices, with the explosion of possible meanings they generate, is precisely one aspect of Vladislavic's quixotic verbal profusion which some critics have found self-indulgent. "Vladislavic is a man in love with words--as artefacts--and he can't resist exhibiting his entire collection", Sarah Biggs complains in a review of Propaganda by Monuments (1997: 18). But in her insistence that language should denote something, rather than appearing "random and meaningless" (18), Biggs is ignoring the fact that at times words in Vladislavic's fiction are sportive entities whose purpose is to give delight. The importance of the notion of play has already been suggested in connection with the fantastical nature of Vladislavic's imagery. When language is used in a comparable way this gives another dimension to the latter's use of the ludic. Like Barthes, he revels in language for its own sake, the pleasure it provides suspending signified value, to become the signifier itself (Barthes, 1975: 65).

This is especially apparent in "Alphabets for Surplus People" in Propaganda by Monuments (1996). The South Africa depicted in Part II of the piece, "The Comings and Goings around the Marmer of the Nation", is inhabited by a range of groups, each of whom give rise to a verbal fireworks display of the recognisable, the

everyday and the surreal:

Marmer's Counsellors wield a lemon slice, a sundae spoon, a jar of honey, and a stainless-steel funnel to ensure that their sweet, refreshing counsel never splashes. ...

Marmer's Electricians favour environmentally friendly technologies for generating power: talk hot air, think bright sparks, beat children with sugar cane on the soles of their feet. ...

Marmer's Glaziers install double glazing, because things look better through a vacuum; get for thanks tumblers of shatter-proof crystal, because things look better through a heeltap. ...

Marmer's Ventriloquists throw their voices downstairs: then utensils applaud her, the kettle sings her praises, the coal-scuttle declares itself willing and able to burst into love.

Marmer's Yebomen practise endlessly the doffing of caps in unison and the bending of knees in counterpoint, never say no, always say roger, okey-dokey, affirmative, absolutely (111, 113).

These extracts do not obscure the distortions and manipulations, and even, at times, the sense of menace, inherent in the

particular type of power politics they engage with. Yet they transform them into part of a lyrical alphabetical parade of sounds and images that interweave the potentially significant and the extravagantly absurd. In the process, sounds and words acquire a force of their own independent of reliable signifiers. The figure of Marmer may resemble Winnie Mandela in certain respects, yet she is also a fabulous creation in her own right, capering with her attendants through a festival of language. The above passage reveals Vladislavic's fascination with words, indicating particularly clearly the pre-eminent role they play in his fiction, while also suggesting the pleasure he derives from working with them. "What amuses me in the act of writing" he claims, "seems to have less to do with situation or character than with the strangeness and artificiality of language itself" (App. B: 327).¹²

The central characteristic of these extracts is their refusal to take any kind of constraints or dictates into account. In their verbal high jinks and their hyperbolic, parodic flights of imaginative fancy, they have a circus-like quality, which is facilitated by the free-flowing length of the sentences. It is as if, through the sheer carnivalesque energy of his imaginative exuberance, Vladislavic can override external restrictions (such as logical, realistic considerations and grammatical rules governing the acceptable length and structure of sentences) in the same way that a circus performer appears to transcend everyday physical limitations. Through this, these extracts evoke a further feature of Barthes's jouissance: its non-teleological,

uncontainable nature. It is "atopical, asocial... unforeseeable..." the latter asserts. "[N]o one can account for one's own bliss, no one can classify it" (1985: 176). Certainly, we are drawn to the above passage because of its playful insouciance and the way it sails gaily, effortlessly, beyond definitive meanings that might contain it. It invites us to the verbal party, and it does not require us to be able to explain precisely why particular words and images appeal to us in the way they do, what exactly they mean, and what specific function they fulfil with relation to the piece as a whole.

Still, the comparison between Vladislavic and a circus performer needs to be taken further. While a juggler's, an acrobat's or a trapeze artist's actions may seem effortless, they could not take place without a certain innate ability, combined with methodical and highly disciplined practice. Analogously, Vladislavic's linguistic flights require a great deal of effort and imaginative skill. The sense of ease that infuses them is, therefore, illusory. Part of the reason why we enjoy the above passage is because we are very aware that this is an accomplished performance, creating the appearance of a smooth, spontaneous exhibition of imaginative and verbal inspiration. As with spectators at a circus, our pleasure derives partly from the element of risk involved, for this type of verbal display is precarious and tricky to pull off. Errors of judgement or careless moves could bring the whole textual structure crashing down.

While it is clear that the process of creative production that gives rise to the delight we experience in "Alphabets for Surplus People" does not come easily, Barthes, on the other hand, tends to envisage jouissance as something mysterious and extemporaneous, seemingly taking place in a void. He has been criticised for this.¹³ Certainly, when we consider Vladislavic's fiction, Barthes's depiction of textual bliss as free-floating does not seem entirely appropriate. Those elements of Vladislavic's writing that evoke a sense of Barthian jouissance arise from and are shaped by the nature of the society to which he belongs. The proliferation of contradictory possibilities evoked, for instance, by the depiction of the demise of the Kreepy Krauly or the atmosphere surrounding the descriptions of the cavortings of Marmer and her sycophantic attendants stems from the way in which these passages engage with very real features of the South African experience.

Yet the above considerations do not, by any means, render Barthes's theories irrelevant. As Steven Connor remarks, pleasure in art and culture is "uncertain and impure" (1992: 219). While there are aspects of Vladislavic's work to which Barthes's concepts do not apply, this does not negate the extent to which the latter's descriptions of jouissance provide valuable insights into the effect of Vladislavic's art. As Barthes's writing itself illustrates, the uncontainable nature of pleasure lies in the cross-currents it encompasses. On the one hand, his description of jouissance as "atopical" and not goal-directed suggests its elusive, unrestrainable quality, which, indeed, is an essential

feature of the extract from "Alphabets for Surplus People." Of course, we also need to bear in mind that Barthes's use of jouissance has a particular strategic and political purpose. We have noted how it was a response on his part to what he identified as a particular lack in his intellectual context. Connor has said that

[i]f Barthes's pure pleasure is alienated from the political world, then that alienation must be read symptomatically, as a critical gesture pointing away from itself and back to the very political dimension that is absent from it (216).

In a comparable manner, the ludic flights in Vladislavic's work take off from a specific point, and they head in a particular direction, both away from and towards their point of departure. Like the carnival, this aspect of his fiction derives impetus and resonance from the "official" world, the socio-political and literary context, within which it is situated. Within this specific setting, the seeming purposelessness of Vladislavic's verbal and imaginative play acquires a particular purpose and force--in the same way that the power and meaning of the carnival lie in the way in which its crazy festivities fulfil no coherent practical objective in the reasonable everyday sphere.

II

In order to consider the significance that these forms of play possess more fully, we need to turn to a literary mode that Vladislavic's use of language calls to mind, and in which his fiction periodically participates: the world of Nonsense. Edward Lear's "Calico Pie", for instance, which Denis Diamond describes as "a puff of verbal magic" (1973: 233) is very similar in spirit to Part III of "Alphabets for Surplus People", "The Signature Tunes of the Barber of the Piece":

Arranger: Down the Orinoco, on a breeze as sweet as
cocoa,

Barber go.

Babysitter: Tooler too tooler Barber tooler twarner, tooler
too tooler Barber tooler twarner (114).

Words in Nonsense literature are active, often wayward participants, not passive instruments for the conveying of ideas. The starting point of the second sentence in the extract is a Xhosa lullaby, but then the words take off on a dance of their own. Of all the literary modes, Nonsense is the one that attaches greatest importance to play, creating a space in which irrational, uninhibited fun becomes a central value.

Once again, we return to Huizinga's discussion of the nature of

the ludic. Another valuable observation he makes in his study is that the fun of play defies rational purpose; it is free--in fact, freedom itself. Children and animals engage in play voluntarily, because they enjoy it, but to the adult world, something as "superfluous" as play can easily be postponed or ignored (Huizinga: 17, 8). As with the carnival and the fantastical elements in Vladislavic's fiction that exist, importantly, for their own sakes, Nonsense literature is potentially liberatory particularly because it affirms the ludic, in all its unnecessary, seemingly meaningless delight, as an integral part of the human experience. In an essay on Lear's Nonsense poetry, George Orwell cites Aldous Huxley's observation that Lear's poems repeatedly feature "They", the realists, the practical, commonsensical pillars of the community, who are outraged by the extravagant escapades of the central figures in the poems, such as the Old Man of Whitehaven,

Who danced a quadrille with a raven;

But they said, "It's absurd

To encourage this bird!"

So they smashed that Old Man of Whitehaven (Lear, 1988: 99; Orwell, 1970: 67).

Nonsense is essentially anti-establishment, a gleeful rebellion against the generally accepted, the rational and the firmly entrenched (Diamond: 277). While Lewis Carroll's Alice books and Lear's poems invert the notions of order and reason that dominated their society, enthroning irreverent imaginative

prodigality in the place of restraint and repression, Vladislavic's fiction fulfils a comparable function in South African literature in English, thumbing its nose at various authorities and the specific controls that they seek to impose. Political power becomes comical, as we have seen with the hapless Prime Minister in "The Box", even when the comedy is very dark indeed. The mockery extends to the literary sphere, as Vladislavic's tales send up the type of South African fiction that seeks to reflect the political through clearly-directed, sober forms of realism. For instance, "The Prime Minister is Dead", in Missing Persons, deals with a very typical white middle-class family's reaction to the assassination of their head of state, but while a typical work of English-language fiction produced during apartheid might have been content with exposing the dictatorial nature of the latter's regime and the parochial mindset of the family, Vladislavic goes one better. He intimates all this in his tale, yet also emphasises the ghoulish excitement that the narrator's grandmother derives from the news of the Prime Minister's murder, and turns the funeral procession, traditionally an occasion for a display of the power and dignity of the state, into pure theatre of the absurd. The truck towing the coffin breaks down, and the father of the family loads the Prime Minister onto his wheelbarrow, charges towards the grave and tips him in. Through episodes such as this, Vladislavic makes critics who focus on the political commentary in his work at the expense of its fantastical escapades seem as limited as the "They" of Lear's limericks.

The fact that Vladislavic's writing runs counter to established trends within South African English-language fiction was not, he claims, the result of any conscious decision.

I think there was very little deliberate about it. ...The idea of deliberately adopting a style in order to demonstrate an alternative suggests a view of communication through writing that doesn't chime with my experience of the activity. For me, writing is about doing what must be done, what suggests itself, what arises during the process" (App. B: 323).

However, this is perhaps an instance when the tale, not the teller is to be trusted. Whatever Vladislavic may have to say in this regard, we cannot help but be struck by the contrast between his work and conventional, realistic South African fiction in English. Inevitably the lightness and vitality of the former make a great deal of the latter appear even more leaden and lacklustre by comparison.

The particular types of revelry that we encounter both in Nonsense literature and Vladislavic's fiction play an especially important role in turning the darker aspects of life into a source of comic delight. By cracking open the compartments in which, all too often, we encase contrasting aspects of our experience, they offer us images of the real within which laughter and horror, destruction and uninhibited creative expression can exist side by side. As in Lear and Carroll's work,

Vladislavic's vision, particularly in Missing Persons, is both a funny and a frightening one. The stories in this collection call to mind some of the most damaging, dangerous qualities of 1980s South Africa. Bizarre constructions of reality hold sway and those in any kind of position of power, such as Quentin in "The Box", become a law unto themselves. Yet, as in the realm of Nonsense, this threatening world teems with comic energy, as we see in these extracts from "Tsafendas's Diary":

Granny is knitting me a thinking-cap, in pink and blue. It is shaped like a turnip, with a long, curling tail. ... I'll be able to pull it right over my face and look out through the two eye-holes Granny has thoughtfully provided. ...

"Now you are ready to do some thinking," she says. "The first thing you must think about is Tsafendas's Diary."

I pull the cap down over my face and look out through the eye-holes.

In the mean time, Granny keeps me busy feeding the hole in the backyard.

"Food for the earth," Granny says. "Excellent stuff. Full of goodness." ...

I climb into the hole. The bottom is marshy, it sucks at my feet. Granny rocks closer to the edge so that she can look down on me. Her eyes are pale as the sky behind her. Her face comes and goes on the horizon. With the flat edge

of my spade I scrape the piles of food along the rim into the hole. Potato peelings, bones, bread-crusts, meat. I dig in. The mixture bubbles and steams. ...

Granny and I set out in the motorised rocking-chair. We are going to Pretoria to recover Tsafendas's Diary. ... On the Ben Schoeman highway, snug under the meat-blanket which Granny has thoughtfully provided, with my thinking-cap pulled down right to my chin, I am happy, I think. We narrowly avoid a collision with a Mercedes Benz. ...

I dream I am Death in my thinking-cap with the spangled D, I dream I am Death, coming with my crochet-hook and my wooden basket, ... I am coming with my fluorescent thread and my iron hook to knot the world into my blanket. ...

Granny, her body swathed in the meat-blanket, her feet sticking out like boiled hams, rocking, rocking, to the mouth of the grave. She comes and goes over the precipice. She rocks herself over the edge.

I hear her cooking, bubbling and squeaking, in the meaty broth at the centre of the earth (91-93, 97-98).

In these passages, we roam with the narrator through a world in which nightmares and reality fuse and everyone and everything is fraught with menace. The compost heap, a voracious, ominous presence, like a slime creature from a horror melodrama, lurks at the centre of this passage and of the narrative. Granny, a

repulsive, all-controlling figure, holds the narrator trapped in her chilly gaze, until suddenly and unexpectedly the forces of death and disintegration, in the form of the compost heap, engulf her. Tsafendas hovers in the background, haunting the narrator's unconscious, the source of numerous lurid images of destruction; and in a dream, the narrator becomes Death himself or herself. Small wonder then that he peers out at the world through the eye-holes of his thinking cap, like someone trying to hide from the dangers around him--or like a potential criminal adopting a disguise. He could be an innocent set loose in a perilous society or, for all we know, the story may be situated within the demon-filled realms of individual psychosis and the images in the passage may originate from the narrator himself. Vladislavic deliberately leaves this matter shrouded in uncertainty.

But these macabre features are incorporated into images and descriptions of comic-book wackiness. In fact, we enjoy the extracts particularly because of the type of surprises they spring. Death wears a sequined dunce cap and brandishes a crochet-hook instead of a traditional scythe while the description of Granny, reduced in the end to just another piece of meat, stewing away in the compost heap is filled with gruesome relish. The threatening atmosphere in the story seems to spur the characters on to increasingly preposterous antics, as the narrator dons his pink and blue turnip-shaped thinking cap and whizzes towards Pretoria with Granny in her motorised rocking chair.

The story is also reminiscent of Nonsense literature in the way in which it engages with the horrors it contains, making them part of its festival of absurdities rather than being overcome or paralysed by them. In this, it is like Lear's more disturbing limericks, or Carroll's The Hunting of the Snark (1876). It is appropriate, then, that the narrative should conclude with Granny being consumed by the compost heap. The latter conveys, like the image of the grave, an interconnected sense of physical corruption and the potential for new growth.¹⁴ Like a great deal of Nonsense literature, "Tsafendas's Diary" participates in the ambivalent sphere of the traditional carnival, which incorporates images of death, decay and deformity in its "gay relativity" (Bakhtin, 1984a: 11).

A characteristic feature of this passage--and, for that matter, most of Vladislavic's work--is the way in which divisions are obliterated, as they are in most Nonsense literature (Diamond: 55). A great deal of the black comedy in the passage lies in the way in which diverse people or things are flung together, often taking on each other's qualities. Granny's legs are compared to "boiled hams" and a few sentences later she herself is transformed into a piece of cooked meat. Ensnared in her rocking chair, she and the narrator take off on their ridiculous odyssey down Ben Schoeman highway, nearly colliding with that solid, respectable symbol of affluent citizenry, a Mercedes Benz.

Nonsense, with its strange, chaotic mixtures of images that flow into and take over one another, suggests the nature of the

unconscious. This is borne out by the above extracts, which appear dreamlike in their arbitrary, erratic nature and their fluidity. In Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious (1922) Freud argues that jokes, like dreams, are connected to the unconscious and that psychic energy is released through laughter. This theory seems particularly appropriate when we consider Nonsense. Here the joke is on us, for that which appears alien and inconceivable turns out, in fact, to be deeply familiar. We recognise it as an expression of something deep within us and our laughter is, in part, directed at ourselves. The country of our own unconscious, as we well know, is as obscure and haphazard a place as the fragmented, whimsical, frightening world of "Tsafendas's Diary."¹⁵

Some of the chief boundaries that Vladislavic overrides are those which we set between the usual and the habitual and that which appears abnormal and unaccountable. Barthes's debunking of signs in Mythologies (1973) springs from his awareness that "[a]nxious, alienated societies constantly need clarity and permanence" (1985: 158) and he sets out to show that these latter aspects are based on signifiers that are essentially spurious or illogical. To an extent, Vladislavic's treatment of the familiar in his work arises from a similar response to attitudes prevalent among the white population in his own country. White South African society was and still is particularly prey to a range of doubts and fears. In such a context, the mundane and long-established, however insignificant, acquire a special force; in changing times they can be perceived as symbols of unchanging order and

stability. This is one reason why the fugitives at the airport in "The Terminal Bar" cling to various arbitrary material possessions--or for that matter, why the Smales family in Nadine Gordimer's July's People (1981) bear huge quantities of toilet paper into the wilderness with them. In part, Vladislavic seeks to show us how inadequate and misplaced this dependency is by turning prosaic objects that could, for white South Africans, symbolise a "normal", orderly existence, such as compost heaps or Kreepy Kraulys, into entities fraught with uncontrollable or even hazardous qualities.

Because these objects acquire an elusive power of their own, they resist appropriation. Vladislavic's treatment of the familiar thus represents a creative prank taking place at the reader's expense. He undermines our own certainties by making the apparently straightforward and accessible enigmatic: a riddle that we cannot hope to read adequately but which fascinates and tantalises us. In this way, a process of defamiliarisation takes place, a concept initially outlined by the Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky. Habitualized perception dulls and "devours", so the purpose of art, he tells us, is to "recover the sensation of life" by making objects "unfamiliar" (1965: 12).¹⁶ In the previous chapter, mention was made of the mind-numbing sense of boredom that characterised much of life under apartheid. It will, unfortunately, take far more than a change in government to eradicate this quality of blandness and inertia in South African society. Under such conditions, Vladislavic's work reminds us of the crucial role that the fantastic can play in re-enchanting and

revitalising a reality that, all too often, seems stale and tired.

Yet the term "re-enchantment" needs to be used in a qualified sense, for it can easily be seen to imply a Tolkienesque conception of the fantastic, in which the ordinary is irradiated by the beauty and sublimity which, in the latter writer's view, represent the predominant characteristics of this mode. Part of the force that infuses Vladislavic's fantastical recreations of the familiar derives from the way in which he often infuses the ordinary with dark, sometimes even diabolical energies. This contrasts with Tolkien's own fantasies, which express a deep nostalgia for that which is unattainable within modern life. In his use of the fantastic, on the other hand, Vladislavic reminds us of the unsettling, dangerous depths underlying our reality, often glossed over by conventionalised images of the real. Even a work as delightful and seemingly light-hearted as "Alphabets for Surplus People" bases its gleeful fantastical play on some of the more sinister aspects of contemporary South African politics.¹⁷

III

A later version of Shklovsky's defamiliarisation is the postmodern desire to "de-doxify" (Hutcheon, 1989: 2-3). The difference between these two impetuses, however, lies in the way

in which the latter is specifically connected to the political agenda of postmodernism, which seeks to destabilise dominant discourses and ideologies. Linda Hutcheon explains how this process takes place in postmodern literature. Through de-naturalising "normal", established perceptions and particular forms of representation, she argues, postmodern fiction "loosen[s] the glue by which labels used to adhere to the products of convention", as Rosalind Krauss puts it (in Hutcheon, 1989: 8).

In place of categories and definitions, postmodernism valorises the play of free-floating signifiers, which, as stories like "Alphabets for Surplus People" show, forms an integral part of Vladislavic's fantastic. Yet of all his texts, The Folly is in some ways the most overtly postmodern work, having at its centre a game of endlessly deferred meanings. On one level, this takes place between Mr Malgas and his neighbour, the mysterious newcomer, Niewenhuizen, who renounces all the stolid, comfortable suburban values that the Malgases live by. Mr Malgas becomes obsessed with Niewenhuizen, whose plan to construct a house seems to hold out all sorts of possibilities, if he be permitted to participate in it. (In this regard, he calls to mind the narrator of "Journal of a Wall" in Missing Persons, who eagerly monitors the progress of his neighbour's building activities.) In his review of The Folly, Peter Horn compares Mr Malgas, the "reader" of Niewenhuizen's plan, to the model reader. Like a reader of a text, Mr Malgas presupposes a contract between himself and Niewenhuizen, in terms of which certain expectations will be met.

However, Niewenhuizen does not "deliver" what he expects, breaking the "contract" between them in his sudden, apparently wanton destruction of the imaginary house (1994: 10-11).

Reception theorists describe how a text sets up a "horizon of expectation" as result of the recognizable conventions of genre, style or forms of representation it may contain. In postmodern texts, however, this is dismantled or betrayed (Hutcheon, 1989: 114). The Folly contains a visual image of this, in the demolition of Niewenhuizen's house, which also becomes the demolition of a text:

In the inevitable end, Niewenhuizen and the removers whipped themselves up into a cloud of dust and typography The cloud boiled and spilled out fists and feet, caps and hats, asterisks and ampersands, dollar signs and percentages, sharps and flats, > , < , and = (138-139).

The amusement that Niewenhuizen derives from Mr Malgas's anxious determination to "read" the events around him appropriately and his repeated inability to do so, and the elaborate tricks he engages in at the latter's expense, are echoed, on a textual level, by the way that we, the readers, become the target of Vladislavic's narrative antics. In the above passage, like Mr Malgas, we struggle to formulate a response to the scene it depicts. From this point on, the text becomes, to use Niewenhuizen's phrase, "like a joke without a punch line" (143). "[T]he wider society" (147) who gather around Niewenhuizen's

campsite at the end, eagerly awaiting significant action and who are finally exasperated, descend on the area and loot it of any important-seeming items could be compared to us, the readers, impatiently awaiting revelation of some kind at the end of the text. In attempting to extract meaning out of the last section of The Folly, we risk, like the looters, being left with the verbal equivalent of the junk and trivia that litter Niewenhuizen's camp. Like Niewenhuizen, Vladislavic refuses to provide "an explanation for this unaccountable behaviour" (131) and we readers are left to draw our own conclusions.

Niewenhuizen's refusal to satisfy Mr Malgas provides further insights into the nature and effect of Vladislavic's fantastical elements. The conclusion of The Folly indicates how the enigmatic, open-ended nature of Vladislavic's texts arises from and reinforces their non-realistic aspects. In an examination of the fantastic in postmodern fiction, Lance Olsen discusses the way it resists being contained by definitive meanings and resolutions:

It is impossible in postmodern fantasy to "see through" the signifier to the golden signified because, in a very practical way, signifieds do not exist in such a universe of discourse, or they exist in a way radically different from the way they do in traditional realist texts Hence, in postmodern fantasy "meaning" is unfastened; it floats free (1990: 62).

As Olsen's comment indicates, postmodernism does not necessarily entail a collapse of meaning. The fact that meaning "floats free" shows that, as Vladislavic and writers such as Thomas Pynchon, Italo Calvino and Umberto Eco suggest, meaning may exist, even if it is beyond our reach.¹⁸ Narratives like Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49 (1967) embark on a search for an evasive meaning that never discloses itself, but may, possibly, lurk somewhere out there. The truth may perhaps have been uncovered, but there is also the possibility that it may never be revealed, that it does not exist, or that there are, in fact, many coexistent truths.

The particular types of meaning Vladislavic's characters ascribe to the events around them may seem wildly improbable, or even crazy at times, but nonetheless, we have no way of ascertaining whether they are actually as deranged or deluded as they appear. On one level, for example, Granny's beliefs in "Tsafendas's Diary" could be viewed as the distorted products of a diseased imagination, yet the possibility that she may be right also exists. For all we know, Tsafendas' Diary may in fact contain the key to the "the mysteries of meat and the imagination" (92), offering answers to all the secrets of our existence, in both a physical and metaphysical sense.

The difficulty of ever attaining a reliable sense of the truth is evident, for example, when one considers South Africa of the late 1980s and 1990s, in which meaning has been subject to confusing contradictions, or reversals, or has been rendered

opaque.¹⁹ Nonetheless, in a society such as ours, the act of searching for truth is important, even if that search never achieves its goal.²⁰

Vladislavic's refusal to provide answers contrasts with the sense of narrative certainty and the predictability which have been a dominant trend in much politically committed South African literature in English, particularly in the 1980s. But the effect of Vladislavic's use of postmodern elements and techniques needs to be examined further. The "unfastened", provisional quality that postmodernism gives rise to allows for the startling changes and the free exercise of the imagination that characterise much of his work. This can be deeply delightful, as we see in "Alphabets for Surplus People", which liberates itself, once again, from the sometimes tedious earnestness at the heart of much South African protest fiction and liberal realism in a way that calls the unfettered imaginative festivities in the novels of postmodern writers such as Salman Rushdie, Pynchon or Kurt Vonnegut to mind.²¹

At first glance, it seems easy to view The Folly, with the postmodern stunts it performs, in a similar light to the novels of these three above-mentioned writers. "[The book] is just sheer exuberant and subversive fun," Andre Brink enthuses (App. C: 341). But while The Folly explores intriguing issues, it is not really an entertaining read. For example, it lacks the lively, madcap appeal and sheer unrestrained thrill in imaginative and verbal antics that we encounter in various other works, such as

"Tsafendas's Diary", "The Box" and "Alphabets for Surplus People". The novel is cluttered with all the paraphernalia of mundane, domestic existence, indicative of Vladislavic's fascination with the quotidian that sometimes appears to border on the obsessive. This finds its stylistic echo in the deliberately commonplace nature of the narrative voice and the verbal exchanges that take place. There is, for instance, the following argument between Mrs and Mr Malgas, concerning Niewenhuizen, who has just set up camp on the vacant lot next door:

"It's all very well for you. You don't have to sit here all day long putting up with him."

"Sigh!"

"I wish you wouldn't say that!"

"Say what?"

"Sigh. It's irritating." ...

"What if he's a dangerous criminal?" she went on.

"Perhaps he's on the run."

"If he was on the run he wouldn't be standing out there in broad daylight making a racket. ..."

"You always think the worse of people. He could just as well be a professor, fallen on hard times. If I had to hazard a guess, that's what I'd say. Just look at the head he's got on him! When I behold that head I must say it gives me a good feeling about him, here, in the pit of my stomach." He pointed out the spot with the yellow tip of his knife (11).

This exchange between Mrs and Mr Malgas, in their empty suburban existence, is mired in cliches, underlining the banalities in terms of which they apprehend events around them. Mr Malgas's opening expostulation sets the tone for the one-dimensional quality of their dialogue, making him sound like a character in a comic strip, in which verbal captions are used to indicate feelings, thus emphasising the fact that reality is being caricatured. When he attempts to express himself in a heartfelt way at the end of the extract, he does so in a hackneyed manner, as if the only emotionally laden utterances he has recourse to are stale, second-hand ones. His melodramatic gesture with his egg-coated knife makes his assertion seem even sillier.

The reader has to wade through a great deal of similar deliberately turgid dialogue in the course of the book. If the text were to be analysed in terms of traditional aesthetic perspectives, it could doubtless be critiqued on the grounds that, while such conversations are intended to indicate the Malgases limited emotional and psychological life, they make tedious reading. Furthermore, even the most dramatic moments, such as the more heated exchanges between Niewenhuizen and Mr Malgas, or the collapse of Niewenhuizen's house, have a dry, even pedestrian quality, as if they have been observed from a distance and methodically, mechanically recorded. From one point of view, this strips them of vitality and immediacy and makes it impossible for us to relate to the characters involved. Or so the argument might go.

Yet, in a study of the fantastic, other critical perspectives need to come into play. Superficial characterisation and lifeless dialogue, while a problem in a realistic novel, do not necessarily affect the impact of a work making use of non-realistic elements, for the fantastic itself can serve as an attention-holding device. In fact, Vladislavic does not allow his text to be too firmly grounded in the working-out of emotionally engaging aspects like character development, convincing dialogue, or a coherent, engrossing plot, precisely because of his desire to situate his texts in the realm of postmodern play, undistracted by other, more traditional novelistic considerations.

The effectiveness of this can be gauged by considering the following extract in which non-realistic elements are predominant:

Niewenhuizen in person, the object of the invisible one's scrutiny, stood at attention nearby--in the northwestern corner of block IF--gazing candidly into the sunrise. Until this moment the sun had been rising irrevocably like a child's balloon, but now it stood still, surprisingly enough, as if a dangling string had caught in the branches of the hedge.

Although he appeared to be considering the implications of this earth-shattering improbability, Niewenhuizen's thoughts were in fact on the top of his head and the soles of his feet, which were developing pins and needles. He

furrowed his forehead and shimmied his eyebrows in an effort to flush some blood into his scalp. He stretched his toes. He flexed his left hand, which was in his pocket: that at least was in good condition and ready for the task that lay ahead. His right hand, by contrast, was frozen into a claw around his flint hammer, and felt numb and unwieldy. To crown it all, the bandoleer, with its freight of nails, began to hurt his shoulder.

He was on the point of conceding defeat and retreating to his tent, when the sun escaped from the grasp of the hedge and bobbed up into the sky.

"Optical illusion," he said with a sigh of relief and sallied forth (76-77).

As in a great deal of The Folly, this passage dissolves the boundaries between reality and the imagination. Incongruously, the rising sun turns into a balloon, dangling and bouncing like a child's toy, and the hedge seems to acquire a life of its own, appearing to clutch the sun in its grip. The strange, ridiculous quality of this picture is intensified by the description of Niewenhuizen, standing frozen in uncomfortable solemnity, incorporating the sunrise into one of his many obscure and laborious physical rituals. The passage reinforces the sense of mysterious oddness that hangs over him and his activities, asserting the unpredictable nature of the reality that a character such as Mrs Malgas prefers to shut out. In its non-realistic aspects, this extract provides a typical example of the type of postmodern trickery that prevails throughout the book.

Niewenhuizen may be temporarily perplexed, yet we are far more so. He and his creator may know what he is doing, but we, the readers, certainly do not. From its opening image of the sun stuck in the hedge, the passage bamboozles, providing us, like the *Malgases*, with bewildering glimpses of events from an outsider's point of view.

This is ingenious, but it has the same sort of distanced quality that the more realistic aspects of the book, such as the dialogue, possess, for these fantastical descriptions are situated within the curiously flattened, abstract world of the novel. Some might argue that comparisons could be drawn between Vladislavic's use of the fantastic in this passage and Jorge Luis Borges's tales, in which the dry, precise style offsets the magical, even mystical nature of the events depicted. Likewise, other works by Vladislavic, such as "The Box", indicate that unremarkable dialogue and a seemingly prosaic authorial voice can enhance the effect of the fantastic. Certainly, Borges and Vladislavic have significant areas in common. The latter describes Borges as having had an fundamental influence on his work, in a passage that could be detailing some of the key features of his own fiction:

I read the Borges collection Labyrinths when I was very young, too young to understand what most of the stories were about, but the mood of the book made an indelible impression on me. ... I love the intricacy and detail, the pieces that recede on the reader like images in mirrors,

the games (in the sense of serious play), the objects (how many of Borges's stories revolve around an enigmatic object) (App. B: 325-326).

The fact that Vladislavic emphasises his own enjoyment of Borges's work in this passage is relevant here, for it points to the central difference between Labyrinths and The Folly.

As we see from a collection such as Labyrinths, the fantastic offers many different types of pleasure, apart from a spontaneous delight in the ludic capacities of the imagination. To return to Shklovsky's concept of defamiliarisation briefly, there is also the enjoyment that arises out of the intense foregrounding--through non-realistic forms and perspectives--of specific, sometimes highly problematic aspects of human experience and the convincing, even logical way in which such situations are worked through, despite their fantastical quality. The narrative voices of tales such as Franz Kafka's Metamorphosis or Borges's "The Library of Babel" may have a methodical, detached nature, yet the intense fascination such stories inspire and the imaginative satisfaction we derive from the way in which Kafka and Borges explore the fabulous situations they set up are, of course, highly pleasurable.

But The Folly does not affect us in this way. Instead, the non-realistic elements of this novel are enclosed--indeed, confined--by the mundane, giving them a reduced, even sterile quality that prevents them from touching us too deeply or holding our interest

too profoundly. In a comparable manner, Niewenhuizen himself is a closed, impenetrable figure, discouraging imaginative exploration. Unlike the central character in "Tsafendas's Diary", for example, he does not invite us into his unique world. In the above passage from The Folly, and throughout the book, all we have of him are peculiarly artificial physical (and, elsewhere, verbal) posturings, which serve to bemuse and thereby to mock curious onlookers, whether the Malgases or the readers. In contrast to the passages from "Tsafendas's Diary", for instance, the fantastical elements in the above extract (and, indeed, in many comparable episodes in The Folly) do not lead us into a Borgesian garden of ever-forking paths but rather into a cul-de-sac.²² The comical, yet astounding image of the sun stuck in the hedge, for instance, suddenly evaporates into a delusion of the eye. The fact that the passage frustrates us in this way is part of the trick it plays on us.

Steiner describes aesthetic pleasure as a state of "enlightened beguilement" (92). While this passage offers us aspects of intellectual interest, expressing various key postmodern concerns, it certainly does not beguile. We cannot, for example, become caught up in wonderment at the fantastical, wayward energy of words and images, in the way that we can in a story like "Alphabets for Surplus People." In The Folly, Vladislavic combines the unaccountable and the eccentric with the quotidian, raising various social, political and theoretical issues in the process. When he embarks on something similar in tales such as "The Prime Minister is Dead" and "Journal of a Wall", he succeeds

in engaging with certain well-known features of South African life in a pointed and intriguing way. However, in this novel, his social critique is neither compelling nor at an imaginative level, altogether convincing. This is because the non-real features of this book do not have a life of their own. Rather, they exist primarily as instruments, contrived means of bringing to the fore the particular concerns with which the novel plays.

Several of Vladislavic's stories are characterised by a comparable clinical postmodern quality, such as "Flashback Hotel" in Missing Persons or "The Omniscope (Pat. Pending)" in Propaganda by Monuments. The latter story, for instance, holds our attention as a result of its unexpected, original nature, but only to a limited extent. A casket that can contain everything in the world is devised, based on the principle of substitution: the insignificant, everyday objects placed in it represent other elements, creatures and phenomena.²³ A box of matches becomes fire, for example, a postage stamp becomes a library and a dog biscuit becomes a behemoth: "Behemoth: tricky. I didn't have a behemoth, of course, although I had a small dog. But even a small dog will not fit into a shoebox comfortably, so I went a step further and chose one of the beast's biscuits instead" (73). In this sphere of changing signification, meaning becomes elusive, as the difficulty of knowing how to respond to the dog biscuit that becomes a behemoth indicates. Should we take the narrator and his invention seriously, or would we make ourselves appear foolish if we were to do so? In postmodern terms, this story functions effectively because of the puzzle it sets up and the

way in which it pokes fun at the notion that the relationship between signifier and signified is inherently transparent and logical. But if we step outside of postmodernism, it can be acknowledged that the tale has a sense of hollowness to it. It does not offer us anything more than the basic idea outlined above, and a feeling of dullness settles over the narrative. It would seem that Vladislavic himself has not been able to decide what he wants to do with the concept of the Omniscope.

The problems inherent in "The Omniscope" indicate that although postmodern analysis offers valuable tools for appreciating Vladislavic's texts, it also allows him to get away with various imaginative and artistic shortcomings. Ideas, in short, take precedence over their fictional realisation. Another specific instance of this occurs in "Flashback Hotel", in Missing Persons, an apocalyptic vision of a collapsing society. The fragmented body of the text provides a structural parallel for the images of psychic and social disintegration in the narrative. However, the tale itself has not been developed sufficiently to allow us to engage with it on any level other than a detached, theoretical one. For Ken Barris, the effect of "Flashback Hotel" is "a bemusing writerly imposition--something like reading the temperature of a body instead of painting it" (1990: 6). Intellectualisation becomes a substitute for narrative life, and we, the readers, feel cheated in consequence.

The fact that the importance of imaginative and aesthetic satisfaction is not often central to a postmodernist analysis

also indicates that, while postmodern literary theory might emphasise play, it tends to mistrust the pleasure that arises from the artistic and imaginative power of a work of literature. Marguerite Alexander, for instance, criticises Brian McHale's and Patricia Waugh's extremely influential analyses of postmodern fiction for paying too little attention to the delight that can be obtained from the texts they discuss (1990: 17). But this is not so much an oversight on the part of two specific critics, as Alexander appears to imply, but rather the result of a broad inclination within postmodern approaches to literature. Postmodernism, after all, tends to ascribe an essentially political function to art, as the work of a prominent theorist of postmodern fiction such as Hutcheon makes abundantly clear. Under such conditions, pleasure could lie, say, in the way in which a work of fiction transgressed established literary codes and destabilised powerful ideologies, but the issue of whether or not such a text were able to provide satisfaction on an artistic and imaginative level would not constitute a major concern. Indeed, the notion of aesthetic enjoyment could run the risk of appearing self-indulgent. As Steiner observes, those who value art especially because of the intense pleasure that can be derived from it, can, from a postmodern perspective, be accused of "fetishizing" it (80).

It goes without saying that critical theory does not control the nature of artistic creativity. Writers who take up postmodern issues may--and thankfully, often do--produce fiction that gives aesthetic delight. However, from a postmodern perspective, they

need not feel under any compunction to do so and this can, at times, impact on the nature of their writing. The Folly, perhaps Vladislavic's work that lends itself best of all to an extended postmodern analysis, certainly provides evidence in support of this.

That said, Vladislavic's fiction is undeniably characterised by an idiosyncratic imaginative energy. Who else, in South African fiction, could have thought of putting a Prime Minister into a hamster cage or turning a Kreepy Krauly into a tragic hero? Moreover, his writing is also remarkable for its sheer artistic skill. There are few other South African writers in English who are able to set language loose on the kind of impressively constructed fantastical flights that his talent makes plausible. If we ignore or discount these features, we could in the end reduce his texts to the dutiful working-out of specific politically-determined concerns. They would become as limited as an imaginatively circumscribed work of liberal realism or a straightforwardly didactic piece of South African protest fiction.

IV

Vladislavic's special significance lies, on the contrary, in his capacity to transcend containment, even by the term "postmodern". He accomplishes this particularly clearly through the

carnavalesque antics of tales like "The Prime Minister is Dead", "Tsafendas's Diary" and "Alphabets for Surplus People". From a certain perspective, this connection between liberation and play may seem debatable. After all, as has been already noted, the carnival was surrounded and sanctioned by the "official" world; as Lucie Armitt points out, "the very terms 'playground' and 'play-pen' demonstrate [that] what masquerades as licence is actually a prohibitive structure held in place by firm, territorial demarcations" (1996: 6). But the power of the ludic in Vladislavic's fiction lies in its ability to work within and challenge or even transmute such confines. Like Hope, his work realises freedoms that take place in spite of--or even as a result of--the various factors that seem to work against them.

Propaganda by Monuments provides several instances of just this. Although a number of stories in this collection are set in post-1994 South Africa, they all avoid presenting us with idealised pictures of a transformed nation. Perhaps this is most apparent in "Courage", almost all of which takes place in an isolated village during "the first days of our freedom" (114). An artist, Peter Meyerhold Becker, descends upon this rural community. Commissioned by the new government to construct a statue paying tribute to the people for their courage during the liberation struggle, he is seeking a model for his artwork. The person he eventually selects is Kumbuza, a drunken, crippled reprobate. He subsequently departs, the "new-found freedom [breaks] its promises" (135) and the community is engulfed by war. Nonetheless, the story has a surprising twist at the end. Many

years later, the narrator comes across the statue of courage in a town square and next to it Kumbuza himself, who has transformed himself into "the General", offering passers-by the opportunity to be photographed next to him and the statue.

Kumbuza, a failure in his own community, recreates himself as "a true hero of the people" (136) in the same way that the carnival enthrones the most insignificant, disreputable members of the community as rulers over its topsy-turvy world "for laughter's sake" (Bakhtin, 1984a: 5). Such figures lack power in a political sense, but they fulfil a crucial emotional and psychological role. It is at this level that tales such as "Courage" embody forms of liberation, despite the seemingly hopeless nature of the situations they depict. Those accorded positions of sovereignty in the realm of the carnival preside over the areas of human experience in which spontaneous mirth in comic carousing triumphs over the dreary weight of ordinary life and the crushing force of the misery we may experience, reminding us that the carnivalesque can and does take place in the midst of wretchedness or even calamity.

In literary terms, a similar type of victory takes place, for the story refuses to succumb to the South African predilection for doleful solemnity when artistically conveying a situation of suffering.²⁴ In addition, the tale disturbs established notions of power, by extending this concept far beyond politics into the realms of the carnivalesque. Kumbuza attains an authority of a kind in the tale, one which lies beyond the capacities of

representatives of official bodies to comprehend or bestow. As a result he symbolises the limitations of their control.

In contrast to "Courage", in which political change brings nothing new to the protagonists, "Propaganda by Monuments" takes as its theme the entrepreneurial opportunities opened up by post-apartheid South Africa. Boniface Khumalo, proprietor of the V.I. Lenin Bar and Grill (previously the Boniface Tavern) writes to Moscow, requesting one of the many statues of Lenin, currently being dismantled all over the city, with which to decorate his establishment. Below we have an extract from a letter from Christov, the government official who responds to Khumalo's request, which has been "ruthlessly invaded and occupied by the translator" (37), Grekov:

It is with rather a great deal of pleasure that I pen this missive, reactionary to yours of the 5th inst.

Some weeks may have passed, indeed, as your request flew from subtropical Pretoria, administrative capital of the Republic of South Africa, to our correspondent temperate urbanity

I am instructed to inform you that your letter is receiving considerate attention at many and various levels, local and national/ international. Soon we will pen additional missives to impart the final decision-making process and details.

[Feeling overwhelmingly cocksure that your request re: SURPLUS STATUE will meet with a big okey-dokey fairly

forthwith

On a new thread. What is doing in the Transvaal? Do the cows and sheep graze on the veld nearby free from harm? Much has been said and supposed vis-a-vis socio-political machinations of reformism in your motherland of which I am always an amateur or eager beaver as they say. But the horse's mouth is what you are. Your tidings have captivated me boots and all. Please correspond. --Tr.]

We look forward to hearing from you in the near future. [And who knows how long hence we may eat beefsteaks and drink vodkas--our patriotic highball--in V.I. Lenin Bar & Grill of Atteridgeville!] (29-30).

Like the traditional carnival, this passage makes the official world from which it arises a target of its parody. Christov's part of the letter constantly trips over its own feet in its entanglements of tautology and bureaucratic jargon. Its unwieldy formalities are made to seem even more ridiculous when juxtaposed with the first sentence of Grekov's section of the missive, with its enthusiastic, inappropriate use of English colloquialisms. The letter as a whole effects a carnivalesque transformation, as the capricious vitality of Grekov's expression turns conventional utterance into a prodigal display of the hilarious and the fanciful. Political processes become part of the comedy as "reformism", for example, is made synonymous with "socio-political machinations".

The ludicrous spelling mistake that turns South Africa into a

"Repudlic" is suggestive of the way the country in this passage becomes a place in which absurd fanciful possibilities run amok. Pretoria, traditionally perceived as the bastion of bureaucratic conservatism, becomes, in Grekov's eyes, a city characterised by its exotic subtropical nature, while the new South Africa is envisaged in terms of a rural idyll that appears particularly far-fetched when we contrast it with the derelict, decaying urban wasteland through which Khumalo wanders later in the story. Appropriately then, Grekov ends his part of the letter expressing a desire that he and Khumalo may someday drink vodka together in the latter's establishment. His wish may seem unrealistic, but it takes place within a narrative world whose disregard of such considerations is suggested by the utterly disparate combinations and juxtapositions it sets up. The notion of an Atteridgeville shebeen containing a statue of Lenin, from which, perhaps, coloured lights may be strung (34), is a possibility that can be entertained (and, of course, is there to entertain). In a verbal sense, this is echoed in Grekov's polyphonic letter, with its totally unexpected verbal flights and its uninhibited, farcical melange of registers and idioms in defiance of all rules of grammar and stylistic decorum.

A critic like McHale connects the polyphonic, which he identifies as a key aspect of postmodern fiction, to the carnivalesque, which juxtaposes and combines the incongruous and the incompatible, interweaving a variety of registers and styles (172). What he neglects to add is that part of the force of the polyphonic in its literary manifestation lies in the way in which

it can be--and, indeed, in the above extract, is--extremely funny.

The polyphonic is a necessarily hybrid form and, as such, has the capacity to break through conventionalised ways of seeing. Bakhtin, once again, describes how we encounter this quality in the work of Rabelais, who brings together that which has traditionally been disunited, thereby threatening established structures and hierarchies. These extraordinary, indiscriminate fusions and juxtapositions create conditions that give life to the new (1981: 169-170). In the contemporary moment, a novelist like Rushdie has spoken in favour of his own book, The Satanic Verses (1988), precisely because of its hybridity. Transformation, he asserts, can come through "impurity, intermingling ... new and unexpected combinations. ...[N]ewness enters the world [through] ... change-by-fusion, change-by-conjoining" (1991: 394). He envisages these qualities having the capacity to symbolically "contaminate" the life-denying absolutism of those who insist on an ideological purity based on separation and exclusion.

While suggesting something similar in its ridiculing of various forms of political authority, the vision of "newness" in "Propaganda by Monuments" has another dimension to it. At first glance, both Grekov and Khumalo seem puny and insignificant in the context of their societies, dwarfed by the huge, impersonal cities that surround them. However, we soon see that their unquenchable enthusiasm and their ability to perceive potential

in the midst of the most unpromising surroundings give them the capacity to assert themselves, mentally and emotionally, over their situations. Energetically and creatively, they explore means of reshaping and expanding their realities through incorporating elements and areas of experience which, in practical terms, might seem beyond their reach. In this way, they represent the capacity for psychic freedoms within societies that have long aspired to keep their citizens in a state of bland passivity. The narrative deals with the passing away of symbols of totalitarian political power--Lenin in Moscow, Strijdom in Pretoria--but it replaces them not with images of a transformed political order, but rather with the informal, carefree sphere of the V.I. Lenin Bar & Grill, as a symbol of the carnivalesque liberties it realises. Appropriately, then, the story concludes with Khumalo beginning "to see how, but not necessarily why, the impossible came to pass" (38). "Propaganda by Monuments" thus serves to make us aware, above all, of post-apartheid South Africa's potential for new imaginative possibilities.

Of all Vladislavic's stories, perhaps the clearest image of carnivalesque triumph takes place in "The Tuba". The tale situates itself within the boring, aggressive world of unregenerate white South African masculinity, depicting characters who "[keep] the braai fires burning" (1) in more ways than one. A black Salvation Army band stops just outside the house where the central characters are gathered and begins playing Christmas carols. The most racist, belligerent member of the group, Sergeant Dundas, fetches his tuba and attempts to

outplay the band, with the following result:

The music closed over the Sergeant like brown water.

Harrumphing, bleating, wheezing, waving his head from side to side, he churned up and down, butting at the players with the bell of the tuba. They whirled aside and shuffled along beside him, as if they were all being dragged hither and thither by the same currents. Suddenly they were swirling on the pavement, in a gathering cloud of dust, and with each pass there seemed to be more of them, and the music grew louder and more forceful. ...

Sergeant Dundas's legs jerked, his arms twitched, he began to dance, nodding his head and stamping his feet, swimming in slow motion. They all moved off down Chromium Street (11).

The carnavalesque aspects of this passage are centred around the Salvation Army Band. It fulfils the same type of role as that of the travelling show in postmodern literature which, as McHale also observes, often serves as an agent of disruption, a means of incorporating the supernatural into everyday reality (174). When the band transforms a figure as reactionary and self-important as Sergeant Dundas into part of its jubilant procession, it makes a mockery of his attempts to assert control over the situation, thereby symbolically subverting the world view he represents.

This extract goes beyond subversion, however. Its visionary

aspect lies in the way in which it concludes with the unlikely image of Sergeant Dundas dancing. In this manner, "The Tuba" offers us a glimpse of a world in which oppositions and polarities melt away and nothing, however hardened and inflexible it may seem, is impervious to mutation. The recurrent water imagery in the passage emphasises this sense of fluidity, as well as the unconfined nature of the creative energies at work in the story as a whole. The way in which these forces make their presence felt in the midst of the drabness of everyday life, evoked in the sterility of the name Chromium Street, a typical street name in certain white lower class areas in this country, is intimated in the description of the way in which the band flows down this dusty suburban road, bearing Sergeant Dundas with it.

There is still more to it than this. As a result of the way in which the band becomes a means of integrating the magical into reality, the extract also suggests something about the nature of aesthetic engagement. In doing so, the concept of pleasure is given further emphasis, for the above scene offers a fictional reflection on certain fundamental qualities of the former. Art, to quote Steiner again, does not simply involve "the enactment of a one-way power relation" (92). It cannot purely be "mastered", as Sergeant Dundas attempts, by compelling it to submit to the specific analyses that we bring to bear on it. It also involves delight, which always evades our attempts to control it.²⁵ Part of Steiner's concept of "enlightened beguilement" involves a surrender to the joys that art can

provide (92, 206). The music that overwhelms and eventually bears off Sergeant Dundas offers, in fantastical form, a visual image of this process of abandonment. In the process, it emphasises the potency of aesthetic bliss. All too often we tend to underestimate the latter, in the same way that Sergeant Dundas scorns and ridicules the Salvation Army Band, only to find, too late, that he is in the grip of its enchantment.

Yet, it will be recalled, the magic of art never takes place in a vacuum. The issue of Vladislavic's artistic ability and verbal dexterity has been raised earlier, but it is useful to return to it in this analysis of "The Tuba." Just as Sergeant Dundas could not have been borne off were it not for the discipline and skill on the part of the band, we are only able to accept what happens to Sergeant Dundas because Vladislavic is able to convince us imaginatively that such things are possible within the world of his story. The opening image of the music that "close[s] over Sergeant Dundas like brown water" and the final description of him "swimming in slow motion" down Chromium Street frame a passage in which the words and images weave a spell that catches the reader in it in the same way that Sergeant Dundas is captured by the music created by the band.

Another previously raised point is worth re-visiting. Our specific situation as South Africans (or people with some awareness of the nature of this country's society) plays a fundamental role in shaping our response to this extract. The delight the passage gives us is, therefore, not something

abstract and unfocussed, but rather it springs particularly from the fact that Sergeant Dundas is such a clearly recognisable South African type, the fate that befalls him so incongruous and yet at the same time so marvellously appropriate. Those like him continue rock-like in their determination to cling to the old ways of life, discordant presences within the broader communities they inhabit, and yet the story deals with this character by overwhelming, most particularly, these specific aspects of his nature.

To sum up, then, these three stories embody especially vividly the most characteristic quality of Vladislavic's writing: the way in which, through its verbal and imaginative play, it sails over the checks and controls that still prevail in much South African fiction. Paradoxically, we have seen that it is the apparently airy, insignificant nature of the ludic that gives it its particular weight and potency, enabling it to act upon the reality within which it is situated. In precisely these aspects, Vladislavic's fiction creates a realm in which the institutions, conventions and forces that regulate or govern our society are made into part of the game. By opening up spaces within which a range of freedoms are possible, his work not only offers us symbolic images of liberation, but reminds us of our own capacity for emotional, psychic and imaginative forms of the latter.

As we have noted, Vladislavic's fiction is not always effective. But at its best, his work sets off on a carnivalesque parade, in which words are acrobats and we, the critics, become part of

their high-spirited progress. In this way, his fiction demonstrates to the staid and restrained literary arena through which it cavorts those aspects of experience which--like Sergeant Dundas--this arena ignores at its own cost. At the same time it presents a challenge, through its very creative potential, to the majority of South African writers in English--one which, significantly, these writers seem not to have been able, at the time of this writing, to take up.

Notes

1. Under P.W. Botha, the military became increasingly integrated into governmental structures (as evident in the formation of the Joint Management Centres, for instance) and from 1983 onwards, the army was used to enforce control in the townships. There was a regional State of Emergency from mid-1985 to early 1986 and then a National State of Emergency from mid-1986 to 1990. These resulted in widespread detention of political activists, banning of organisations and draconian media restrictions. Television news and actuality programmes became little more than a mouthpiece for government propaganda.

2. For example, there were a number of widespread boycotts, such as the school boycotts between 1984 and 1990. In 1983, the United Democratic Front was launched, signalling the rebirth of organised mass resistance to apartheid on a scale that had not been seen since the 1960s.

3. Moreover, in 1980 a range of books and documents, including the Freedom Charter, were unbanned and from the mid-1980s onwards a range of groupings began meeting the ANC, from the first, highly publicised meeting by a top-level delegation from the business community in 1986 to secret meetings by National Party officials.

4. As in the chapter on Hope, only a few of Vladislavic's stories will be discussed. These specific stories have been selected because of the way in which they embody certain key features in Vladislavic's work.

5. This is in keeping with the nature of Vladislavic's creative process. The starting point for his writing, he states, is a visual or verbal image, which he develops by means of free thought (Hadland, 1990: 4).

6. In contrast to Barthes, who approaches pleasure in an essentially abstract, theoretical way, Steiner situates her discussion of this concept in the context of specific contemporary issues such as the controversy surrounding the Robert Mapplethorpe exhibition, "The Perfect Moment", and the fatwa against Salman Rushdie. She explores what such events reveal about the way aesthetic pleasure is often misunderstood and mistrusted in today's society. In doing so, she examines the way a gap has opened up between arts professionals and the general public. Central to her definition of pleasure is a concept which both these groupings could find meaningful: "enlightened beguilement" (92): which incorporates both intellectual engagement and spontaneous aesthetic enchantment.

7. As the title of Steiner's book indicates, pleasure participates in the shocking and forbidden. She explores this aspect when she discusses various sado-masochistic photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe. The photographs give delight, she claims because of

the naughtiness, the wicked humor, the irony, the titillating contradictoriness, the perversity of these works of art. The photographs are camp and confrontational. They are rude. They put the viewer on the spot ... There is pleasure in being shocked, in being ridiculed for one's conventionality, in looking at a piece of wit in which the absolutely most proscribed taboo is presented as formally pleasing (56).

8. Consider, for example, this passage from Book 4, Chapter 15 of Gargantua and Pantagruel (1944):

At once the gauntlets rained down upon him to good purpose. Catchpole's head was split in nine different places. The first bailiff's right arm was broken. The second bailiff's upper jaw was dislocated, so that it fell halfway over his chin, baring his uvula, with great prejudice to his molar, masticatory and canine teeth.

...The general merriment increased; friend drank to friend, and the whole company to Catchpole and his bailiffs (548).

The above description is not intended to be taken realistically. Rather, it forms part of the grotesque exaggeration that characterises Rabelais's work as a whole, and it has symbolic aspects, representing, for instance, the death of the old order (represented by the Catchpoles and the bailiffs) and the birth of the new (Bakhtin, 1984a: 205). But as we see from the immediate reaction of the company in the passage, this violence also occasions delighted mirth. Children might find, say, the aptly named Bash Street Kids comics or the Tom and Jerry cartoons

entertaining for much the same reason.

9. Barthes incorporates certain of the cruelties, both self-inflicted and imposed on others, that form part of Sadeian sexual ecstasies into the realms of intellectual bliss. He compares the pleasure of the text to the experience of Sade's libertine who hangs himself and then chooses the very moment of orgasm to cut the rope in an "untenable, impossible, purely novelistic instant" (1975: 7).

10. Ken Barris, for example, objects to the story on these grounds (1990: 6).

11. This contrasts with the blackly humorous scenes in Hope's fiction, which tend to be conveyed with a detachment in keeping with the latter's degree of emotional and physical distance from the South Africa of his childhood.

12. Vladislavic has also commented on the specific quality of the language in which he writes:

English has a contradictory status, very energetic and resilient, full of colour and beauty, but also voracious and destructive. It's a bit like a wild fire, consuming everything in its path and making a spectacle of itself. I sometimes wish I wrote in a less obviously domineering, less thoroughly commercialised language, although I am sure this view must seem like an indulgence to someone who writes in, say, Venda (App. B: 319).

13. Philip Thody critiques this aspect of Barthes's theories, for example, (1977: 134).

14. The earth is, paradoxically, "an element that swallows up and gives birth at the same time" (Bakhtin, 1984a: 41).

15. Diamond makes a similar point about the poem by Lear which depicts an Old Man with a beard full of birds: "While we may not have an Old Man with a bird-infested beard in our own unconscious it is good to know that what we have is not too different--that mass of abandoned, unrelated, unassimilated images" (215).

16. This calls to mind J.R.R. Tolkien's conception of Recovery: the defamiliarising effect that is created by fantasy (1996: 57). Shklovsky's approach is, however, especially appropriate to Vladislavic's work, for he emphasises the teasing, puzzling nature of defamiliarisation, citing as examples the riddling way in which erotic objects can be presented (18-21).

17. Shklovsky makes clear that defamiliarisation is certainly not always sweet or agreeable in some of the examples of this process that he cites. For instance, the Russian folk tale in which sex is defamiliarised depicts sexual intercourse in terms of various acts of random brutality--tying up a bear and branding it, breaking the leg of a magpie and shoving a stick up the rear end of a fly (20-21).

18. The search for meaning in Pynchon's texts, for example, frequently tends to revolve around attempts to uncover possible conspiracies. On one hand, these conspiracies seem to spring from the sense of near-lunatic paranoia that infuses his texts, or to be figments of his odd-ball characters' overactive imaginations. On the other, his texts do not discount the possibility that huge conspiracies shaping the course of history and individual lives may exist.

19. For instance, the realisation that various seemingly mysterious political events could, in fact, be attributed to the activities of a "Third Force" did not clarify issues. Instead, it complicated matters further, for the exact nature of such a body--where exactly it originated and who precisely sanctioned it--remains uncertain, as government representatives tended to disown responsibility for its activities. In some respects, the Truth Commission's name is ironic, for while it implies that there is a definitive truth out there that is directly accessible, in various hearings, such as those relating to the activities of the Third Force, the difficulty of ever arriving at such a truth became clearly apparent.

20. As in Vladislavic's work, other postmodernist writers such as Pynchon emphasise that the quest for meaning gives their characters' lives a sense of purpose, even if that meaning is never arrived at within the text itself. This provides one instance of the way aspects of postmodernism and modernism flow into one another, for in Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot (1956), the act of waiting for that which will give meaning to life may be doomed to futility, but is nonetheless invested with significance.

21. The distinctive fiction produced by these writers illustrates yet again the intensely individual, varied nature of aesthetic pleasure, for not all readers have enjoyed their work equally--or for the same reasons. This is evident in the mixed responses to The Satanic Verses and Gravity's Rainbow (1973), for example.

22. At the centre of Borges's "The Garden of Forking Paths" is a fictional work presenting an image of the universe that allows for "diverse futures, diverse times which themselves also proliferate and fork" (1970: 51). Several postmodern critics have used this as a metaphor for the range of potential meanings and perspectives to which postmodern writing can give rise (McHale: 106--109; Olsen, 1990: 73).

23. Vladislavic's omniscience is reminiscent of Kircher's "polydyptic theatre" in Calvino's If On a Winter's Night a Traveller (1981), in which a box filled with mirrors transforms a bough into a forest and a soldier into an army (162).

24. J.M. Coetzee's Disgrace (1999), with its overall atmosphere of despairing gloom, is a recent example of this tendency.

25. The carnivalesque, in its "opposition to theory, to the capturing force of conceptuality" offers an appropriate image of this, as Connor observes (215).

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CHAPTER FOUR: ANDRE BRINK'S SOUTH AFRICA

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It would be wrong to suggest that the very use of the fantastic automatically guarantees access to an imaginative largesse that enhances and expands our horizons. In fact, this mode is highly problematic--perhaps even more problematic in terms of the demands that it makes upon the skills of the author than the liberal realist mode utilised by many South African writers. Nowhere is this better exemplified than by the experiments in the fantastic conducted in four of Andre Brink's more recent novels.

Brink's initial work containing fantasy elements, The First Life of Adamastor (1993), was published in Afrikaans in 1988. This was followed by On the Contrary (1993), Imaginings of Sand (1996) and Devil's Valley (1998). Brink's attitude to his own writing produced prior to this period is revealing, for his sense of the role that fiction could play in the South African context highlights the nature and the limitations of the liberal realist approach of which he initially made use. We shall also see that some of the basic ideas behind Brink's use of liberal realism also inform his use of the fantastic.

Discussing the role of the writer in South Africa with his fellow Sestigers in the late 1960s, Brink maintained that literature could "only be vital by exploring openly the issues involved within that society" (1983: 27). In 1976, he outlined the role that writers could play in South Africa:

The writer has two important responsibilities. The first is, quite simply, to keep the people informed. ...

The writer's second responsibility ... is to expose and explore the roots of the human condition as it is lived in South Africa By keeping alive the voice of reason and the search for meaning in a demented world he offers a safeguard to human dignity and an awareness of human values (1983: 151-152).

Brink's choice of the realist mode until the late 1980s is tied to the particular political and moral function that he feels literature should fulfil in South African society. At the conclusion of A Dry White Season (1980), Ben Du Toit decides: "Perhaps all one can really hope for, all I am entitled to, is no more than this: to write it down. To report what I know. So that it will not be possible for any man ever to say again: I knew nothing about it" (316). Like his protagonist, Brink believed that the single most important act that he, as a writer, could carry out would be "simply [to reveal] to people what is happening" (1983: 206).

Expressions like "explore openly" and "simply revealing" (1983: 206) indicate the extent to which Brink felt the need to expose in as clear and unequivocal a way as possible to his readers the effects of apartheid and the history of inequality and oppression from which it arose. His writing has focussed dramatically on various aspects of injustice in South Africa, from slavery and its legacy in A Chain of Voices (1983b), to death in detention

in A Dry White Season.

Yet knowledge on its own will not, of course, alter the course of events. As critics such as Rosemary Jolly have commented, at times Brink's positive sense of the writer's role has been counterbalanced by a sense of hopelessness and helplessness (1996: 26). Towards the end of A Dry White Season, for example, Ben du Toit doubts his ability to bear adequate witness to the suffering of the black community (Jolly: 27). Similarly, the ability of white liberal writers such as Brink effectively to explore the South African situation has often been called into question.¹

Jolly remarks that, coming after the watershed year of 1985, marked by the declaration of regional States of Emergency and the growing militarisation of South African society, States of Emergency (1988) reflects Brink's growing sense of the limitations of realism. In this novel, which has postmodern, metafictional aspects, the narrator, a writer, cannot find adequate words to describe the times in which he lives (149). Brink's move towards the fantastic may be deemed to offer a way out of the impasse which, as States of Emergency and the conclusion of A Dry White Season suggest, he may seem to have experienced as a liberal realist writer. In contrast to this latter mode, the fantastic contains possibilities of different, more imaginatively enhanced ways of apprehending and exploring the South African reality. It can encompass not only the past and the present, but also the future, which, in a society undergoing

radical transformation, is an area with which many South Africans would be particularly preoccupied.

Further to this, in a comparison of Etienne Van Heerden's Casspirs and Campari's (1991) and Brink's An Act of Terror (1991), Michiel Heyns refers to a sense of "obsolescence-anxiety" that periodically comes to the fore in both novels. Both writers' central protagonists are deeply concerned with issues of political injustice and resistance to the Nationalist government, yet they realise at the end that their concerns have been superseded by the momentous political developments taking place around them (Heyns, 1994: 62). In this respect, Heyns suggests, their positions resemble those of Brink and Van Heerden, writers who focussed particularly on the destructive effects of apartheid in their work, yet imply, through their protagonists, that they have been "overtaken by history" (1994: 62).

Brink welcomes the way in which political change has provided him with the opportunity to transform his writing. He admits that the fantastic is a mode which has always intrigued him:

I think much of the pervading interest I've always had in history and genealogy has been coloured by the possibilities of a slightly more fantastic edge to the realistic. ... I think ... there is more space now to indulge perhaps that sort of enjoyment I take in a particular kind of writing (Appendix C: 329).

There are, however, a number of other reasons why Brink might be drawn to the fantastic.

On a local level, developments within South African literature doubtless played their part. The younger generation of Afrikaans writers who rose to prominence in the 1980s, including Koos Prinsloo, Andre Letoit, Van Heerden and Marita van der Vyfer, made particular use of fantastic elements in their work, as did various writers in English in the late 1980s and 1990s who sought to explore new aesthetic and imaginative avenues, such as Mike Nicol, Ivan Vladislavic and Zakes Mda.

But doubtless, Brink's own awareness of the prominence in contemporary literature of the fantastic, in the form of magical realism and postmodernism, influenced his move away from realism even more strongly. In a review of Anne Landsman's The Devil's Chimney (1997), he endorses Fredric Jameson's claim that "magical realism has become the literary language of the emergent post-colonial world" (1997a: 117)--a far cry from his implicit support of realism several decades earlier. Similarly, he identifies postmodernism as an increasingly important South African literary trend, arguing that one of its most significant aspects has been "its reinvention of the real and of history" (1997b: 485).² He cites a number of examples of this--including his own more recent fiction (1997b: 485-489).

There is, however, another dimension to Brink's use of the fantastic. His vision of the vital role that the fantastic could

play in the South African context is embodied in Kristien's reflections after listening to her Ouma Kristina's stories in Imaginings of Sand:

I have the feeling, both unsettling and reassuring, of recovering something: not the story as such, snatched from what may or may not have been my history, but this strange urge of the real towards the unreal, as if it must find its only possible justification there.

Father, I know, and Mother too, would have been shocked by this; their stark Calvinism did not allow for such invention. But have they not denied, in the process, precisely this surge of the imagination which links us to Africa, these images from a space inside ourselves which once surfaced in ghost stories and tales and jokes and imaginings of travellers and trekkers and itinerant traders beside their wagons at night, when the fantastic was never more than a stone's throw or an outburst of sparks away? How sad--no, how dangerous--to have suppressed all this for so long (97).

A passage like this implies, firstly, that it is by means of the fantastic, partly in the form of indigenous oral traditions, that white South Africans such as Kristien--and Brink--will be able to affirm a sense of belonging in Africa.³ Secondly, Kristien suggests that it is only through fantasy that the nature of reality can be fully confronted and mastered. Over and above this, however, Brink asserts through Kristien that by suppressing

their imaginative creativity and all the irrational, fabulous aspects associated with it, South Africans have done themselves damage in a psychological and spiritual sense. Thus the use of the fantastic offers a crucial means of effecting a recovery in this regard. "Only by dreaming and writing the impossible can life be made possible once again," Brink declares (1996b: 202-203). Without a doubt, this belief is embodied in his fiction over the last decade. In Imaginings of Sand, for example, the fantastic not only aids growth towards psychic wholeness but through these means, it also points the way towards regeneration and harmony within South African society. As such, it is an agent of personal and national healing.

Here, we arrive at what is, for Brink, the single most important feature of his recent novels: their visionary aspects. It is useful, at this point, to return to Jung's description of the visionary mode of creation, which, as we have seen, contains various aspects that form part of the nature and function of the fantastic:

[T]he material that furnishes the material for artistic expression is no longer familiar. It is something strange that derives its existence from the hinterland of man's mind Sublime, pregnant with meaning, yet chilling the blood with its strangeness, it arises from timeless depths

[T]he compelling power and deeper meaning of the work do not lie in the historical or mythical material, but in the

visionary experience it serves to express (1971: 90-92).

Underlying Brink's move from what Jung defines as the psychological mode of literary expression, in which all is well-known and clearly understandable, towards an approach incorporating aspects of the latter's visionary mode, with its mysterious, potent qualities, there would seem to be the conviction that this would give his work--and the images of future possibilities contained within it--a depth and profundity, as well as the capacity to touch his readers, imaginatively and psychologically, in a way not possible through straightforward liberal realism.

Brink's point of entry into the visionary lies particularly through the carnivalesque. Those aspects of his fantastic associated with this area will, therefore, provide the focus for the next part of this section. The carnival, as we know, makes available fresh, original perceptions of reality, thereby suggesting the possibility of alternative, freer ways of being. As in the former, Brink's novels purport to embrace contrasts and dissonances, overriding hierarchies and categorisations. This approach to reality finds particular expression in the proliferation of amazing and confusing stories in terms of which various of Brink's characters interpret the events around them.

On the Contrary (1993), for example, is based on actual historical events, namely the rebellion of the Dutch East India Company sergeant Estienne Barbier and his followers against the

Company's rule in the Cape in the 1730s.⁴ However, Brink's Barbier is an inveterate liar and throughout the novel, we encounter various different, frequently incredible, accounts of events. As Barbier remarks, "There is always a new discovery in the retelling" (8).⁵ Fanciful stories told by highly unreliable narrators also propel Imaginations of Sand and Devil's Valley into astounding imaginative terrains. In the former novel, Ouma Kristina, dying in her family mansion in the Little Karoo, "the Bird Palace", "High Victorian Folly turned out as Boer Baroque" (7), gleefully regales her granddaughter, Kristien, who has returned from exile in England on the eve of the 1994 elections, with her fabulous tales that bewilderingly interweave past and present, myth and history.

Likewise, Devil's Valley fuses history with "tall tales" (9). As the latter's Flip Lochner, would-be-historian turned reporter who descends into the isolated, archaic community of Devil's Valley to record the history of its inhabitants reflects near the end: "All I have, I the historian, I the crime reporter, in search of facts, facts, facts, is an impossible tangle of contradictory stories" (367-368).

The narratives in these novels frequently strike us as festive spaces, existing in antithesis to the sober world of solid realities, within which ludic--and sometimes seemingly lunatic--imaginative flights are allowed free reign. In this way, they serve to create another, "unofficial" reality. Instead of simply appearing as misfits, restricted by their societies, Barbier and

Ouma Kristina recreate themselves as free spirits, able to rise above their circumstances (even if only in the world of the imagination) and to challenge their destinies as soldier in an unjust and corrupt system, on the one hand, and as a woman in an authoritarian, male-dominated society, on the other. While their flights of fantasy may not be able to transform their physical situations, they play a liberatory role symbolically. Through their stories, Brink's characters affirm an imaginative free play that appears to transcend external constraints, often piling far-fetched episodes and descriptions on top of one another. Their re-invention of their own and others' histories represents a form of what Jameson terms postmodern "fantastic historiography":

[I]ts very invention and inventiveness endorses a creative freedom with respect to events it cannot control, by the sheer act of multiplying them; agency steps out of the historical record into the process of devising it; and new multiple or alternate strings of events rattle the bars of the national tradition and the history manuals whose very constraints and necessities their parodic force indicts (1991: 369).

In their diverse, discrepant qualities, the tales told by characters such as Barbier and Ouma Kristina call to mind Mikhail Bakhtin's heteroglossia: the "otherness" implicit in every apparently unified utterance, a concept that plays a central role within Brink's use of the fantastic. In his Introduction to Bakhtin's The Dialogic Imagination, Michael Holquist reflects on

this notion: "My voice gives the illusion of unity to what I say; I am, in fact, constantly expressing a plenitude of meanings, some intended, others of which I am unaware" (1981: xx). According to Bakhtin, this "hetero- as well as polyglot consciousness" is manifested, for example, "in stylizations, in skaz, in parodies and various forms of verbal masquerade, 'not talking straight'" (1981: 274-275). These types of expression have the capacity to give a fantastical edge to events, and they are favoured by many of Brink's protagonists, such as Barbier, who enlist them in their revolt against conventional notions of reality. Furthermore, Bakhtin cites writers such as Cervantes, Rabelais and Sterne (Bakhtin, 1981: 274-275), whose artistic vision is closely connected to the world of the carnival, and whose influence is evident in the parodic, bawdy and multifarious qualities of Brink's four recent novels.

A particular attraction of these stories that Barbier and Ouma Kristina weave lies in their comic aspects. More broadly, this quality constitutes an essential feature of the Rabelaisian gusto that infuses Brink's work as a whole, which sweeps us on from one far-fetched situation or description to the next. The human body and its functions become a recurrent source of mirth, but nowhere, perhaps, are the most unruly and ridiculous aspects of human physicality heightened to more grotesque proportions than in Adamastor.

This book, like the other three novels, blends extravagant humour with deeply serious concerns. The tale combines an account of the

effect of the arrival of white settlers on the Khoi people of the southern Cape with an Africanised version of the story of Adamastor from Camoens's sixteenth century epic The Lusiads, the first European literary work in which South Africa is imagined. Camoens's poem depicts the Titan Adamastor, who rebelled against Zeus by daring to love the goddess Thetis, and who was eventually changed into a rock at the southern end of Africa. For Brink, Adamastor is a personification of that continent, while Zeus is "the god of European patriarchy" (1996b: 242). In this way, the figure of Adamastor, represented by the Khoi leader, T'kama, symbolises the indigenous South African peoples, in their resistance to and oppression at the hands of the European colonisers. But T'kama certainly does not always strike an impressive, tragically heroic figure. Instead, a great deal of the narrative revolves around his failure to consummate his passion for the white woman he calls Khois, as a result of his enormous, uncontrollable erection which, as we see in the following passage, becomes huger and huger as the story progresses:

Soon I was able to wind [my member] twice around my waist like a hefty belt, with the end tucked in. Which was reasonably comfortable, except when it got it into its obtuse head to stand up, because then it would break out of the loose knot I had tied and jump to attention, invariably hitting me like a club between the eyes (88).

At the beginning of the novel, T'kama boasted about the size of

his penis. However, in the above passage, his pride turns to horror, as, ironically, the bigger his organ grows, the more useless and foolish it becomes. Moreover, the image of his penis swatting him across the forehead, as if belabouring its owner for his futile attempts to exert control over it, drives home the nature of T'kama's relationship with his organ. From the outset, the latter has allowed his penis and its demands to rule his life, letting it beat all reasonable, even ethical considerations into submission.

From all such examples, we can see that Brink's use of the fantastic leads us into the sphere of the carnival in other ways as well. His central protagonists, for example, embody various qualities of the folkloric figure of the rogue.⁶ Brink's trickster figures, Barbier and Ouma Kristina, engage in a "gay deception" (to quote Bakhtin) that serves to mock the lies told by those in positions of control (1981: 401). "Opposed to ... the languages of all who hold power and are well set up in life," Bakhtin tells us, "there is the language of the merry rogue.... Falsehood is illuminated by ironic consciousness and in the mouth of the happy rogue parodies itself" (1981: 401-402).

The fantastically parodic aspects of Brink's fiction give rise to indecorous comic episodes. These are intended, in Bakhtin's words again, to express "the sense of the gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities"--including the narrator. (Bakhtin, 1984a: 11). In one of his ribald anti-establishment fantasies, Barbier imagines winning his court case against the

Company and, as compensation, being accorded the right to kick the acting governer, van den Henghel, in the buttocks. This pokes fun not only at the Company, but also at Barbier's own attempts to obtain justice through established legal systems--a struggle so futile that, from one perspective, it seems little more than tilting at windmills.⁷

Like Barbier's personal bible, Don Quixote, in which the central protagonist's grandiose accounts of heroic exploits are countered with parodic depictions of what actually takes place, Brink's characters' flamboyant, tongue-in-cheek descriptions undermine serious, "official" versions of history, sending them up. Ouma Kristina, for instance, does this. But then she makes fun of her own tales ("[a]nd then an elephant came and blew the story away" (193)), changes them around and constantly undermines herself as a figure of authority, as does Barbier. Through this self-parody, both she and he ridicule traditional historical accounts. If their narratives cannot be trusted, neither can they. Like their tales, the latter are the product of mythmaking or fabrication. Both the established and anti-establishment versions of the past contained in Brink's novels serve to bring the essentially narrative nature of history, emphasised by contemporary critical theorists and historians such as Fredric Jameson and Hayden White, to the fore.⁸

As in the traditional carnival, Brink's books set out to override the restrictions of the "official culture" in their exuberant rebellion against the conventional and the conservative. They

seek to take us along a path that moves further and further away from these latter areas, arriving ultimately, at the visionary revelations that occur near their conclusions. Likewise, the novels' heterogenous, inclusive approaches to events pave the way for the crucial images of wholeness and concord contained within these visionary experiences. At this point, we turn to the role played by the visionary in Brink's fiction.

The visions with which the latter's novels conclude may not always be tangible, nonetheless they represent an ideal that Brink believes can eventually be realised. In On the Contrary, his visions of healing and unity are most fully embodied. During Barbier's final, imaginary journey through Southern Africa, the latter is freed in a psychological and spiritual sense, not only from the violent, destructive elements of his society, but from the aspects of his own nature that have held him prisoner. He addresses the Khoisan peoples, both the living and those whom he has helped kill, pleading for peace and understanding between South Africa's different peoples. This is clearly intended to suggest the potential for reconciliation between the country's black and white communities, and as such, it forms the moral core of the book. Brink's own awareness of his own privileged position as a white, male Afrikaner is linked to a desire to prove that it is possible for whites to feel at one with Africa and its black inhabitants. For Brink, Barbier represents one of the early Afrikaner dissidents who, he claims, "based their revolt against authorities on a total identification with the African continent... [and were able to] establish a complete

identification with Africa and her indigenous people" (1983a: 20-21).

Brink's fantastic novels, especially Imaginings of Sand, were produced, it must be noted, during a period of radical political transformation. In response, Brink utilises fantastical elements in a very different way from Hope and Vladislavic, consciously coupling this mode to specific ideological goals which, he feels, address the current needs of the South African people.⁹ As has already been noted, undoubtedly he is inspired by an awareness of the significant role that such an imaginative enterprise could play in a symbolic sense in the South African context.

The potential value of Brink's use of the fantastic also lies in the access it offers us to those areas that South African fiction in English has been reluctant to explore. For those accustomed to the imaginative parsimony of much of this writing, the way his novels break loose from these confines to embrace a contrary, kaleidoscopic wealth of fantastical images and scenarios seems to promise the type of imaginative feast of which such literature has long been starved.

But paradoxically, it is the very features that make Brink's use of the fantastic seem, on the surface, appealing and specially meaningful that lead to his overall limitation as a writer of fantasy. The visions of harmony and regeneration, the use of the mystical and the fabulous to convey vitally important messages about the South African situation, the imaginative enthusiasm

that leads to a desire to take in as much as possible, in whatever combination of contradictory perspectives, all this gives rise to various problems that remain unsolved and have a deeply damaging effect on his use of the fantastic.

II

If, as has been suggested, Brink's use of the fantastic appears to offer us so much, why then is its potential not fully realised? To start with, certain difficulties arise when we consider the role that he envisages for this mode within South African literature:

It is not just a matter of freeing the imagination: it is changing the conditions of its operation. Much of it concerns history, as whole tracts of past experience silenced by apartheid, by over three centuries of colonialism, are now to be reclaimed, reinvented, reimagined into story. This may be a vital part of the real opposition embodied in South African literature of the future: constantly to oppose the present with a recovered past, in order to open more possibilities for the future (Brink, 1996b: 202).

This statement is at the heart of Brink's argument for the use of the fantastic. His opening sentence relates to the need for

a new approach to literature in South Africa, one with more scope and greater possibilities than those which prevailed during apartheid and he seeks to respond to this in his own fiction.

However, we note that Brink's emphasis in the above passage is not so much on liberating the imagination as altering the conditions under which the latter operates, implying that it will be freed in the process. He suggests that this change will come about, in part, through an imaginative recreation of the past, in which the latter is transformed into story (or stories) in all its potentially fantastical aspects. Here, Brink appears to assume that the fantastic is a literary mode which can easily be utilised to work its transformative magic on the South African context. By envisaging a fantastically charged re-imagining of this country's history as providing a way of understanding, and through that, acquiring some sense of control over that history, he seems to endorse the assumption, all too readily adopted in contemporary literature, that the fantastic provides some form of cure-all for interconnected individual and social ills.

The fact that the fantastic is by no means always a constructive force becomes especially evident when we consider the way in which fantastical recreations of history can serve to appropriate the latter, rather than, as Brink asserts, "reclaim" it. Certainly, when any new historical narrative, designed to meet specific needs and desires, is created, this inevitably results in a selective, slanted viewing of the past. Brink would not dispute this, for such qualities are inherent within fiction.

However, subjective bias, distortions and omissions can, whether consciously intended or not, become appropriative, when they serve the specific interests of one individual or grouping, at the cost of the interests of others. In terms of the way in which such recreations of the historical ignore or exclude, they can contribute to the very imaginative confinement that Brink seeks to counter. This is manifest in the work of a South African fantasist such as Mike Nicol, whose reinventions of the past frequently serve to reinforce rigidly held preconceived notions, thereby closing off possibilities, in both a personal and political sense.¹⁰

Furthermore, Brink's assertion that history is "now to be reclaimed, reinvented, reimagined into story" needs to be challenged. While he allies himself with what he describes as the recent "move in historiography towards the open-ended perception of history as text and narrative" (1996b: 246), this type of awareness, as critics such as M.J. Devaney and White have pointed out, has always been interwoven with the historical process itself.¹¹ Consequently, a reimagining of the historical is not, in itself, that remarkable or original (however Brink might imply this to be the case). The significance of the change in his literary approach lies, therefore, not so much in his reinvention of history as in the way he reinvents himself as a writer. In doing so, he appears eager to associate himself with prominent (and fashionable) literary trends, such as aspects of postmodernism and magical realism.

Finally, and most significantly, it is evident from all of the above that Brink seeks to deploy the fantastic in what seems to be a programmatic attempt to refurbish the South African imaginative capacity in a way that he believes will prove constructive and valuable for a changing society. Fiction, however, is not made out of deliberate ideas, however well-intended. Whether or not there is more to Brink's four recent fantastical novels than the conscious attempt to realise the above-detailed programme will need to be examined in the rest of this chapter.

Such considerations have a bearing not only on the "possibilities for the future" that Brink's fantastic offers, but also on his treatment of the present and the past. Through his use of the fabulous, Brink seeks to inform his readers about the nature of historical and contemporary South African society, emphasising the importance of certain moral values and political convictions and offering, above all, images of liberation from those forces that have acted as agents of oppression. In their studies of fantasy, writers as diverse as Bruno Bettelheim and Jack Zipes remind us that this mode--in the form of folk tales, fairy stories and fables--has been used to express ethical and political messages for centuries. However, in his eagerness to utilise the fantastic in this way, Brink seems to lose sight of the difficulties that this particular approach entails. For one thing, the ideological and moral messages conveyed in his texts actually work against his use of the fantastic, undermining it.

By depicting history as a range of fantastical narratives, Brink claims these "[confront] the reader with the need--and above all with the responsibility--to choose" (1996b: 246). The word "responsibility" implies that some kind of ethical choice is involved. Whatever his claims to a plurality of readings in his novels, one discourse ultimately overcomes all the others, to become, as Bakhtin puts it, "the language of truth" (1981: 263).

This has always been a feature of Brink's fiction. For instance, A Chain of Voices consists of a number of fragmented, sometimes conflicting, not always reliable narratives. Nonetheless, it is made clear that some of the narrators can perceive the "true" versions of events, while others cannot. In a comparable way, despite their apparent open-endedness and, as Heyns puts it, "Bakhtinian polyglossia", all four later novels eventually enforce what Heyns terms a "single unitary language" (1994: 66). Despite appearances, the fantastic is subordinated to the message it is intended to carry.

This is evident at many points. In On the Contrary, Barbier's amazing dreams and paradoxical imaginings serve to convey the central vision of penance, reconciliation and redemption. Consequently, the openness to contraries and ambiguities implied in the title falls away. Similarly, Ouma Kristina's contradictory tales in Imaginings of Sand all expose the oppression of women in South African history, while simultaneously revealing ways in which women have sought to resist this oppression. In this way, notwithstanding the parodic, anti-establishment way she presents

herself, Ouma Kristina becomes invested with an authoritative status. Likewise, although there may be ambiguities and confusion in Devil's Valley, there is nonetheless a "real" version of events, in that we discover that some of the stories told to Lochner are false, while others--those that convey the warped and callous nature of old-style white South African society--are true.

This, in itself, does not necessarily detract from Brink's use of the fantastic. After all, the latter can entertain a plurality of possibilities, finally discarding most of them. However, difficulties arise in that, in Brink's hands, a form of what Bakhtin terms "authoritative discourse" prevails, which encloses and limits the imagination: "[T]here is no space around it to play in, no contradictory emotions ... and the context around it dies, words dry up" (Bakhtin, 1981: 344). Such is very often the case with this novelist.

Jung maintains that a work of art is most effective when it allows imaginative freedom, making the interpretation the reader's, not the writer's, responsibility:

A great work of art is like a dream; for all its apparant obviousness it does not explain itself and is always ambiguous. A dream never says "you ought" or "this is the truth". It presents an image in much the same way as nature allows a plant to grow, and it is up to us to draw conclusions (1971: 104).

Jung's statement holds particularly true for many forms of the fantastic, such as the fairy tale. The latter, with its free-floating, dream-like qualities, speaks to the unconscious, "leav[ing]", as Bettelheim tells us in The Uses of Enchantment (1976), "all decisions up to us." On the other hand, fables speak to the conscious mind, leaving nothing to the imagination (Bettelheim: 42-43, 154). Brink's novels convey moral fables for a changing South Africa and, as Bettelheim reminds us, this mode leaves no space for dissent or debate: "[F]ables tell by means of words, actions or events--fabulous though these may be--what one ought to do" (27). Kristien's meditation on the value of the fabulous in Imaginings of Sand has something of this quality: it seeks to convince by instructing us, rather than by showing us. But a more serious problem is that elsewhere in this, as in other novels, Brink does not simply tell us what to think, but he does so in a heavy-handed--sometimes even ham-handed--manner. At such times, the dull, flat nature of his expression turns areas of his novels into barren ground, in which there is nothing to nourish the imagination.

A case in point is Imaginings of Sand. There one finds a series of tendentious exchanges between Kristien and various members of an ANC delegation, in which platitudes, expressed by stock figures such as Thando, all-wise, fatherly and benevolent, and Nomaza, the Strong Black Woman in Africa, are presented reverentially, as if they represent new, deeply significant insights.¹² Another example is the following assertion by Ouma Kristina:

More and more of these trekking groups were by then moving into the interior like packs of scavenging dogs spreading civilisation and the gospel; the country was shrinking, it seemed, its space contested, penetrated, appropriated, tamed, the whole shameful story (302).

Like so many of Brink's central characters, Ouma Kristina frequently seems to function as her creator's mouthpiece and, as is often the case when this occurs, her voice does not ring true. Rather than a heated expression of an individual protagonist's outrage, the strident, clichéd quality of the passage (evidenced for instance in the comparison between the trekkers and "scavenging dogs") deprives the extract of emotional force, leaving us with the impression that we are merely being preached at. We may also find it hard to respond to her statement on anything except a perfunctory level, for the same basic point--that colonialism had a disastrous effect on Africa and its people--has already been recurrently stated, often in a similar fashion, in her stories.

Further to this, Brink seeks to manipulate (and thereby restrict) our responses by making it abundantly clear which of his characters' perspectives are "true" or reliable, and which should be rejected. When discussing the way in which the writer offers the reader the opportunity to choose between a range of possibilities, Brink confesses: "The writer does tend to load the dice a little bit" (App. C: 344). This, however, is an understatement. For instance, Kristien's brother-in-law, Casper,

the violently aggressive embodiment of the most racist, sexist aspects of South African society, is presented in as unpleasant a way possible. He beats his wife, attempts to rape Kristien twice (once on his wedding day) and along with his commando of heavily armed bully-boys, he races around the countryside, terrorising and maiming the local black inhabitants. Kristien, on the other hand, is consistently the voice of reason and reconciliation, regularly asserting herself victoriously against various representatives of conservative South Africa, from Casper to the dominee.

The drawback of this type of polarisation is that, very soon, it becomes predictable: we expect the worst from Casper, while we know that Kristien will once again succeed in triumphing over her adversaries and pointing the way forward. Consequently, her victories seem more and more hollow and she and Casper--and many of Brink's other protagonists who fulfil similar roles--often appear uninteresting, or even irritating. We have to spend a great deal of the story inside Kristien's consciousness, which, bearing in mind the role she is made to play in the book, can become a tiresome place to be. Her pronouncements, whether spoken or unspoken, become increasingly invested with an air of portentous importance.

Brink's artistic and stylistic limitations manifest themselves particularly clearly when he utilises the non-realistic to help bestow a sense of profundity on a political or moral insight. We encounter various such scenes in Imaginings of Sand, all intended

to represent deeply revelatory moments relating to the feminist concerns of the novel. Seeing her sister naked, for example, Kristien is suddenly struck by the following conviction:

For an all too fleeting instant, as if we're outside time, outside history, the two of us are together, sisters And from this knowledge spreads a subliminal awareness . . . of the many circles of the night spreading from this centre where we are: of plains and darkness and beyondness, of moonlight and stars, a free and female universe (55-56).

This is not only hackneyed writing, but it also sounds unconvincing, at least as an expression of belief. The invocation of all those stereotypical images recurrently associated with the feminine (such as circles, darkness and moonlight) assist in making the passage seem little more than a mandatory moment of homage to some vague, essentially dubious notion of female solidarity. More suspect still is the moment later on, when Ouma Kristina reveals the deeply guarded secret of a lifetime to Kristien: all her used sanitary towels, which she has never discarded. Kristien is overawed, somehow finding a way of perceiving the latter as an "eloquent and dauntingly mute" (221) testimony to the silencing of women. The solemn manner in which the whole episode is presented makes it seem almost risible.

In his study of folk and fairy tales, Breaking the Magic Spell (1979), Zipes observes that utilising the fantastic as a means to an end represents an attempt to govern and control the

imagination (9-10).¹³ It could as well be argued that this takes place in the fiction of Hope and Vladislavic, since some of the fantastic elements in their work certainly serve very definite purposes. However, their use of the fantastic extends much further than this, for they repeatedly and emphatically show in their novels and stories how the world of the imagination eludes containment. In contrast, in Brink's case, the fantastic is predominantly an instrument to a specific end and a blunt instrument at that.

It must in fairness be said that from his own writings on his use of the fantastic, it is evident that Brink is attempting a type of fantasy that is not simply intended as a means to a specific purpose. He does not relate his fantastic elements to the world of fables or allegory, but instead emphasises their postmodern, magical realist aspects. These latter modes tend to shy away from unquestionable political or ethical truths. While Brink would, doubtless, prefer his work to be associated with folk and fairy tales--on which modes such as magical realism draw and which are rooted in the oral traditions which form a significant part of his fantastic elements--these contain a complicated, often ambiguous ethical system. Bettelheim, for one, states that fairy tales embody "good and evil [which] are omnipresent in life and the propensities for both [which] are present in every man" (19). In Ursula K. Le Guin's view, fairy tales depict psychic journeys, which lead the reader to confront the shadow within him - or herself (1989: 52-53).¹⁴ However, she adds:

In many fantasy tales of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the tension between good and evil, light and dark, is drawn absolutely clearly In such fantasies I believe the author has tried to force reason to lead where reason cannot go, and has abandoned the faithful and frightening guide, the shadow. These are false fantasies, rationalized fantasies. They are not the real thing (57).

Brink's texts resemble, in certain respects, "rationalized fantasies". Evil is projected onto outside forces, making it easy for the reader to disassociate her - or himself from it, in opposition to which the unquestionably positive forces of liberation and transformation are situated. Brink's fantastic elements become caught up in these polarities and, consequently, seem to have very little to do with the potential for good and evil within his reader's individual natures.

Despite the way in which Brink initially emphasises many of his central characters' failings--Barbier's deceitful, lecherous nature; Kristien's stubbornness and recklessness; Lochner's selfishness and misogyny--they all end up as moral beacons, touchstones for the ethical and ideological values conveyed in his novels. In the process, they do not really confront their own shadows; rather, their narrative voices are simply brought closer to that of Brink. A major reason why such transformations seem stage-managed relates to Brink's inability to realise evil effectively in his fiction. His characters' dark sides seem unconvincing. Kristien's defects, for example, appear like

superficially annoying features pinned onto her, rather than the result of any kind of psychological complexity. Barbier's shortcomings also seem contrived, although for different reasons. They are so connected to the overblown web of fantasies that he weaves around himself that, while we may enjoy the way in which he enthusiastically dwells on his many transgressions, we cannot, in the end, take the latter very seriously. They seem, instead, like a highly coloured mask temporarily donned to impress us.

Brink fails particularly in his attempts successfully to suggest evil in Devil's Valley, a novel which represents a descent into the darkness of the white South African psyche. This is evoked by the range of shocking events detailed in the novel, such as floggings and stonings, rape, murder, incest and necrophilia, all of which contribute to a savage, eerie world, involving ghosts, succubae, supernatural forms of punishment and storms of unearthly force.

These violent elements arise from Brink's conviction that a work of art should give "offence". In a comparable way to awakening a sleeper, the latter should break through an initial resistance, inducing in a reader an "awakening" to a new state of awareness (Brink, 1983a: 119-120). As Jolly observes, the violent aspects of Brink's fiction reflect his own sense of horror at the physical and psychological violence of apartheid, and he seeks to "offend" his reader by evoking a comparable feeling within her or him (19-20).

However, the stiff, laboured quality of Brink's aesthetic and imaginative expression renders the ideological message within his novels inert. In consequence, his books do not awake us to a more profound, imaginatively deepened understanding of the South African situation, past and present. This is all the more the case in many of the fantastical aspects of Devil's Valley, which, rather than evoking an authentic sense of social evil, degenerate at times into melodrama. Jolly cites Francis King, who describes the floggings and brutal rapes in A Chain of Voices as "[veering] towards a pornography of sado-masochistic violence" (57). Various fantastical scenes in Devil's Valley seem to have a similar type of quality. One such example is Lochner's account of a group of adolescent girls in the forest at night, a scene which hovers uneasily somewhere between dream and reality:

In my sleep I had a totally screwy dream. ...

I dreamt I woke up from the moon flooding the room like a wash of white water spilling right across my bed on the floor. Jesus, here comes the poetry again. ... I dreamt I opened the window to climb out--which of course was impossible as no window in the settlement can be opened. But since when is a dream inhibited by the fucking feasible?

I saw ... a throng of naked young girls dancing among the trees. Except that dancing is not the right word: they were simply rushing about wildly, blindly, to and fro among the trees and through the clearing, arms and legs flailing.

...

This was no fucking kid's game, but more of a mass flagellation. ... [T]he girls had an assortment of thongs and switches and canes and freshly plucked branches with clusters of leaves still attached to them, with which they lambasted one another. As some of them came thrashing past me, ... I could see dark weals and streaks of blood on their limbs. And what from a distance had sounded like some unmelodious chant, was now much closer to a bloody half-hysterical wailing. ...

Henta herself was unmistakable, with her wild red mane, her body smeared with blood or filth (61-62).

The violent eroticism of this scene has an unpleasant, unsettling effect on Lochner; it is meant to affect the reader likewise. Like many similar episodes, such as the gruesome description of the Sunday communion service, involving the sacrifice of a newborn white goat and the devouring of its raw flesh, it is intended to contribute to an overall sense that repression of all sorts casts a shadow over the community within which it takes place. Throughout the novel we have images of warped sexuality and violence, which are sometimes brought together, as in the above extract, with its description of pubescent female sexuality gone haywire and transformed into a sado-masochistic bacchanalian frenzy. The problem with this and many similar scenes, however, is that they do not transcend the one-dimensional.

To start with, Brink is unable to make his narrator, Lochner, infuse the events he describes with any sense of depth or

vitality. Partly, this is because the latter's expression is weighed down by the regular use of obscenities, especially "fucking", which sound increasingly mechanical the longer we spend time with him. As we see in the above extract, his language swings unsteadily and clumsily between heavy attempts at lyricism (as in his description of the moonlight in the above passage) on the one hand, and the crudely cynical and falsely matey, on the other. (Lochner's attempts at sardonic humour repeatedly fall flat.) But above all, the latter's narrative voice sounds unremarkable, even pedestrian, rather than lively and idiomatic, as Brink no doubt intended. Lochner's periodic expressions of shock at what he sees seem wooden, particularly because he tends to convey strong feelings through his use of invective. All this has the effect of flattening the dramatic and macabre scenes he describes, making them seem little more than cardboard cut-out images, pasted clumsily over the underlying message of the book.

An even graver shortcoming, however, is the fact that the really fantastic quality of the above passage lies not in its nightmarishness, but in its deeply unrealistic nature. Brink's imagination tends generally to work in cliches, and even his images of horror are (perhaps especially) cliched. Indeed, the fantastical images in the above extract do not so much provide a way of passing judgement on South African society, but serve primarily as an unwitting illumination of the stereotypical paths which Brink's imagination follows. The latter seems to assume that a scene such as this one--which conforms to a very typical notion of perversion--is startling enough to stand on its own,

without being developed in any way. We are left, as a result, with a passage lacking in focus and descriptive interest and also devoid of any real originality. This gives a sense of verbal vagueness, even a generalised quality, to what is no doubt intended to be a particularly forceful scene.

In consequence, the sense of evil that Brink seeks to convey through this episode remains insubstantial. In this, the passage truly offends: in offering us trivialised images of viciousness and cruelty as a comment on the South African situation, it downplays the reality of that evil which has been all too clearly part of this country's experience.

These sorts of deficiencies prevail throughout the novel. In certain respects, Devil's Valley is comparable to didactic Victorian children's fantasies, in that both are designed to shock their readers into a state of awareness, whether ideological or moral. But as in any text where we grow into an awareness that a message is being expressed in an essentially lifeless fashion, the weird, terrifying scenes in the novel, like the realistically depicted brutality in Chain of Voices, become increasingly monotonous as the book progresses. This impression is intensified by the way in which we are made constantly aware of the sense of moral revulsion (dutifully expressed through Lochner) that such scenes are intended to evoke in us.

Moreover, scenes such as the one above or the communion that takes on the qualities of a black mass, with its cruelty and

revoltingly sensuous qualities, ironically lead us away from the realities that they seek to engage with. The events they describe seem closer, in fact, to the lurid world of pulp horror fiction (reassuring, ultimately, because we know that the terror it peddles has little to do with real life) than to the actual world to which they purport to relate. In a discussion of dystopias in science fiction, Le Guin reflects:

Recent science fiction, for instance, is full of edifying and hideous pictures of terrible futures

Novels of despair are intended, most often, to be admonitory, but I think they are, like pornography, most often escapist, in that they provide a substitute for action, a draining-off of tension (195).

In their overheated attempts to evoke a specific response from the reader, the fantastical qualities of the above-mentioned scenes become not so much about ourselves and our reality, as about the way in which the fantastic can so easily degenerate into the pornographic. The latter is characterised above all by a lack of imagination, and this defect is, certainly, one of the central reasons for Brink's failure as a fantasist. Despite the spectacular ghastriness of the fantastical scenes in Devil's Valley, the overall sense we are left with is one of uninventiveness.

The twisted scenes in the novel are intertwined not only with images of debauchery, but also with drunkenness, gluttony and

other excesses, which appear carnivalesque in their hyperbolic nature. Indeed, as in the other three novels, for a large part of the book the world of the carnival is never far from the surface. At this point, we need to revisit Brink's use of the carnivalesque, subordinated as it is to the politically and morally laden concerns in his above novels and hampered, above all, by his lack of imaginative creativity.

In fact, Brink's fiction illustrates particularly clearly how the carnival in fact can be subject to re-containment. We have already noted that, while the latter appears to subvert the established order, it can serve the interests of that order, for it is sanctioned and enclosed by it (Bakhtin, 1984a: 9). In fact it fulfils this function in Devil's Valley, as Lochner comes to realise that apparently disobedient attitudes are tolerated by the community's power structures, for they serve as a space for the release of seditious energies. Similarly, there are times when Brink's use of earthy comedy and outrageous imaginative festivities seems to amount to little more than a temporary diversion to make the ideological pill more palatable.

One such example occurs in Adamastor. In this novel, the principal fantastical image, T'kama's ever-increasing erection, is closely linked to the "official" message of the book. When T'kama and Khois finally succeed in having sex, this represents a climactic moment, in various senses of the word. Similarly, T'kama's castration by the white men at the end is another episode of central symbolic significance. There is also the fact

that, as we have noted, from beginning to end his penis and its needs form the focal point of T'kama's, the narrator's, world. In passages such as the one cited earlier, depicting the vagaries of the latter's giant organ, we have, for a while, a form of irreverent revelry in the earthy side of human experience, but eventually the "official" world reasserts itself and his penis is restored to its previous status. When we consider the symbolic, thematic and narrative weight attached to T'kama's organ, its carnivalesque qualities dwindle in importance.

The above result may seem inevitable, particularly when we consider how the carnival is dependent on the normal order and its eventual restoration. However, as Hope's and Vladislavic's work illustrates, the fact that the carnivalesque is constrained by its context does not necessarily detract from its capacity to powerfully and strikingly assert freedoms in a symbolic and imaginative sense. In Brink's fiction, on the other hand, the liberatory potential of the carnival seems short-lived even on this level. It offers brief moments of subversion, but it does not sustain itself as a potent presence within the world of his fiction. Primarily, this is because Brink's carnivalesque images do not have the same imaginative force as those in Hope's and Vladislavic's novels and short stories. We may enjoy the descriptions of T'kama's huge penis or Barbier's fantasies of revenge against various Company officials, but these are essentially lightweight episodes. Once again, we return to one of the fundamental shortcomings underlying Brink's use of the fantastic: his storytelling ambitions outstrip his capacity for

truly imaginative expression. As a result, his carnivalesque elements often have a desultory quality, as is the case in the following description of Wilhelmina in Imaginings of Sand:

She began to put on weight at an alarming rate. At ten Wilhelmina was sturdy; at twenty-four, when she married Leendert Pretorius, she was hefty; by the time she went on the Great Trek, at thirty, one might call her solid; and when she left Natal at just under forty she was massive. ... By the time she and her family settled beside what they took to be the river Nile, she was the size of a young hippo and still expanding. Initially, the rigours of travelling might have restricted her gain in weight, but what to her was the sedentary existence of a settled farmer boosted an almost daily expansion of her girth (291).

The extract offers us a moderately entertaining summary of Wilhelmina's gradual, disconcerting physical expansion. There is, however, nothing else to make this description seem more interesting. This impression is intensified by the somewhat plodding final sentence, which is characterised by its use of formulaic expressions, such as "the rigours of travelling" and "an almost daily expansion." In general, the passage lacks substance and animation--which is, certainly, not in keeping with the physical appearance or the character of Wilhelmina herself, who (we are told elsewhere) is a fiery, rumbustious figure.

In Brink's defence, it could be argued that Gabriel Garcia

Marquez also uses verbal formulas in his fiction. These occur, for instance, in his depictions of his larger-than-life figures, such as Aureliano Segundo in One Hundred Years of Solitude (1970), with his monumental girth and his insatiable appetites. The essential difference between the latter and Wilhelmina, however, is that there is far more to Marquez's descriptions of his characters than well-worn phrases and images. In fact, the deeply ordinary takes on new dimensions in his work, surrounded and irradiated as it is by the extraordinary. In Brink's case, the above passage is one of the few pictures we have of Wilhemina and it offers us very little indeed.

The impression that there is something wanting, at an imaginative level, in Brink's use of the carnivalesque is strengthened by the way his novels tend to speed from one farcical, madcap episode or description to the next. It is as if he is unable to realise any one of these adequately, and so crowds his novels with carnivalesque features to compensate for this. Moreover, the dead weight of the banalities and the air of ponderous earnestness that often surrounds Brink's statements of political and moral belief create an atmosphere in which it becomes hard for the carnivalesque to retain its impetus. Roland Barthes's assertion that the pleasure that can be derived from a text contrasts or even conflicts with the imposition of definitive, centralised truths seems especially apposite here. "[P]leasure," he tells us, "suspends ... signified value: the (good) cause. ... What is overcome, split, is the moral unity that society demands of every human product. ... The contagion of judgement [is resisted]"

(1975: 65, 31-32).¹⁵

In the end, all these above-outlined factors undermine the visions of new possibilities that the carnivalesque is intended to entail. Because the latter lacks vigour, the foundations on which the former rest seem feeble and inadequately constructed.

But there are even more serious problems in Brink's use of the fantastic. At various points, this mode provides him with an imaginative means of fulfilling various needs and longings, both in an individual and collective sense. There is, of course, nothing wrong with this in itself. As critics such as Patrick Parrinder and Rosemary Jackson point out, fantasy is bound up with desire, in that it seeks that which is unattainable within everyday reality (1987: 110; 1981: 3). Zipes goes even further, arguing that the fantastic can transcend the compensatory. In his eyes, this mode can contribute, in a symbolic sense, towards social transformation, by reminding us of the possibility of a freer, happier society (174). This is a view that Brink would endorse. Yet using the fantastic as a means of fulfilling desires, particularly in the way Zipes suggests, is fraught with a further set of pitfalls.

There is, first, the fact that, especially when utilised in a political context, the fantastic can highlight a sense of personal impotence. When Brink's protagonists become caught up in forces beyond their control, they resort to fantasy. This is evident in Barbier's fabulous images of Africa at the outset of

On the Contrary and during his final visionary journey, which transform reality into a magical realm that serves as a compensation for the harshness and monotony of his experiences, whether the disappointment and tedium of the journey into the interior with Alleman's company, or imprisonment in the Dark Hole in the Castle.

In addition to this, Brink's use of fantastical histories as a means of reinventing the past--and thereby deriving a sense of meaning and purpose from it--constitutes one feature of the compensatory aspects of his fantastic. This is borne out by the following statement by Jameson, who acknowledges that postmodern "fantastic historiography" arises from a sense of limited possibilities:

[H]ere the making up of unreal history is a substitute for the making of the real kind. It mimetically expresses the attempt to recover that power and praxis by way of the past and what must be called fancy rather than imagination. Fabulation--or if you prefer, mythomania and outright tall tales--is no doubt the symptom of social and historical impotence, of the blocking of possibilities that leaves little option but the imaginary (1991: 369).

Brink is well aware of the dangers of using literature as a source of fallacious, comforting visions. He compares the creation and the reading of a work of literature to the drawing and reading of a map, emphasising the importance of dialogic

interaction in various forms: between the writer and the text, between the text and the reader. Through this, he claims, a text can be prevented from becoming merely didactic and unrealistically "uplifting":

What [the writer] does is to perceive, below the lines of the map he draws, the contours of another world, somehow a more "essential" world. And from the interaction between the land as he perceives it to be and the land as he knows it can be, someone from outside, the "reader" of the map, watches--and aids--the emergence of the meaning of the map (1983a: 169).

Sad to say, this represents an ideal that is not always realised. In certain respects, Brink's image of a writer's drawing another world over the land that she or he perceives calls to mind the narrator's statement in Rushdie's Shame: "I too, like all migrants, am a fantasist. I build imaginary countries and try to impose them on the ones that exist" (1983: 92). As Timothy Brennan notes, the word "impose" conveys a playfully ironic acknowledgement of the symbolic colonisation and control that a magical realist re-creation of reality can entail (1989: 86). In this way, a magical realist reimagining of reality can easily become an imposition of the fantastic on the real, rather than an interaction between the two.¹⁶

This imposition of images which conceal the gaps and cracks in the world we know, adorning the latter in such a way that it

becomes removed from reality, is a major hazard facing writers making use of magical realism. Instances of this occur at the conclusions of On the Contrary and Imaginings of Sand, when Brink's respective visions of healing and belonging set up a secure, unified imaginary realm that contrasts with and in some respects compensates for the real South Africa, with all its unresolved contradictions. Also they conveniently ignore some of the material realities which Brink, given his specific position in South African society, might find too difficult or disturbing to grapple with.

For example, as Stephen Watson points out, the reimagining of the past that takes place in On the Contrary smooths over the contradictions and flaws apparent in the historical accounts of Barbier's career. In Brink's narrative, the latter retains strength of purpose and even a sense of humour until the last. But, according to historical records, he lost heart and wept when he realised he was to be imprisoned in the Castle's dungeon. Furthermore, had his struggle on behalf of various Cape farmers been achieved, it would have led to further deprivation of the rights of the Khoisan peoples (Watson, 1995: 22-23). This belies, for one thing, Brink's assertion that the early Afrikaner dissidents were able to identify completely with Africa and its indigenous people.

In Imaginings of Sand, it is the fantastical tales of the women in her family that primarily inspire Kristien's sense of commitment to and belonging in South Africa, rather than the

political events taking place around her. The fabulous world of Ouma Kristina's stories, to which she turns night after night parallel, in certain respects, Barbier's imaginary journey through Monomotapa while in prison. In both cases, the fantastic serves as a way of achieving harmony and regeneration that cannot be so readily attained in real life.

There is, of course, always a distinction between a vision and the real. As Bettelheim reminds us, what fairy tales offer is "food for hope", not realistic accounts of the conditions in which we live (73). Furthermore, as has been noted, South African literature is saturated with bleak, dismal images of oppression, guilt and suffering, which sometimes become self-indulgent.¹⁷ There is a desperate need for alternative fictional approaches that could act as a counterbalance to this tendency. Moreover, Brink's belief in the possibility of redemption and reconciliation and his willingness to emphasise what he believes is right are commendable. However, when these involve the ignoring or negation of contradictions, and when they are conveyed in part through cliches, stereotypes and heavily didactic, imposed convictions--all of which are evident in the above examples--they diminish what Brink is trying to accomplish.

This becomes all the more apparent when we compare Imaginings of Sand to Isabel Allende's The House of the Spirits (1985). In Allende's novel, the supernatural world cannot effect change in the existing political order. (The spirits cannot save Alba from incarceration and torture, for instance.) By contrast, in Brink's

fiction there are no realities--however dire--that cannot be confronted and, it is suggested, overcome, through the intervention of the fantastic. After her sister's murder of her husband and children and subsequent suicide, Kristien turns away from the reality of their funeral to Ouma Kristina's tales and the sense of hope that she has attained through them, affirming: "I know that the present--this small square riddled with graves--is less real than the possible" (350).

For Kristien, it is the potential that we can realise within our own lives and the society we inhabit, rather than the sufferings which appear to impede us, that really matters in the end. But what we are offered in Imaginations of Sand in no way substantiates this. The possibilities suggested in the novel remain as airy and unreal as the ghosts who inhabit Ouma Kristina's stories. Instead of imaginatively feasible images of "the possible"--and the way in which the latter can be brought closer to the sphere of tangible realities--we merely have facile assertions. Kristien asks: "Why demand the truth, whatever it may be, if you can have imagination? I've tried the real, and I know now it doesn't work" (325).

The extent to which some of Brink's fantastic elements, particularly in their visionary aspects, suggest that we can evade the social and political forces that shape our reality becomes clear when we contrast his narratives to the proceedings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. As the latter have shown us, claims to harmony and unity can, at times, risk

appearing oversimplified or even dishonest in the light of the terrible realities of the South African situation. Expressions of remorse on the part of the perpetrators and statements of forgiveness on the part of the victims and their families do not always provide adequate restitution for the tremendous emotional, psychological and physical scars that the latter may carry with them all their lives.¹⁸ Furthermore, some of the perpetrators have found it convenient to express a contrition that they do not feel, or have refused to acknowledge individual responsibility for the actions they carried out. On the other hand, for a range of individuals (such as the families of Matthew Goniwe, Griffiths and Victoria Mxenge and Chris Hani) the cost of reconciliation has clearly been too high.¹⁹ As in Brink's fiction, the TRC focusses on individual narratives as a means towards peace, absolution and understanding. But while Brink intends his fantastical tales to play a creative, positive role, the TRC reports illustrate the ambiguous nature of narrative. The stories they contain have certainly had the potential to be constructive and cathartic; but they can also conceal, twist the facts or be proffered as a symbolic sticking plaster for wounds that cannot be so readily healed.

The TRC provides just one recent instance of the dangers of narrative in the South African context. An integral part of this country's historical and political reality has been the way in which different narratives have been utilised to install and entrench various power structures, thereby serving to control and manipulate. Yet, in his ultimate affirmation of the healing,

enlightening role of stories, Brink loses sight of this crucial part played by the latter in the South African experience. He does acknowledge the dangers of narrative in his theoretical work, The Novel: Language and Narrative from Cervantes to Calvino (1998), in which he examines the way that language in a range of nineteenth and twentieth century novels takes the form of various narrative strategies upon which characters construct their lives and their relationships to the societies in which they live. He shows how such reconstructions of the real can distort and dissemble, yet these more problematic aspects of storytelling do not pose any real threat in the world of his fiction. For example, in Jane Austen's Emma, Brink describes how language keeps unmanageable reality at bay, functioning as a form of elaborate pretence and manipulation (1998: 108-109, 123-125). Similarly, he shows that in Moll Flanders the protagonist uses language as a way of protecting herself from reality, both the causes and consequences that confront her (1998: 78). David Attwell, in his review of The Novel, comments on the similarities between this text and Brink's fiction. However, it is, ultimately, the differences between them that are the most striking (1998: 19).

On the Contrary, Imaginings of Sand and Devil's Valley all make much of the deceptive, unreliable nature of narrative. For example, near the beginning of On the Contrary, Barbier reflects that the story he tells "[multiplies], in the telling, into a host of others" (4). Not long thereafter, he warns the reader: "Few have any notion of the wounds, tarnishes and false beauties

the truth may and does often receive from the reigning humour in the author" (27).

Yet in all three books, this particular view of narrative ends up seeming little more than a fashionable literary exercise in a postmodern questioning of established versions of the real,²⁰ as is evident in the readiness with which this perspective is discarded in favour of the solidity of the truths contained in these novels' conclusions. The flimsiness of the carnivalesque elements in many of Brink's protagonists' narratives testifies to the fact that, despite the way outrageous, probably untrustworthy tales feature so prominently in Brink's novels, they amount to little more than surface trappings, bedecking issues of greater significance. Like the postmodern convictions it purports to express, this emphasis on the more dubious, unstable aspects of narrative is all display, and little substance.

From the above discussion, it is evident that a major defect in Brink's use of the fantastic lies in the way in which, at various points in his work, the necessarily delicate balance between the fantastic and the real breaks down and the former ceases to interact with and speak to the historical and contemporary South African situation. This is connected to the way in which, at a number of critical points in his novels, Brink's fantastical elements separate themselves from the realm of the imagination--with its potential to regenerate and transform--and move into the area that Coleridge defined as pure fancy which, in its set,

lifeless quality, inevitably manifests itself in stylistic and aesthetic limitation:

The secondary [imagination] ... dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still, at all events, it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially vital

Fancy, on the contrary, has no other counters to play with but fixities and definites. The fancy is indeed no other than a mode of memory emancipated from the order of time and space; and blended with, and modified by that empirical phenomenon of the will which we express by the word choice (1965: 167).

A more contemporary instance would be Richard Mathews's description of fantasy, which, like Coleridge's depiction of the imagination, suggests some of the qualities that Brink's fantastic elements should, but do not, possess: "[It is] a type of fiction that evokes wonder, mystery or magic--a sense of possibility beyond the ordinary, material, rationally predictable world in which we live" (1997: 1). While Brink may emphasise the capacity of the fantastic to enhance our psychic lives, his fantastic elements do not have the vitality or potency to which Coleridge and Mathews allude. Instead, they seem closer to Coleridge's "fixities" and "definites".

Doubtless, as has been suggested, the immensely popular contemporary literary mode of magical realism has significantly

influenced the nature of Brink's fantastic. Equally clearly, the latter's fantastic elements have suffered in consequence. We shall see, especially, that in his use of magical realist features, Brink seems, more often than not, to be following a recipe, rather than the promptings of his own imagination. It is no wonder, then, that his fantastic elements lack the capacity to evoke the type of imaginative potential of which Mathews speaks.

The widespread appeal of magical realism is based, to a large part, on the very real need in highly secularised, urbanised societies, for areas of enchantment. But the yearning to reach out beyond mundane realities to something utterly different has its problematic implications for this literary mode. Many have found the latter especially attractive because they perceive it as consisting primarily of highly coloured, wildly imaginative tales of strange and fabulous places.²¹ Nicol's novels, at times, seem little more than this and as such, they indicate the dangerous ground on which writers making use of magical realist elements find themselves. It is all too easy to succumb to the appeal of the outlandish and to devise flamboyant supernatural effects for their own sake. Magical realism treads a very thin line between, on the one hand, images, episodes and characters that possess a multi-faceted resonance transcending one-to-one interpretation and, on the other hand, flights of fancy that are, in the end, not about very much except themselves.

On the Contrary provides various illustrations of the way Brink's

use of the fantastic tends towards this latter pitfall. Brennan warns that in magical realism there is a very real danger of "viewing the land as a spectacle, a fund of imagery" for the mode of the fantastic (86)--and we encounter one instance of this in Barbier's travellers' tales of strange or even mythical African peoples and animals. Later on, the dream-like quality of Barbier's final journey reinforces this sense of Africa as a place of wonders and mysteries. The fantastic mode, naturally, lends itself to depictions of the mythic and exotic. Yet, obviously, such features cannot in themselves make a work of art seem the product of the Coleridgean imagination. Indeed, because of its long-familiar, even archetypal qualities, the mythic can easily seem unoriginal, even hackneyed if it is not imbued with sufficient imaginative force. This, unfortunately, is the more common result in Brink's fiction, as in Barbier's description of the unicorn:

[Gazing] in the fearsome region of barrenness the trek is preparing to enter, I face the setting sun, resting huge and miraculous, unwieldy, like the bladder of a gigantic beast pendulous with blood, on the low undulations of the land towards the blue-black blur of the sea. And I see the Unicorn. It appears, heraldic, flat against the sun, standing in alert pose, head erect, taller than the gazelles of these parts, and shaped somewhat like a horse, a maned creature, pure white in colour--that much can be discerned against the fiery disk--its tall horn rising like a scimitar from its forehead (28).

In this extract, as well as at many other points in the novel, Barbier deliberately resorts to bombastic prose so as to emphasise that the verisimilitude of his narratives is constantly in question. At the same time, we are made uncomfortably aware that his rhetorical excesses combine with, and are at times deflated by, Brink's artistic inadequacies. This is the case in the first sentence, so laden with overblown, sometimes spurious phraseology (as in the case of the word "miraculous", for instance) that it becomes as "unwieldy" as the sun it depicts. In addition, the over-used images that we encounter in this passage, such as the "blue-black" sea and the--predictably--"heraldic" pose of the unicorn, silhouetted against the sunset, make Barbier's description seem uninspired, rather than energetically, ironically exaggerated. It becomes all too easy to view the unicorn as a creature of idle fancy, rather than a being emanating from a magically enhanced vision of the real. The same could be said of a great many of Barbier's accounts of the more incredible aspects of his travels, which convey a picture of an Africa that is as far removed from the real continent as Barbier's dreams of Monomatapa.

For Brink, on the other hand, the images of Africa in On the Contrary are "real" in terms of the way that they serve as a means of exploring what are, for him, deeply pertinent issues. The improbable "facts" that Barbier cites about the African continent, derived, Brink tells us, from texts by eighteenth-century travellers (1996b: 243), are meant to draw our attention to the concept of history as fabulation. The extent to which this

forms one of Brink's central concerns is evidenced by the way in which, in his critical writings, he repeatedly draws our attention to this issue.²² In conjunction with this, we have noted how he emphasises the significance of the "fictionalisation of history" that has taken place in contemporary South African literature, illustrating how his novels form part of this (1996b: 235). The fact that the fabulous descriptions of Africa in On the Contrary seem affected, even self-conscious, derives, it would appear, from the way in which they seem deliberately designed to give fictional expression to what Brink regards as an area of key theoretical and literary importance. As with the description of the unicorn, they have nothing else, apart from these ideas, to bestow a sense of meaning on them.

Indeed, the lack of authenticity that characterises Brink's fantasy in general stems particularly from the fact that the latter's fabulous elements seem mechanically reproduced, more in accordance with the specific programme that he has consciously committed himself to than any inner, imaginative imperatives. In contrast with the way in which Hope's and Vladislavic's respective fantastic elements are fuelled, at best, by these writers' specific quirks, yearnings and preoccupations, Brink's fantastic features lack individuality. More specifically, because they do not convey any sense of a special emotional and psychological investment, they lack soul: that is, they have nothing to animate them or give them resonance.

There is another major reason for the imaginative flatness of the

fantastical images of Africa in On the Contrary, and one that has nothing to do with their own inherent thinness. It relates, instead, to the figure around and in relation to which these descriptions take place: the slave woman, Rosette. As a beautiful, enigmatic black woman who eventually becomes an embodiment of the primeval spirit of Africa, Rosette is deeply stereotypical. Fantasy, of course, seems full of stereotypes. Nevertheless, unrealistic and cliched though these may appear, they can resonate on a deeper level, as a result of their archetypal qualities. Jung explains the power of archetypes in a work of art:

The impact of an archetype ... stirs us because it summons up a voice that is stronger than our own. Whoever speaks in primordial images speaks with a thousand voices; he enthalls and overpowers

By giving [an archetypal image] shape, the artist translates it into the language of the present, and so makes it possible for us to find our way back to the deepest springs of life (1971: 82).

Rosette, manifestly, lacks such qualities, as is evident in her portrayal in the book. The most striking thing about her is her "exotic" physical beauty (31) and, in his second encounter with her, what Barbier notices particularly are "her woman's breasts. ... Pale ochre globes, rounded and complete, the pointed nipples dark as cinnamon" (35). Such passages, while playing on very common masculine notions of female sexual appeal, fail to invest

Rosette with the creative potency and the sense of the numinous which are intended to constitute her principal qualities. Further depictions of her do little to dispel these initial impressions.

In a twisting, complicated gesture--but you made it seem very easy--you shook the top half of your clothing from your shoulders; it fell down to your hips. You put a finger to your navel.

"This is the sign of my freedom," you said. "When they cut me from my mother I was free."

I looked at you. But what I felt was different from desire; more than desire.

"Cover yourself," I said.

You did so, with that infuriating half-smile on your lips (71-72).

Rosette's effectiveness as a central protagonist is undermined by the way in which, for a great deal of the book, she exists principally as the subject of Barbier's--and, we suspect, Brink's--admiring gaze. After all, the latter has admitted that he cannot write a novel without falling in love with the main female character (Retief, 1998: 15). In a scene such as the above, Rosette's air of proud aloofness and self-sufficiency, rather than suggesting her subliminal qualities, seems, first and foremost, to contribute to her sexual allure. In the overall scheme of On the Contrary, she is not simply intended to be a sexual figure, yet Brink's descriptions of her repeatedly circle back to the sensual, as if this is the area that he is most

comfortable depicting. These factors combine to deprive of all imaginative credibility Rosette's metamorphosis from desirable woman to divinity, the goddess whose stories brought Africa into being.

Ironically, however, although Brink's novels are replete with desire, he struggles to convey it.²³ As with his images of evil, his attempts to depict desire stem from an imagination which is, at bottom, deeply conventional. For instance, while Rosette's act in the above passage may be intended to be significant, it uncomfortably calls to mind the images of female sexual teasing that one frequently encounters in popular fiction. Repeatedly, in this and other novels, he employs bland, worn-out images in an attempt to suggest sensuality. Tired and flaccid as his language is, his narratives are incapable of evoking any sense of real passion.

Many of the main female characters in Brink's other recent novels suffer from comparable shortcomings. As with Rosette, their other-worldly attributes are frequently tied to their physicality. For example, in Devil's Valley, when the ghost of Mooi-Janna appears to Lochner, she has "four tits" as her most distinguishing feature (28). Certainly, in a great deal of contemporary magical realism there are many female characters whose defining qualities relate closely to their sexuality or physical attractiveness, such as Remedios the Beauty in One Hundred Years of Solitude, Helen the beggar girl in Ben Okri's The Famished Road (1991) and Rosa in Allende's The House of the

Spirits. The point about Remedios, Helen and Rosa, however, is that they are not simply supernaturally lovely women. The haunting power of the descriptions of their beauty, and all the unusual, disturbing and miraculous qualities associated with it, leave a deep impression on the reader's imagination and serve to suggest the amazing, sometimes perilous quality of beauty itself.

Brink's depictions of his female characters, on the other hand, do not have this kind of effect. One of the characters in Devil's Valley, Dalena, describes Mooi-Janna in this way:

"When the commando was close enough ..., Mooi-Janna got up from the rock where she was waiting. She stripped off her long silk dress Her loose hair was shimmering in the setting sun, and the last rays brushed her shoulders as though they were lightly daubed with blood. ...

That girl was a sight to behold, believe me. ... Enough to say that no man who'd ever seen her ... would forget that body to the day of his death" (221).

As with many of the other descriptions of Brink's women, the images in this passage never rise above the level of the standardized. There is, for instance, the reference to Mooi-Janna's hair shimmering in the sunset, a commonplace image of female attractiveness. In consequence, we have no real sense of her physical presence and what there is, apart from her four breasts, that makes her so exceptional. We are merely told that she is lovely, and we have to take Dalena's word for it. (We

could contrast this with the effect that Allende's description of Rosa, with her strange green hair and unearthly "underwater beauty" (35), has on the reader.) Mooi-Janna is associated with (and at times appears to be conflated with) Emma, a central character. Various inexplicable or dreamlike events that take place in Devil's Valley involving the latter thus relate to Mooi-Janna. But since Mooi-Janna herself is presented so tritely, the effect of many of these fantastical episodes is correspondingly reduced.

Brink's failure to invest his female characters with any aura of enchantment calls to mind Barthes once again, and particularly his definition of a stereotype: "[A] word repeated without any magic or enthusiasm, as though it were natural, as though by some miracle this recurring word were adequate on each occasion for different reasons" (1975: 40). This is obviously very different from J.R.R. Tolkien's assertion that fantasy should effect a Recovery of the ordinary, freeing it "from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity--of possessiveness" (1966: 57).

Insofar as it relates to his use of the fantastic, Brink's depiction of women is comparable to his treatment of the Khoisan peoples. It is through the Khoisan in particular, whether as actual characters or in the form of their folklore and belief systems, that Brink attempts to recreate South Africa as a magical realist realm comparable to Okri's Nigeria or Marquez's Colombia.

In Imaginings of Sand, the family line, as well as Ouma Kristina's stories, is rooted in the world of the Khoisan. Kamma is Ouma Kristina's first known ancestor and Kristien is given various different mythological accounts of the origins of her family, one of which depicts a snake-woman with a jewel on her forehead emerging from a river (173). Later in the book, we see that this is an image from the belief systems of the Khoisan people in the novel, in that the guardian spirit of the group to which Kamma's daughter belongs is a huge female snake living in a dark pool, with a diamond on its forehead (303). In Ouma Kristina's stories, Kamma and the Khoisan peoples are associated with the mystical and the marvellous, possessing a wealth of myth and legend. Kamma's remarkable and even supernatural abilities, such as her entrancing songs and her affinity with birds and animals, seem to be linked to her Khoisan origins.

However, Kamma's songs and the serpent with a jewel in its forehead are details mentioned in passing. In a study of the Khoi peoples, Peter Carstens tells us that this snake features in the belief systems of some Khoi communities. It is described as being "so large that when its head is resting on the north bank of the Orange river, its tail is still on the south bank" (1975: 90). It is associated with women: they have fallen in love with it, and there are also accounts of it falling in love with them. On the other hand, it is hated and feared by men, and it is said to be angered by the sight and smell of a man (Carstens: 90). Now it is significant, I think, that the nature of this snake and its specific association with women, all of which could give Brink's

depiction of it more depth and meaning, are omitted. In the end, like the images in Kamma's songs, it does little more than contribute to a generalised sense of fantastical African colour, embellishing the central concern of Ouma Kristina's stories: the oppression of women in a racist patriarchal society. Rather than serving as a means of acknowledging the oral foundation of African literary traditions, as Brink claims (1996b: 222), the indigenous myths and tales his work incorporates seem severed from their roots.

There is a further aspect to Brink's use of the Khoisan peoples. Kamma, with all her enchanting qualities, is an ever-receding focus of the desires of the men around her, slipping out of their reach each time they attempt to lay claim to her. In a similar sense, the Khoisan themselves, in their association with the mythical and spiritual, provide a comparable focus for needs and longings (Brink's and, potentially, the reader's) which prove ultimately intangible or otherwise lacking in substance.

In On the Contrary, during his first journey into the interior, Barbier reflects: "As one distances oneself from the centre, the hottentot tongue becomes ... less and less human in sound and grammar" (22). He later adopts a completely different view of this language when, during his final, imaginary journey, he learns to speak it himself:

[Khoib] has begun to teach me the sounds of his language.
... I am amazed by the intricacies of his speech. It can

convey shades of meaning that don't even exist in my mother tongue. ...

There are tongues even more subtle and complicated in the deep interior, Khoib tells me. ... The clicks are beautiful (354).

While these two extracts may seem very different, they both involve Barbier's quest for Monomatapa: in the first case, the legendary African kingdom, and in the second, a type of spiritual Monomatapa, in which absolution and total identification with Africa can be attained. In each case, the Khoisan peoples and their language, with its alien, but ultimately arresting qualities, are integrated into the quest, forming part of the creation of Africa as a magical realist realm in which Monomatapa, in its various forms, represents an attainable possibility.

Throughout On the Contrary, the Khoisan peoples are important primarily in a symbolic sense. They become emblematic of Barbier's guilt and complicity in destructive colonial structures and later on, vehicles for his journey towards redemption. As has already been pointed out, the fantastic often transforms character into symbol, yet in On the Contrary the contrast between the farmers Barbier leads in rebellion and the Khoisan is telling. The former are allowed to articulate specific emotional and political needs, while the Khoisan belong principally to the sphere of dream and the supernatural. This is evidenced, for instance, in the way that the Khoisan Barbier

encounters during his third journey straddle the realms of the living and the dead. In consequence, the Khoisan peoples become abstracted from the real, mystified, their own political needs overridden in favour of those of the farmers. While it is not implausible for a character such as Barbier, a European adventurer in what is, for him, an unknown continent, to view the Khoisan peoples in mythic terms, at no point is his mystification of the latter ever called into question. Instead, it intensifies as the book draws towards its conclusion.

In fact, this attitude which Barbier adopts towards the Khoisan is not very far removed from the views of his creator, whose imaginative response to these peoples is shaped by the nature of his specific social context. The sense of spiritual emptiness, so often said to afflict contemporary Westernised society, frequently tends to be linked to the conviction that modern humanity has lost touch with the natural world. In the light of this, the Khoisan peoples's closeness to nature and their incorporation of the latter into their belief systems and mythology have resulted in their possessing special appeal for many members of Westernised communities in South Africa and elsewhere. We see how, through the Khoisan, Barbier attains a state of oneness with the natural world:

I'm learning, learning all the time. I learn their multifarious languages, I learn from them how the world was made, how this land was told into existence; they teach me their remedies, their stories, their secrets of hunting and

gathering and caring for the cattle, the long-tailed sheep, caring for our mutual deep mother, the earth. I learn to recognise her voice, to breathe in her breath, to attune myself to her arcane rhythms in profound incestuous couplings. The more, still more. I learn the intricate sign-language of trees and rocks and water, of dust-devils and the rain; I learn to dance the dance of the sun, of the moon, of the hills and plains (359).

In this passage the Khoisan, depicted as uniquely attuned to the spirit of Africa, are transformed from a diversity of peoples into a homogeneous, mystical Other through whom Barbier gains access to a revelation of the African world and his place in it. The above extract, like others dealing with the Khoisan in this part of the novel, forms an integral part of the visionary experience through which Barbier is redeemed and, therefore, of the message of atonement and belonging with which the book concludes. Such images of the Khoisan are, therefore, imbued with an air of profound significance and even--as a result of their position in the narrative--with a sense of finality. The reader is not, therefore, accorded the space to entertain the possibility that there are other, less deeply problematic, ways of perceiving the Khoisan peoples. The fact that the latter are marginalised groupings, their numbers depleted, who tend to exist predominantly as myth in the consciousness of others certainly has made them all the more vulnerable to being utilised in this fashion.²⁴

Brink, however, argues that, by drawing the Khoisan, their worldview and their tales into his texts, he is acknowledging his "Euro-African" heritage (1996b: 222). Yet a danger of the magical realist tendency to mythicise (and, in the process, exoticise) indigenous peoples whose beliefs and ways of life contrast radically with those of the urbanised contemporary world is that the writer and reader may become confirmed in their alienation from such people and their culture. Franz Fanon comments that folkloristic motifs in colonial writing can suggest not cultural roots but a move towards exoticism, "only the reverse side of assimilationism, equally alienated, equally outside looking in" (1968: 233). The specific use Brink makes of the Khoisan in his use of the fantastic does not escape similar suspicion. Nor does his attempt to "[subvert] ... male historiography" and "[transform] dominant historical discourses" (Brink, 1997b: 489).

The fundamental flaw in Brink's use of magical realism is that, while it may seem unique and surprising on the surface, it is, in the end, unable to adequately provide the particular type of pleasure that we seek from the fantastic: that is, a delight in its unexpectedness. In his books, the beautiful women, the interconnectedness of the natural and supernatural worlds, the grotesque and eccentric characters, the mythical creatures and the dreamlike landscapes--all the staple ingredients of magical realist texts--often have a certain derivative, predictable quality to them. In consequence, our pleasure in Brink's narrative inventiveness, his bawdy humour and his colourful

characters such as Barbier and Ouma Kristina is short-lived.

III

As has been suggested at the onset of this chapter, the chief factor underlying all the deficiencies outlined above is that Brink does not appear to have taken adequate cognisance of the difficulties that the fantastic entails. Certainly, imaginative inventiveness and liberation from narrow, rational constraints are not all there is to a successful work of fantasy. It is one thing to invoke the mythic and supernatural, but it is quite another matter to make them resonate in the reader's mind. It must be conceded that Brink's use of the fantastic is well-meant, based as it is on his sense of excitement, as a writer, in the world of creative possibilities that the imagination can lead into, and a desire to remedy South Africans' imaginative impoverishment. There is much in his work that seems appealing: his storytelling abilities, the colourful, heterogeneous fabulous realms his fiction opens onto and the way in which these aspects celebrate the imagination. But there is an over-eagerness, a tendency to take too much on board as he crams his texts with the magical and mystical, without sufficiently realising them. Ultimately, Brink's very enthusiasm for the fantastic as a literary form and his faith in its transformative, restorative powers are too programmatic. His novels are, in this sense, more like text-books of the fantastic than the thing itself.

There is of course a sense in which the fantastic exposes the writer, cutting her or him off from the traditional supports and protection that realism can provide, making the inadequacies in her or his work often appear all the more glaring. Le Guin, once again, makes the relevant point:

[I]n fantasy there is nothing but the writer's vision of the world. ... There is no comfortable matrix of the commonplace to substitute for the imagination, to provide ready-made emotional response, and to disguise flaws and failures of creation. There is only a construct built in a void, with every joint and seam and nail exposed (1975: 27).

The inherently precarious nature of the fantastic is further emphasised by the novelist Dan Jacobson, who, in another connection, has argued that "[o]ne of the problems with fantasy as a fictional mode is that it is always in danger of degenerating into mere whimsy" (1988: 86). For a fantasist to avoid appearing shallow or artificial, Jacobson argues that "only a firm internal logic generated from within, a strict attention to the rules which the story sets itself as it unfolds, is likely to avert that danger" (86). He goes on to contrast the rigorous logic of Franz Kafka's Metamorphosis with novels such as One Hundred Years of Solitude and Milan Kundera's The Unbearable Lightness of Being, objecting to the latter two works on the following grounds:

The longer we go on reading [these novels] the more we come to feel that the author has so contrived things that he can say more or less what he likes at any point, and can arrange for almost anything to happen next. Then we get what seems to me the worst of both worlds: laborious whimsy, plodding whimsy (86).

While Jacobson's apparent dismissal of Marquez and Kundera is, in my view, highly questionable, the essential point that he makes is an important one. The fantastic offers us more complex, highly charged forms of reality, and as such, it requires a fantastical logic all of its own if it is to appear convincing. In the best of the fantastic, this logic serves to strengthen one's grasp on the real even as, paradoxically, it seems to be flying off into the terrain of illusion and delusion. Jorge Luis Borges might be the signal instance of this paradox, as was his master, Kafka.

In most of Brink's fantastic, however, this inner sense of authenticity and consistency is lacking.²⁵ Mooi-Janna's four breasts provide an example as appropriate as any other. Of course, the inclusion of this particular fantastic element could be defended on the grounds that, while on a narrative level there is no real reason why Mooi-Janna should not be so equipped, the fantastic certainly does not always make sense in this way. Indeed, part of its impact lies in its illogical qualities. A particularly fascinating aspect of Amos Tutuola's The Palm Wine Drinkard (1953), for instance, is the variety of bizarre beings

the narrator encounters, such as a half-bodied baby and a quarter-of-a-mile-long white creature with only one eye, during his journey through the bush in search of Dead's Town. Yet there is a weird rationality within this apparent irrationality, for such beings seem entirely appropriate inhabitants of the shadowy, phantasmagoric world through which the narrator wanders. Another example might be the golden butterflies that hover, like a garment, around Ayesha, the young visionary in Rushdie's The Satanic Verses (1988), providing her with her only source of food. This seemingly meaningless feature seems, in fact, fitting, when we consider Ayesha's strangeness, remarkable beauty and unaccountable magnetism. The presence of the butterflies also sets her apart from those around her, hinting at the way in which she inhabits a spiritual plane beyond the reach of human understanding.²⁶ On the other hand, Mooi-Janna's four breasts seem to be there simply because Brink thought they would be an interesting element--and as a result, they seem merely tacked on, rather than something that appears to arise with natural unnaturalness, so to say, out of the fantastical world he has created.

The reason why Tutuola's ghosts and monsters and Ayesha's butterflies seem much more plausible than Mooi-Janna's four breasts lies in the way in which they, and the narrative worlds that they inhabit, have been imagined. Here we return to Le Guin's image of a writer of fantasy creating a separate world, one which requires skilful construction if it, and the events that take place within it, are to literally ring true. We have

seen how Brink's lack of the creative resources to successfully develop his fantastical worlds means that he falls back on bare assertions of fact and stale, weary verbal formulas, which place his fantastic elements, ironically, on the level of the limited assumptions and commonplace notions of the real which they are intended to challenge. In such a context, the evocative and the suggestive have little place. The extent to which the fantastic is dependent on these qualities for its successful operation can be seen in the way in which, in his very first description of Ayesha, crouching on the grass and eating the brightly coloured butterflies settling on her hand, Rushdie succeeds in suggesting her compelling loveliness and the aura of mysterious power that surrounds her. Yet, despite all the nightmarish images he conjures up and the repeated emphasis on cruelty and horror, Brink cannot, in the near 400 pages of Devil's Valley, breathe life into the society he depicts.

Paradoxically, despite the extent to which his fantasy is characterised by imaginative inadequacies, Brink seeks to create fictional worlds in which anything can be made possible through the imagination. In this way, he undermines the very substance of the latter in its finest operations. By contrast, part of the sense of verisimilitude underlying the fantastical elements of a novel such as Laura Esquivel's Like Water for Chocolate (1989) derives from the way in which these elements are subject, ultimately, to certain checks and balances. As a result of its overwhelming intensity, Tita and Pedro's love possesses a magical force of its own, but when they are finally able to consummate

their passion at the end of the narrative, they both perish, suggesting that a love such as theirs has no place in the ordinary physical world.

Because they have not been fleshed out in any other way, Brink's fantastic elements exist most significantly at the level of ideas. In the end, his four fantastical books are used as the equivalent of a good works programme, both in a literary and an ideological sense. It is well known, however, that ideas alone are not sufficient to sustain a work of literature. Heyns pinpoints a central failing underlying Brink's recent fiction when he concludes his review of Imaginings of Sand by stating that "all too frequently [the novel] subsides into a mere heap of good intentions" (1995: 227).

Brink's earlier realistic novels have been criticised for their dull narrative expression and the humdrum, editorialising sentiments with which they conclude.²⁷ Nonetheless, many of these books were carried forward by the inherent power of the situations they depicted and Brink's unquestioned ability to turn these circumstances into the subject of gripping tales. But there is no such impetus in his four recent texts. The ideas on which they are based certainly do not have the drama and immediacy of, say, the specific issues that gave A Dry White Season its narrative forcefulness, despite its stylistic flaws.²⁸ As a result, Brink's weaknesses as a writer become all the more conspicuous in his latter fantastical novels.

It seems, therefore, that the realism of which Brink made use until the latter part of the 1980s would, in fact, have served him better than the fantastic. His latest book, Rights of Desire (2000) provides particularly strong evidence in support of this. Unlike his preceding four novels, this work is primarily realistic. There is an other-worldly element, in the form of a ghost, but she is inserted into the story in a somewhat artificial manner. On the other hand, the central theme of the book, the desperate desire of an aging man for his youthful lodger, has a genuine quality to it that the supernatural side of the narrative--or, for that matter, many of the fantastical elements in the previous four novels--tends to lack. The pain that Ruben Olivier experiences is convincingly imagined and touches us in a way that the sufferings of T'kama, Barbier, Ouma Kristina and Lochner do not. Unlike the four novels preceding it, Rights of Desire seems to have its origins in some deeply felt (and known) personal imperative. Instead of a conscious programme, we have the sense of a matrix--comprised of aspects of memory, longing and fear--out of which the book has grown. This, unquestionably, is why the novel succeeds in embodying desire in a way that Brink's previous works do not.

There is also a contrast between the revelation Ruben arrives at near the conclusion of the book and the visionary aspects of Brink's other, fantastical novels. While walking in the forest, Ruben and Tessa, the young woman he yearns for, are attacked, but Tessa manages to cry out, and they are rescued. That evening, Ruben reflects:

She screamed for help, and people heard, and came, and saved us. ...

And then the next slow wave of thought unfurled. How many other voices have there been shouting for help throughout my life, shouting for me to help? Riana, more than anyone else, ever. Shouting and shouting, in so many ways. But also my sons. Alison. Perhaps Tania. My mother from beyond the grave, my father in his carpentry shed in Booyens. ... All those cries for help from a clamouring world. While I chose not to listen. I couldn't bear to get involved. Unlike those strangers, this afternoon. I complain, often, like everyone I know, except Tessa perhaps, of how the place is going down the drain. Misery, violence, terror, the lot. All the voices, voices. Yet I prefer not to listen, not to respond. ... And by turning a deaf ear I help create the very space in which the world can sink into the morass. The mindset that makes atrocity possible (299-300).

In Rights of Desire, we are not offered very much in the end--only the possibility of doing the little that one can to resist the violence that characterises South African society, remaining alert to the sufferings of others. Yet, in contrast to the conclusions of the other four novels, which seem to proffer so much, but are undercut by their insubstantial, even spurious qualities, this book presents us with a clear-eyed sense of what is and is not viable, given the difficulties of South Africa's current situation. Furthermore, the believability of the

narrative voice in this extract enhances the difference between the vision contained in this book and those of the four preceding novels. In its unadorned simplicity, Ruben's expression in the above passage possesses a clarity and directness that bring it to life, in contrast to the deadening effect of the more ornate, fantastical language in many of the above-quoted passages from the previous four novels. Arguably then, by returning to a predominantly realist approach in this latest work, Brink may be acknowledging that this mode is the one in which he is most at home. Certain writers are, by nature and vocation, realists and the contrast between Rights of Desire and the four novels examined in this chapter suggests that Brink belongs firmly in this category.

In the context of this thesis, then, this chapter strikes a cautionary note. While Brink's fiction makes us aware of the possibilities offered by the fantastic, especially in a literary context which, all too frequently, clings to the conventional, fearing and mistrusting imaginative prodigality, it also indicates how, despite the best intentions on the part of the writer, those possibilities can easily remain unrealised. South African writers and critics in the 1980s and later who expressed a mistrust of the fantastic were (sometimes unintentionally) uttering a warning which South African writers who turn to this mode will need to heed, should they wish to avoid the pitfalls that a writer like Brink has encountered in his search for a new literary aesthetic with a broader range and more potential than that of protest fiction or liberal realism.

Notes

1. For example, Brink quotes Es'kia Mphahlele: "Not only does a white man speak for the African, but he also simply says the situation is bad and does nothing to transcend it" (1987: 38). Although Brink views this attitude as illustrating one of the key problems in South African literature--the extent to which the racial divide has led to thinking based on ethnic or group divisions (1987: 38)--Mphahlele's comment also reflects the black community's lack of confidence in liberal realism as an effective literary response.

Similarly, during the planning of the Cultural Festival, organised by a range of UDF-aligned political organisations, which was to have been held in Cape Town at the end of 1986 (but which was, however, banned under the State of Emergency) the inclusion of various liberal realist writers, including Brink, was discussed. Various members of the planning team (some of whom belonged to the Congress of South African Writers) expressed the view that such writers would be able to make only a very limited contribution to the festival.

2. Theo L. D'haen points out that magical realism and postmodernism tend to overlap in many respects, making use of a great deal of the same elements and techniques (1995: 193-194). (This is evident in Brink's comment on the nature of postmodernism in South African literature.) Various critics, such as Brian McHale and Wendy B. Faris, view the former mode as an aspect of the latter. Faris, for instance, talks of "magical realist rooms in the postmodern house of fiction" (1995: 175). However, by subsuming magical realism under postmodernism, one risks losing sight of some of the qualities that make it unique and as critics such as John Burt Foster Jr. have observed, there are various distinctions between the two approaches (1995: 269, 282-283).

3. Brink incorporates elements of African oral traditions--both indigenous narratives and old Afrikaner tales--which draw on the world of the magical and the supernatural into the stories contained in his four more recent novels.

4. Barbier's career is described by Nigel Penn, in his chapter "Estienne Barbier: An Eighteenth-Century Cape Social Bandit", in his book Rogues, Rebels and Runaways: Some Eighteenth-Century Cape Characters (1999).

5. For instance, Barbier first describes his arrival at the Cape of Good Hope thus: "No less a luminary than the governer, his excellency Jan de la Fontaine, came out to our ship in a rowing boat when we anchored in Table Bay" (5). Later on, however, he states that he fell ill while on board ship, passed into a coma and was unaware of his arrival.

For Brink, Barbier's narratives suggest the essential nature of artistic creativity. "[O]n the contrary" the former declares, is "the writer's motto par excellence" (1983a: 181): "[W]hen ... one simply allows all the impulses and possibilities of a

situation to erupt--I'm thinking of the process of storytelling now--then one tends to see more possibilities in a given situation. You look with what Van Wyk Louw called the multiple eye of the fly" (App. C: 337).

6. Bakhtin comments on the folkloric roots of this character (1981: 159).

7. Barbier's use of official channels in his quest for social justice resembles, in certain respects, Ben du Toit's desperate attempts to obtain social justice in A Dry White Season, which are equally doomed to disaster from the onset.

8. For instance, White remarks that historical narratives are always figurative accounts, with allegorical qualities and are thus essentially literary in nature, while Jameson tells us that history is only available to us in textual form (1987: 48; 1981: 35).

9. Brink deals with this role that fiction can play in a post-apartheid South Africa in, for example, his essays "Reimagining the Real" (1992) and "Literature as Cultural Opposition" (1993), contained in the collection Reinventing a Continent (1996b).

10. We see this in This Day and Age (1992), for instance, in which the mythic becomes a dead weight, trapping its characters within (Nicol implies) its inevitable patterns, precluding any possibilities for future change. Within this overall narrative structure, Nicol's protagonists inhabit his novel as archetypal figures, embodying various stereotypes, rather than opening our minds to the potential for new ways of being.

11. Devaney states: "Given that we have only ever had access to the past through texts about the past (and through memories [which are expressed in the form of narratives]) [Nancy J.] Peterson's suggestion that "a historical position in postmodern culture necessitates the recognition that history is a text composed of competing and conflicting representations and meanings" ... is superfluous ... since historical works ... have never pretended to be anything other than 'texts about the past' " (1997: 141).

12. Brink makes Thando, for instance, utter patronizing banalities as if they are expressions of deep wisdom: "The country has had many courageous women, black and white. ... We need them in the past and we need them now" (254); "The woman has spoken. And she is right" (256).

13. As examples of this, Zipes cites fairy tales such as "Beauty and the Beast", which excluded or denigrated the bourgeoisie and affirmed or legitimized the values of the aristocracy (8-9).

14. According to Jung, the shadow represents our dark side: that which we repress or refuse to acknowledge about ourselves. We can avoid our shadow as long as we externalise everything that is negative, seeing it as something as distinct from us. But only

by acknowledging our shadow can we attain self-knowledge, maturity and creative potential (Jung, 1959: 20).

15. Of course, as we have already seen, Barthes himself endorses pleasure for specific ideological reasons. Nonetheless, this does not detract from the essential validity of his point.

16. Brink's image of his texts as maps has ironic implications when one considers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of a map, to which they ascribe multiplicitous, open-ended qualities (1988: 8, 12). Although Brink views his texts in this light, in actuality, they are closer to Deleuze and Guattari's image of a tracing (which they relate to their arborescent model) which fixes and stabilises (12-13).

17. One such example is Rian Malan's My Traitor's Heart (1991), an orgy of white South African angst and paranoia.

18. Antjie Krog, who covered the TRC hearings as a journalist, explores this aspect in her book on the Truth Commission, The Country of My Skull (1999).

19. The individual anguish and the moral dilemmas that reconciliation entails are suggested in Anne Michael's Fugitive Pieces (1996), in which the central character, a Jewish man whose family was wiped out in the Holocaust, asks "Who can forgive on behalf of the dead?" (128).

20. In an essay on postmodernism in South African fiction, Brink uses this aspect as a starting point for his discussion on postmodern fictional strategies, emphasising the way in which various postmodernist South African novels have set out to subvert existing orthodoxies (1997b: 485-486).

21. This assumption is reinforced in part by writers such as Marquez's and Alejo Carpentier's definitions of magical realism as an essentially Latin American phenomenon. "Our world is baroque," Carpentier declares, "and the description of a baroque world is necessarily baroque" (1995: 105-106). As Gerald Martin points out, for non-Latin Americans this can result in the notion that the main purpose of works such as One Hundred Years of Solitude is to celebrate the extraordinary nature of the Latin American reality. Consequently they tend to regard magical realism as dealing with somewhere else: separated from and contrasting with their own drearily familiar surroundings (1989: 181).

22. See, for example, Brink's critical essays, "Reinventing a Continent" and "Reflections on Literature and History" in Reinventing a Continent (1996b) and "South Africa: Postmodernism in Afrikaans and English Literature" (1997b).

23. One exception is his most recent work, Rights of Desire (2000).

24. The new South African coat of arms provides another instance of the way in which the Khoisan peoples have been cast as symbolic guardians of the African heritage--proving that this type of mythologising is by no means restricted to members of white communities.

25. As we have already seen, The Folly suffers from similar shortcomings.

26. In his comments on Marquez and Kundera, Jacobson seems to overlook the meaning that the fantastic can possess on this subliminal, imaginative level.

27. Barry Smit, for one, describes A Dry White Season as "bland, flat, [and] well-meaning" (1993: 10).

28. This is endorsed by Ethel Robinson, who states, in a review of Imaginings of Sand: "We cannot expect the poignancy and power of A Dry White Season, sparked by the political struggle that, ironically, brought out the best in Brink and other South African writers" (1996: 8).

In fact, Robinson could also be referring to Hope in this regard, for the latter's novels, stories and travelogues which deal with South Africa during apartheid--or, like Moscow! Moscow! (1990), have that particular situation as its overarching context--are far more interesting than any of his other writings.

CONCLUSION

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On the basis of the preceding five chapters, two findings emerge. Firstly, the fantastic as a literary mode is able to investigate and illuminate aspects of the South African experience, both individual and collective, in a striking and original way that other, more realistic approaches in this country's English-language fiction have proved incapable of.

Secondly, however, it is, equally clear that it would be tendentious to prescribe the fantastic as a ready-made solution to the problems that beset literary culture in South Africa. For one thing, as the more recent fiction of Brink clearly illustrates, the fantastic is a form that is not suited to all comers. In fact, when the question arises why South African writers in English have not made more use of this approach, it is not only specific aspects of their country's political and cultural situation that have inhibited them, but also the fact that, as has been pointed out in the course of this study, the fantastic requires far more complicated forms of engagement, and, indeed, degrees of skill, from writers than the artistically restricted, relatively imaginatively undemanding realism espoused by many South African authors in the past.¹ The work of Ivan Vladislavic provides one instance of this. His fiction is distinctive partly because of the very fact that what he attempts is so hard to emulate. Its surreal postmodern play, as well as its verbal and imaginative dexterity, requires a quite special type of creative poise and sophistication. Likewise, the type of insights that Christopher Hope brings to bear on the South Africa of the 1950s and 1960s necessitate a specific quality of

imaginative perception: an ability to look below the surface and see peculiar and unexpected dimensions to reality, to find the comedy within the terrible tragedy of apartheid--and to relish it.

Further to this, the fantastic is difficult because it constitutes a kind of tightrope from which the unwary, particularly the overly eager, can easily slip and fall. An elaborate balancing act--always elusive in practice and elusive in definition--needs to be maintained between the real and the non-real. Lucky's imaginary world provides a vivid illustration of how the fantastic simultaneously "flies away" from and interacts with our reality. Despite the way in which it departs from the real--or at least, established notions of it--the fantastic also needs to remain in touch with the latter, speaking to it without constraining the free-floating qualities that form an essential part of its nature. Yet while the power of fantastical images lies in the way in which they transcend easy definition and containment, this can just as readily result in their losing their resonance, becoming instead sterile flights of fancy. As some of Brink's fiction in the previous chapter makes clear, the fantastic can easily slip loose from our reality, sliding into forms that ignore or negate essential aspects of our experience.

There are a number of reasons why it is impossible to assert confidently that we have shifted, post-1994, into an era of greater scope and creative possibility, enabling greater space

for the fantastic as literary response. One is, obviously, that too little time has passed to give a clear sense of the shifts that have taken place. But apart from this, there are other factors to be taken into consideration. To all appearances, tendencies in the international literary sphere seem to indicate that the highly influential magical realist wave--which, we have observed, provided a significant impetus for some South African works of fantasy--has passed its peak. The nature of the fiction produced by some of the most prominent writers whose work has been described as magical realist (or, at the least, containing elements of the latter mode) during the bulk of the last decade seems to bear this out. Several of these authors are making increased use of realism, while others seem to be running out of imaginative energy. At times, their work has a repetitive or even imitative quality.

An instance of the former case is Mario Vargas Llosa, whose most recent novel, The Goat's Party (2000), has been hailed not only as his most impressive work but also as one of the best Latin American novels ever written.² In contrast to some of his earlier novels, Llosa declares that in this work, a fictionalised treatment of the career of the dictator of the Dominican Republic, Rafael Leonidas Trujillo, he took great care to make sure that everything it describes "could" have taken place (Gallagher, 2000: 23).

There is also the case of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, who, in his most recent book, News of a Kidnapping (1997), examines events

in Colombia primarily from a factual, journalistic perspective. The text deals with the abductions of the wives and family members of prominent politicians carried out by the druglord Pablo Escobar, in response to the proposed extradition of Colombian drug dealers. (Prior to this, Marquez's most realistic novel was In Evil Hour (1979).) His return to realistic techniques in this latter work could be indicative of a sense that at times it is more useful to make use of realism despite the way in which, as he asserts, it offers a circumscribed view of reality, in order to focus closely on specific political issues.

On the other hand, Ben Okri's sequels to The Famished Road, Songs of Enchantment (1993) and Infinite Riches (1998), are trapped in a replay of the elements that made this initial work so inspiring. Similarly, Salman Rushdie's last few books, The Moor's Last Sigh (1994) and, even more markedly, The Ground Beneath Her Feet (1999) are not nearly as accomplished as their predecessors. Like Rushdie's earlier books, his more recent works are large, meandering novels, but unlike the former, they seem headed on a ramble that does not, in the end, lead us anywhere nearly as remarkable. There is also the fact that, nowhere else in her fiction has Isabelle Allende been able to use the supernatural as powerfully as she did in her first novel, The House of Spirits (1985). On the other hand, many have found her autobiographical work, Paula (1997), an account of her own exile and her daughter's death, particularly moving. Perhaps she, too, may be inclining away from the fantastic, for her latest book, Daughter

of Fortune (2000), adheres to a realistic mode.

All this is, of course, no more than a tentative sketch of the careers of a few authors. But it does seem to suggest a decline in magical realism as a presence on the world literary stage. It may be that Andre Brink's return to a predominantly realistic approach in Rights of Desire is partly a result of a recognition of this. Yet of course this does not mean that no good fiction incorporating non-realistic elements has been produced in the last ten years. The work of writers such as Margaret Atwood, A.S. Byatt, Louise Edrich, Arundhati Roy and a range of others testifies to this. Atwood's latest novel, The Blind Assassin (2000), the winner of last year's Booker Prize, which incorporates fragments from science fiction stories and plays with the notions of truth and illusion, illustrates that the fantastic remains very much in evidence in various prominent works of contemporary fiction.

While the vogue for magical realism may have faded, it is clear that there is still very definitely a need for the fantastic in contemporary literature. This accounts, in part, for the success of J.K. Rowlings's Harry Potter books among both adults and children.³ These novels are entertaining, but not necessarily outstanding, works of children's fantasy. While it is easy to attribute the huge demand for Rowlings's work in part to hype, this does not rule out the possibility that the popularity of the Harry Potter series also arises from a deep-seated sense that the fantastic is lacking not only in current children's literature,

but also in adult fiction. The ongoing yearning for the ways in which the fantastic can interact with our reality and the imaginatively enhanced modes of perception it makes available remain a wide-spread reaction to the despiritualised, highly rationalised nature of contemporary urban societies. The perception of such things, as well as the needs it generates, can hardly be less felt in South Africa today. That much is certain.

But prospects for the fantastic in this country's literature are obviously uncertain. While the outlook for the fantastic still seems promising enough in the light of international literary trends, it would appear that the current state of South African fiction presents particular obstacles to the growth of the fantastic in this country. Although there is a crucial need for new imaginative registers that would be appropriate to a post-apartheid context (some of which are suggested in Vladislavic's Propaganda by Monuments) it is doubtful, at least for the foreseeable future, that many writers in English will respond to this need. The work of authors such as Hope, Vladislavic, Zakes Mda and Anne Landsman undoubtedly serves as examples of the imaginative possibilities generated by the fantastic, and the ways in which it offers particularly rich and compelling means of reflecting on the past and exploring present realities. It will, however, take more than those few works to remedy the crucial lack of imaginative range and vitality that lies at the heart of much of this literature. It has been the implication of this thesis that if writers explored the fantastic aesthetic more fully, this might generate a trickle-down effect that could have

the potential to contribute gradually towards more imaginatively liberated ways of apprehending and responding to the particular situation that we, as South Africans, inhabit. But at this stage relatively few writers in English seem interested in investigating this option. No one, in any case, is in a position to be certain in her or his conjectures about the future of the fantastic in South Africa.

There are also the current cultural, intellectual and material conditions in South African society, which make the prospects for the development of the fantastic--or any other significant literary approaches, for that matter--in this country's literature seem tenuous, at best. As one example of this, we could consider David Lurie in J.M. Coetzee's Disgrace, once a professor of Modern Languages at the University of Cape Town, now "since Classics and Modern Languages were closed down as part of the great rationalization, adjunct professor of communications" at the Cape Technical University (1999: 3). Lurie's situation is indicative of the direction in which tertiary level education in South Africa would seem to be tending. The fact that universities have responded to lack of funds and dwindling student numbers by becoming more market-driven, denigrating the arts because they cannot be justified as commercially viable, reflects the increasingly diminishing significance of the cultural and the intellectual spheres within our society as a whole. The fact that we have been and still are distanced, in certain respects, from international cultural and intellectual developments has, of course, only contributed to this malaise.

In addition to this, it has become far harder in the last decade for South African writers to find a market and to be marketed, thereby actively discouraging the growth of new, vibrant works of literature. As has been noted in the Introduction, the publishing industry is depressed, particularly in respect of indigenous literatures. All the evidence would suggest that the decline in sales of African and South African literature (in both English and Afrikaans) is both a contributory factor and a product of this. In consequence, the section allocated to South African and African literature in local bookshops has dwindled drastically in the recent years. While fiction and non-fiction decrease in significance, video culture is burgeoning, as is the computer industry.

The above tendencies are, of course, not just a South African phenomenon. We live in an age that has increasingly come to be dominated by the visual and the electronic rather than the literary.⁴ Lurie, for example, terms his students the "postliterate" (32) generation. But the differences between the South African cultural and intellectual contexts and those of, say, the United States and Britain far outweigh the similarities. In the latter societies there is, above all, a firmly established literary infrastructure that makes it far easier for a culture of reading to be sustained--and even encouraged--and which also allows for the reception and widespread dissemination of new literary approaches. For example, literary reviews feature prominently in established newspapers and journals. There are publications devoted entirely to books and book reviews, while

book programmes feature on radio and television and effective, sophisticated forms of marketing encourage the promotion of new books.⁵ In contrast to South Africa, there is a relatively large book-buying public in the above countries.⁶ Books are, comparatively, far cheaper and more readily available than they are here, and there is no comparison between our local bookshops, with their limited stocks of books and stores the size of Barnes and Noble in the United States or Waterstones in England, for example.

Our lack of an adequate literary infrastructure is clearly evident in the media. For instance, in the Mail & Guardian, the emphasis has been increasingly on information technology and television programmes, less on book reviews. The latter's Review of Books supplement used to appear once a month, featuring fairly substantial reviews of interesting books. The last edition appeared in November 1995. Four years later, in December 1999, a very different type of book supplement appeared in the Mail & Guardian, which contained little more than information about a range of books for prospective Christmas shoppers. There were numerous photographs of brightly coloured book covers, and thumbnail sketches of the books themselves. A similar supplement, entitled 101 Books for Christmas, appeared in November last year. Books also receive minimal attention in other newspapers. (The Sunday Times publishes only one book review a week.) Moreover, one journal that offered particularly comprehensive coverage of current South African literature, the Southern African Review of Books, which used to be obtainable bi-monthly, has long since

ceased publication. The last SAROB periodical appeared in November/December 1996. Thereafter, it appeared far more sporadically on the internet and is now defunct.

These trends in the media both reinforce and testify to the widespread lack of interest in new fiction. This, combined with the economic downswing in which we are caught, has given rise to a situation in which increasingly expensive books are being purchased by an extremely small number of South Africans.⁷ All the above outlined factors make it seem that the possibilities for the evolution--and the promotion--of a vibrant, imaginatively charged literary culture in this country have declined, rather than improved, since the demise of apartheid.

Yet while the fantastic is beset by a range of powerful constraining factors, this does not mean that it has no significance in South African literature. To start with, this country has other literatures within which this mode features far more prominently than in fiction in English. At the very least, these could serve as a reminder to writers of novels and stories in English of the world of possibilities that this approach can lead to. As we have seen, the fantastic represents an important aspect of Afrikaans literature, but it plays an even more significant part--in the form of the supernatural and the spiritual--within those South African oral narratives that convey traditional ways of seeing.⁸ In such accounts, the real possesses a numinous, otherworldly dimension. For some South Africans, this remains a deeply meaningful way of apprehending

their situation and for many others, it continues to colour their intuitive, imaginative responses to their reality, irrespective of whether or not, at a rational level, they acknowledge the validity of such perceptions. Only a few writers, such as Brink, Mda and Etienne Van Heerden, have attempted to incorporate this aspect of the oral into their fiction--and not always entirely successfully, whether in Van Heerden's case or, as we have seen, in Brink's.' All the same, it is highly likely that the oral will continue, in one or other degree, to inspire writers seeking to create uniquely South African forms of the fantastic. Over and above this, the oral tradition, although considerably diminished and eroded, persists as an integral, although often inadequately acknowledged, part of South African literature, keeping the potential for the mystical and the magical alive in the imaginations of a range of South Africans.

Further to this, it should be borne in mind that there is endless scope (almost by definition, one might say) for the fantastic in literary responses to our current situation. Political conditions may have changed, but as Hope and Vladislavic both emphasise, the South African reality continues to incorporate large amounts of the absurd and the bizarre. A few years ago, the former novelist remarked that "[t]he richness of the comedy in South African life never ceases, never fails" (Appendix A: 309), while Vladislavic recently asserted that "[t]he grotesque--the OED says 'comically or repulsively distorted'--is a South African speciality" (App. B: 327). There are many examples that validate these observations. One instance is the recent alliance of the National

and the Democratic Parties, the former once the home of Afrikaner Nationalism and the latter purportedly the custodian of liberal values, a political marriage which has a farcical quality that would not make it seem out of place in the pages of a Hope novel. Also, there are the excesses on the part of various government officials and civil servants, which sometimes take on proportions that seem simultaneously shocking and ludicrous. For example, some months ago the Sunday Times ran a story about how Lionel Mtshali, the premier of KwaZulu-Natal, commandeered a jet to fly four times a week back and forth from his house in Durban to the governmental seat in Ulundi, a distance of 280 km each way, costing taxpayers R12 000 minimum per trip.¹⁰ Moreover, political events periodically seem to unfold in a way that gives a warped, astounding edge to the South African reality. In his idiosyncratic, politically hazardous response to the AIDS pandemic, President Thabo Mbeki claimed that a virus and a syndrome were two utterly different phenomena, and that the former could not cause the latter. But despite what was, presumably, an attempt on the part of Mbeki to avoid having to confront the AIDS crisis head-on, the latter made its presence felt in top-level governmental circles shortly afterwards. The furore following Mbeki's pronouncements had not yet faded away when the presidential spokesperson, Parks Mankahlana, died, presumably from AIDS, since government officials have refused to disclose the nature of the illness that caused his death.

We certainly need more writers with an eye for the fantastic to do justice to the strangenesses and the lunacies that constitute

an integral part of life in present-day South Africa. Vladislavic's comment is, in fact, reminiscent of Marquez's claim that the Latin American reality "is all out of proportion" (Mendoza and Marquez, 1983: 35) and therefore calls for a literary approach that incorporates the irrational and the extraordinary.

On another level, there is the ambivalence of the current South African situation--the mixture of innovation, creative energy, disintegration and despair that Vladislavic touches on in Propaganda by Monuments. He comments on Johannesburg:

Of course, where one person sees initiative and ingenuity, another sees clutter and decay. Or the same person sees one thing and now another. ... I suppose perspectives will always clash in a city (and a society) of extremes. Part of what makes South Africa interesting is that it isn't one thing or another (App. B: 320).

The fantastic continues to offer, one would think, some particularly apt ways of apprehending and engaging with this aspect of the post-apartheid South Africa.

Finally, and most important of all, there is the special potency that the fantastic possesses. This arises, as we have seen, from its refusal to be bound by the imaginative constraints to which many writers remain subject, and its ability to work its transformative magic on the context with which it engages. In the

preceding chapters, we have observed that Hope's and Vladislavic's work bears witness to some of the darkest and dreariest aspects of this country's reality, past and present. The former dwells on the deadly dull and deeply oppressive nature of the apartheid era, while predominant in the latter's South Africa are images of bland suburbia inhabited by stultifyingly tedious white South Africans, apocalyptic vistas of destruction or scenes of turbulence and decay. Yet these qualities ultimately serve to intensify the manic comic energies and the outrageous imaginative play that take place through their use of the fantastic. Through their fabulous recreations of this country, they triumph symbolically over the most menacing, deadening aspects of life in the latter. While this constitutes an individual artistic triumph, it is also attributable to the triumph of the mode of the fantastic itself and all that it, at best, allows. On the one hand, Brink succumbs to many of the forces that still hold the South African imagination captive, yet on the other, Hope's and Vladislavic's achievement lies in the way in which, despite the confines of their literary context and the images of South Africa in which they deal, they use those very images as a means of finding their own ways to the freedoms of the carnival.

When T.E. Apter tells us that "[f]antasy provides a point of vantage from which we are shown the gaps in our knowledge" (1982: 7) he could be referring specifically to the way in which Hope's and Vladislavic's fantastic elements--and even, sometimes, Brink's--make us aware of vital areas that are missing from the

South African literary imagination. "Therein lies the social significance of art"; C.G. Jung declares: "it is constantly at work educating the spirit of the age, conjuring up the forms in which the age is most lacking" (1971: 82). The particular importance of the use of the fantastic in the work of writers such as my chosen three lies in the way in which it offers access to those areas of experience with which more realistic South African fiction has not been able to engage adequately. Such has been the fundamental argument of this thesis. Their use of the fantastic promises, if not the kind of psychic integration which critics such as Ursula K. Le Guin and Bruno Bettelheim claim for the mode, at the very least a spectrum of human possibilities which, often for understandable reasons, but also, at times, as a result of artistic and imaginative inadequacies, have been diminished and scanted.

When we consider, firstly, the particular nature of the reality that we, as South Africans, inhabit and next, the imaginative limitations that still characterise much of our country's fiction, we cannot but be convinced that we stand in as much need as ever of those dimensions--as high as they might be deep--which the fantastic is uniquely equipped to deliver.

Notes

1. It goes without saying that there are many popular, trivial works of fantasy--by writers such as Anne McCaffrey or Julian May--to which this statement would not apply. But, as has been reiterated in this study, producing convincing fantastic fiction is not a simple matter.

2. See David Gallagher's review of this novel in the Times Literary Supplement (2000). The book has not yet been translated into English, and its Spanish title is La Fiesta del Chivo.

3. The first book in the series, Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone appeared in 1997, and has subsequently been followed by three more.

4. Of course, the implications of this have been widely discussed. In A is for Ox (1995), for instance, Barry Sanders argues that the lack of literacy, not only at a written, but also, importantly, at an oral level--as a result of overly heavy exposure to television--has a highly damaging effect on children's psychological and emotional development.

5. Despite the way in which it usually tends to discourage reading, television can occasionally have the opposite effect. For example, in the United States, popular television personality Oprah Winfrey has publicised her book club list, thereby encouraging people to read more new fiction, and also, to read more widely. While not all the books endorsed by Winfrey are necessarily impressive works of literature, she has succeeded in making the public far more aware of work by African-American and Caribbean authors.

6. The limited importance attached to fiction in South African society is evident in the November 2000 Mail & Guardian guide to recently published books. Out of the 12 page supplement, less than two pages were dedicated to adult fiction, while crime fiction, poetry and children's literature received half a page each. If this and the previous book supplement in the Mail & Guardian are anything to go by, South Africans seem more interested in non-fiction (particularly that which reinforces their prejudices) than fiction. And, within the sphere of fiction, banal, stereotypical novels are certainly preferred to the more challenging kind.

7. This deduction is based on general observation and commentary. The limited range of novels currently available at the Cape Town branches of the Exclusives Booksellers chain, for instance, is certainly indicative of a sense that, under present conditions, the sale of fiction is not particularly profitable.

8. For example, according to traditional Xhosa belief, the deep pools in rivers are inhabited by a range of supernatural beings and creatures, such as abantu basemlanjeni, the river people, and the inkanyamba, the tornado spirit that takes the form of a

snake.

9. Of the three writers, Mda's use of the oral is the most effective. Van Heerden's Kikuyu (1998) has a "mythological" quality to it (to use the former's own phrase), which, he claims springs in part from the stories he heard from a family servant when he was a child (de Waal: 1998: 31). Unfortunately, as in Brink's novels, the fantastical elements that draw on the oral in Van Heerden's work are not sufficiently imbued with life. Despite some of its intriguing features, a sense of flatness and monotony hangs over Kikuyu.

9. The article, by Ranjeni Munusamy, appeared as the front page story in the Sunday Times (November 5, 2000) and was entitled "Mr Gravy Plane: Fury at Premier's Extravagant Trips to His Office in Luxury Jet." The fanciful, comic quality of the verbal play in this caption is worth noting, particularly in the light of the above discussion.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTOPHER HOPE, CAPE TOWN, JULY 1998

(Published in 1998 in The English Academy Review 15.)

University of Cape Town

Felicity Wood: When one examines texts like Learning to Fly, Black Swan and A Separate Development, they seem very different from what was going on in a lot of South African literature in English at that time. South African literature in English tended to favour realism and it also tended to take itself very seriously, while I find your writing far freer, more irreverent and bizarre. There's a lot of black humour. So, to start off, did you feel conscious of the difference between your own writing in those novels and stories and the kind of writing that was happening at that point in South African literature in English?

Christopher Hope: Yes, I think one was always aware there was a strain of realism about it. Yes, there was a kind of earnestness about things and I don't know to what degree I reacted against it, but I was certainly very aware of it. I also knew that the sorts of things I liked to read in South Africa would be people who gave me a kick, people like Bosman, for instance. I also thought that much more apparent in the darkness of things that were happening was a kind of manic humour, and one wanted to in a sense to pay tribute to that. It just seemed to me much more useful, certainly more interesting because it was so terribly funny. I don't know if people always understood or understand this, but this more or less was and is still my feeling about these things. So I don't know that I wrote with any particular programme in mind, but certainly I was very aware of what was being done and how--in my terms--earnest it was, yes, earnest is perhaps the politest way I could put it.

FW: Could you perhaps talk a bit more about your use of humour?

CH: I think I once said that I suppose what was and is one of the great books out of South Africa is Cry, the Beloved Country. Somebody in A Separate Development says he's been reading Cry, the Beloved Country--

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FW: Yes, one of the policemen and he says it made him cry.

CH: No--there wasn't a tear to be seen. It has always seemed to me that weeping never did very much good. It was perhaps more useful to point to the absurdities of things and to almost defiantly relish those and that might be more effective somehow. Certainly in my own terms as a writer, I think one can only deal out of that experience whatever it is that is given to him and out of my experience that seemed to carry better and further. I think I've always felt that. I felt it then and I feel it now. I think that strain of unreality, that capacity for comedy bubbling up out of the most unexpected places--often very dark and even violent comedy-- but nonetheless it seems to me it is something that is in the marrow of whatever the South African experience is. It's a very odd thing, because of course inevitably it lays you open to charges of either frivolity or cynicism or a need or a wish to see humour where only sadness reigns. The question that I ask myself is what is to be done about it, you see. Well, my books are, I suppose, my answer to the question I put myself. They are what is to be done about it.

FW: To comment further on what you've just said, I recall that in an interview in 1989 you described South Africa as a "surreal and curious nightmare", which "eludes ... conventional descriptions" (Joffe, 1989: 98).

CH: Yes. I also compare it to an asylum where the inmates have taken over but they've had their white coats on for so long that we can't tell the difference any longer. All these remarks predated the great change, but there again, you know, I've said it before and I'll say it again: it seems to me the more things change, the more they seem to stay the same. There is something endemic in the Southern African psyche--if one could use those terms--which will keep disclosing itself in these wild and unexpected ways. When I hear or read of the latest revelations out of the Truth Commission, again I'm afraid my impulse is not shock and horror. My impulse is to recognise something that seems to me has always been there, a mixture of terror and comedy.

FW: In Kruger's Alp you use more overtly fantastical qualities than you do in a lot of your other writing--the whole dream structure and strange meetings, the quite visionary quality. What made you decide to write in this way and would you like to try writing like that again?

CH: I suppose I write each book as if it were my last. Not like the last, but as if I weren't going to write another one. I think that they're slightly different each time, but with Kruger's Alp one of the reasons why it has this underlying structure is that

among the other things I try to do is to follow quite carefully the pattern of Pilgrim's Progress. There's also the fact that I think there's always a relation of dream to reality or to detail, fixed detail whatever one writes, sometimes a little more, sometimes a little less. This book I'm writing at the moment is based very firmly on people that I've met in this small village in the south of France, but the longer I stick at it the more fantastical it becomes. That interests me very much because it's happening without my trying to do it, whereas I think with stories in say something like Learning to Fly, unreality is so powerfully present in almost everything one experienced, or if you like, reality was so deadly boring where it wasn't lethal that one really tried for other ways of being and other ways of writing. So I guess it depends on what the pressure is and where it's coming as to how one responds.

FW: I find many of the people you use in your novels interesting, because like Lucky and Ilse in Black Swan or Harry in A Separate Development, they're people that are on the margins. They don't exactly fit in and the fact that you've chosen to write from this perspective seems quite important.

CH: Well, yes, again I don't think it's a position that anybody chooses. But I do feel borderlands interest me more than centres. Being on the edge is something which if someone grew up as I did as this curiously labelled creature, a white semi-Irish half Catholic Southern African, it puts you at a considerable degree from what louder mouthed people call the centre of things. Those

are the sorts of people that generally spoke about normality and pragmatism, and things being where they were or how they were, and using words like "reality" a lot. These are words which owners tend to throw about. They're not words which come easily to the mouths of those who see things from a distance or from the edge, but I think really often that it's only on the edge that the more interesting things happen. People haven't the money or skill to protect themselves and so they reveal more of themselves. It's always more interesting to look at revelation than it is to look at certainty. I can't abide certainty, nor those with a sense of mission, nor those with a sense of their destination or destiny.

FW: Something you once said was that that you feel it's important to undermine the easy certainties on which societies rest (Joffe, 1989: 102). Would you say that is quite a key concern in your writing?

CH: Well, yes. I'm afraid I have a real problem with certainties. Certainly with the expression of certainties, because particularly in a society like this where nothing's ever been certain except that somebody's ripping off somebody else and the way in which we operate in this country is when someone doesn't understand what you mean you raise your voice and if that doesn't carry you raise it still further and if that doesn't carry you either lock them up or shoot them. You offer violence. This is a deeply violent society. Violence is a natural widespread reaction. You see it in everything from banking to sport, never

mind politics. One sees it as much now as one did then. It's a very remarkable thing. It's endemic in the language itself, the language of television, the language of radio, the language of the press. And it has behind it the implication of force and I'm allergic to those sorts of things. It just seems to me much more interesting and more useful to look at what is not certain, and not clear and not settled and in fact, where one can, to celebrate that and make notes of the sillinesses that people utter with such wonderful certainty, and to write them down and to print them.

FW: In those books you've written a lot of people end up in a situation in which there seems to be no way out. There is Harry in A Separate Development, for example, who ends up a cell. What interests me is what you do with a character like Lucky in Black Swan, because Lucky is able to have access to freedoms. Could you talk a bit about this?

CH: Yes, I think you're quite right. The way I see it, what Lucky does is not so much as to escape. Escapism is an unreal thing, it's not that. What Lucky possess is imagination and the form of imagination that he possesses is deeply subversive. It turns things on their heads. What Lucky wants to be is that which in South African terms is that most useless of creatures, a ballet dancer. What Lucky wants to do is to fly. What Lucky wants to do is to change, to transform things through the imagination and indeed that is what he does and it is for that, in a sense, that he gets into trouble. For that he's punished, but even at the end

it seems to me that it's the power of Lucky's transforming imagination and his capacity for subversion, above all, that frees him. Not accepting what he's told, indeed hearing more or less what he's told and then remaking it, reworking it in his own fashion, his own way. In a sense, he doesn't accept anything he's told because he will be neither saboteur nor bomber nor soldier nor good upstanding muscular South African, and yet what he wants is entirely modest. It's not particularly notable, but in the context of our country it's both misunderstood, dangerous, reprehensible--all the reasons for which one applauds the way Lucky is, and would like to see more people the way he is.

FW: Another thing that interested me a great deal is the way you deal with the left-wing establishment. We've got the student activists in "Hilton Hits Back" and "The Kugel", there's Jake Mphahlele in "Learning to Fly" and the armed struggle in Black Swan. Your average liberal or left-wing South African writer working during that time would certainly have tended to be far more respectful in their treatment of such figures and groupings.

CH: It seems to me there is no-one more intolerant than a liberal under a left-wing regime. I'm astonished at the way that well-known liberals, for instance, who spend their lives opposing conscription will consider it entirely proper and will go on record as saying that conscription for medics or lawyers or engineers or accountants, who will do their year or two in a kind of conscripted services is a good thing. And yes certainly, with left-wingers I mean any in a sense any wing, any badge, any

left-wingers I mean any in a sense any wing, any badge, any belief that puts ideas before individuals and ideals--worse still--before individuals seems to me to have within it the seeds of destruction. It's force by another name, and I think if there's one thing worse than those who wish to do you harm for malign reasons, it's those who wish to do you harm for the best of possible reasons, because on top of it they're unctuous. I've written a fair amount about the death camps in Poland, and one of the most striking things about Birkenau (if one goes there, because very few people who ever go to Auschwitz cross the road to the camps that remain next door) wasn't simply that the Nazis in those camps killed their prisoners, but on the rafters of the wooden barracks in Birkenau there are slogans like "cleanliness is hygienic", rather like "work breeds virtue". So people in those dreadful barracks were not only being done to death by their captors, they were also--God help them--being exhorted to lead better lives. I find that more intolerable almost than what went on there, so yes, I've pretty vehement reactions against that sort of thing. Truly I see very little difference when push comes to shove between right-wing ideologues and left-wing ideologues, creatures of another stripe perhaps, but brothers under the skin.

FW: How do you find yourself in the new South African society?

CH: I think rather as Jake Mphahlele says in "Learning to Fly": "You are the teachers who made us, we learnt from you. How could we do other?" Yes, I do I see uncanny resemblances, certainly in

whereas before it was done in the name of nationalism or something like that.

FW: A figure in one of your recent books that I find interesting is Mimi in Me, the Moon and Elvis Presley (1997), who is deputy mayor of a Karoo town. How would you see a person like that in relation to current power structures?

CH: Well I was reminded of Mimi the other day because I saw that there was a meeting or a symposium organised by women in this country on the vexed question of gender, and that one of the protests that came up in the meeting was that men weren't taking the question of gender seriously enough. Well, I have to say that the richness of the comedy in South African life never ever ceases, never fails. I thought of Mimi being handed the gender portfolio and asking the mayor why he didn't do it and he said he was a man. Gender was up to women and it sounds like a joke in fact, but of course it isn't. This is the painful thing for me sometimes--in the sense that I don't tell the jokes, the jokes are there to be told. This a country in which everything is founded, if it's not founded on race (which by and large it has been), it's founded on all sides of the ethnic divide on the belief so naturally assumed as to brook no argument that women cook, sew, bear children. One might put them into parliament, one might give them titles, one might organise committees but the pretence that anything other than the old order prevails is so absurd that one wouldn't have thought that one needn't point it out. Fortunately people point it out themselves by making the

sorts of statements they do, but it is still very, very remarkable.

FW: But not everyone notices it.

CH: No, it's an odd business and as I say with that sort of oddity I think one of the useful things writing can do is to celebrate it.

FW: So you would feel that essentially that over the years, from A Separate Development to now, is that you find yourself still focussing on the same sort of attitudes and qualities in South African life?

CH: Well, I'd certainly say I'm as struck now as I was then. I think it's a wonderfully strange place and this useful amnesia that Mimi can't get used to--this capacity to trumpet out on Monday something with utter certainty that we have a great respect for human life in this country or that we are putting women to the fore or racism is a thing of the past: all these easy slogans which we tend to trumpet out. How people can say these things and keep a straight face I find utterly astonishing. But what counts it seems to me in this country are the edicts, are the pronouncements. If you say it, that's fine, you know, that will do. I'm reminded that this is why I was so drawn to Russia in the old days. It was like this in the Soviet Union under the communist party. It didn't matter what was done, it was what was said that mattered and if you said it loudly enough

everybody else shut up. The real truth was told in the kitchens, the real truth was told in lowered voices amongst friends. Everyone knew what the real position was and this was the other remarkable thing about Russians--after 75 years of being force-fed the propaganda of equality, egalitarianism, internationalism in a country where not enough soap or shoes could be produced for its population, nobody believed it. And though people were treated like idiots, they didn't become idiots. It seemed to me the most wonderful thing that somehow people preserved their sanity, their ordinary sense of what was and what wasn't so. I always took great encouragement from that.

FW: I found your non-fiction White Boy Running and Moscow! Moscow! very interesting because they seemed to link up so much with what was going on in texts like A Separate Development, Black Swan and Learning to Fly. Do you see much of a distinction existing between your fiction and your non-fiction, or do you see them very flowing into each other?

CH: It's a good question. I always think of Bruce Chatwin--his novels always read like travel books and his travel books always read like novels and you could never tell which he was better at. Increasingly I have to say yes, I do think that. Now I seem to write more and more non-fiction. If I'm writing about Yugoslavia--ex Yugoslavia--as I have been doing, or as at the moment I'm writing about this little village in France where I live, I'm writing non-fiction. That's what it will appear as and that's what I'll publish it as, but whether anybody's going to believe

this to be non-fiction I don't know. So yes, I do see a useful confusion between the two.

FW: Could you comment on your own position as someone who's left South Africa and has been writing outside South Africa? How do you think that affects the way you see the country and the way you relate to it?

CH: Oh, I think it affects it enormously. I think it's always difficult if you go away from a place which either infuriates you or nourishes you or both, but equally I said somewhere, I think in White Boy Running, that I was homesick before I even left home. So being away is just another form of coming to terms with that. So I have never emigrated or consider myself to be anything other than a South African writer who lives abroad, but in our society I lived abroad when I lived here. So if one has to be uncomfortable, one may as well at least be uncomfortable on a larger scale or a larger stage.

FW: You mentioned Bruce Chatwin. I wonder, could you mention a few writers that you feel are important to you?

CH: They would invariably be either people like Chatwin who went off from where they were and looked hard at somewhere else or they would be people like Jorge Luis Borges who because of his blindness and his strangeness saw Argentina either as a model for the world or the world as a model for Argentina. I used to have an Argentinian friend, a novelist, she used to say that most

people are descended from something. She said look at the Mexicans, they're descended from the Aztecs and look at other South Americans, they could say they're descended from the Incas, but Argentinians are descended from ships, which I've always rather liked. So there's always to me been enormous pleasure in reading Borges. By the same token, someone like Vladimir Nabokov would be another. Nabokov is so interesting because--what was he in the end? I suspect in the end he was a Russian novelist, but he was a Russian novelist who thought long and hard about what it was to become an American and wrote what Christopher Isherwood called perhaps one of the best American travel books in Lolita. Nabokov appeals to me hugely not only because of the magical qualities in the novels but because of the things like Speak, Memory. There're two key moments in Speak, Memory for me, among many. There's a moment where he describes the revolution in St Petersburg and he remembers the day that the revolution was now unstoppable. He describes how their servant served the family lunch, then put on his coat and went outside and never came back. Then at some other point in the memoir Nabokov remembers his telephone number in St Petersburg and he thinks: what would happen if I phoned that number? Who would answer? This strange idea that perhaps there was the other Nabokov, some other Nabokov, living that other life, had this terrible reality of the revolution not intervened, as if somehow one goes on, another part of one, rather like a series of doppelgangers, and they go on living these lives which you now cannot live but they continue to live. I must say that those things move me very much, probably because of the place out of which I come and the sort of writer

that I am. I find them both very moving and very consoling, in a curious way, because others have seen them. I'd add to that rather bizarre concoction of writers even someone like Somerset Maugham, again because Maugham was born French, aspired to be British and travelled incessantly and then made what he could of the material that came to hand in the places he visited. He looked very hard at his fellow countrymen too. He took the view that I think Gore Vidal expresses very well, and that is the first duty of a patriot is to be extremely rude about his country.

FW: Now, could you tell me about South African writers whose work you find striking?

CH: Well, I mentioned Bosman. I go back to Bosman again and again because he always makes me laugh. He's wonderfully sly and his apparent ingenuousness is very very craftily done in the very best sense of that word. He's a clever writer but above all, he takes the piss, you see, and one is immensely cheered by that. It's a very rare thing. There's Campbell of course, despite Campbell's last incarnation as the irritable fascist in Portugal, there still are wonderful things in lots of his verse and I rather like his satire. He succeeded in offending people, and that's always a good thing. I look for oddities and Njabulo Ndebele's Fools and Other Stories I really enjoy, because I thought what we have coming from it was a way of looking that was neither social realism nor moral stricture and one welcomes that. It was a great relief and I felt the same about Ahmed Essop, The

Hajji and Other Stories and The Emperor. Again, those are sorts of things that appeal to me because they cover things obliquely and perhaps because they represent a minority view too--not mainstream stuff.

FW: The South African situation was and continues to be so surreal, but I find it interesting that very few South African writers have picked up on this in their work--or chosen to see this.

CH: I agree with you. I find it extraordinary.

FW: Have you any ideas why this should be like this?

CH: No I don't. I would attempt to say I'm as bewildered as anybody else. I find it very strange--except what I would say there has always been among South Africans this astonishing unwillingness to look at what is right in front of their noses. You see this in a number of ways. If you have a political programme, you adopt it from abroad with variations. If you are to impress your friends or to convince yourself that what you are doing has made the grade, it needs some form of foreign approval in order to do it. There is a continuous looking elsewhere and I think I've touched on that in other things I've written about this country. Reality exists somewhere else. What is close to us or in front of us is either embarrassing or second-rate and certainly not the sort of stuff out of which one could make capital L literature or capital A art. It seems to me a mixture

of inferiority complex and superiority complex because South Africans like to put out rather loudly how very good they are at everything. Yet this seems to be combined with an extraordinary sense of inferiority when it comes to utilising one's own stuff, dealing with one's own bits and pieces.

FW: I'd like to return to that earlier point of describing South African society as being like an asylum in which you couldn't tell the warders from the inmates. Do you think there now there are ways out of the asylum or do you think that we always carry a lot of the asylum around within us?

CH: Yes, I would like to think there are ways out. I imagine anybody would, but if somebody asked me what way there might be, I would say that I'm a writer. I don't do anything else. I would answer that I think it was Cicero who said when he was asked what he would do about the excesses of the Roman Empire, he said that he would purify the language. I think to examine very carefully what people say and how they say it and to look for plain speaking wherever one can is a far more civil, civilised way of proceeding than the way we have. Language and the use of it in this country is a weapon. It's a form of ammunition, it's a form of warfare, it's a form of propaganda, and it has been so for a very long time. It's a way of obliging other people to do as you say or to do as they say. I don't know that things have altered very much in that regard and I don't know how else one reaches a kind of useful ordinariness or healthiness except by speaking plainly between one another.

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW WITH IVAN VLADISLAVIC, JOHANNESBURG, SEPTEMBER 2000

University of Cape Town

Felicity Wood: How do you feel your position as a white English-speaking South African has influenced the nature of your writing?

Ivan Vladislavic: It is easier for me to reflect on the consequences of being "white" than being "English-speaking". I am very much a child of apartheid: I started school two years after the Sharpeville massacre and finished two years before the Soweto uprising. I am sure that being "white" shaped every aspect of my identity under apartheid and continues to do so now. To the extent that writing is implicated in this identity and my place in this society, being "white" affects everything.

Being "English-speaking"--and this is always constructed in relation to "Afrikaans-speaking", rather than, say, "Zulu-speaking"--is a more slippery notion. As a child I accepted these categories fairly uncritically. There were two kinds of white South Africans: Afrikaners, who spoke Afrikaans, and the rest of us, who spoke English and were superior. Yet Afrikaans was the dominant language in Pretoria, where I grew up, and I was exposed to the language every day. I had Afrikaans-speaking relatives and friends. So there was not quite the social distance that the English/ Afrikaans divide sometimes implied.

Later the difference in kind between the two supposed categories became apparent to me. In the case of the "Afrikaners", people with diverse national and cultural backgrounds had been subsumed into a new ethnic identity, of which the Afrikaans language was one aspect. However, there were also (coloured) Afrikaans-speakers who were not Afrikaners. In the case of the "English-speakers", there was no common identity

at all; people with different cultural and other affiliations were simply grouped according to the language they spoke. I was an "English-speaking South African" although a large part of my background was East European. Were the Portuguese "English-speaking South Africans"? Or the Italians? Or the Jews? The definition could be expanded and contracted. In its contracted form, it meant white South Africans with an English--or, more broadly, British--heritage. In its expanded form, it meant all the whites who were not Afrikaners. The two definitions served different practical or political purposes.

The fact that I write in English has significant implications, ranging from the expressive possibilities of the language itself and the literary tradition it positions me within, to practical matters, like publishing opportunities and readership. English has a contradictory status, very energetic and resilient, full of colour and beauty, but also voracious and destructive. It's a bit like a wild fire, consuming everything in its path and making a spectacle of itself. I sometimes wish I wrote in a less domineering, less thoroughly commercialised language, although I am sure this view must seem like an indulgence to someone who writes in, say, Venda.

FW: What is your own view of post-1994 South Africa and the role of writers within it?

IV: The new improved South Africa is like one of those jokes: "The doctor walks in and says, 'I have good news and bad news. What would you like first?'" I am delighted or depressed,

depending whether or not I get the good news or the bad news first. I suppose many South Africans have similarly ambivalent feelings.

Small things cheer me up. The way ordinary people have plugged the gaps in the public services, for instance. In the part of Johannesburg where I live people have recently begun installing telephone booths in their gardens, little shacks like Punch and Judy stalls, usually made of sheet metal painted white, with a counter that flaps down over the fence. The telephone is simply the household instrument at the end of an extension cord. Compared to the old ones managed by the Post Office, these ramshackle "public" telephones are models of efficiency: they always work, they're vandalproof, and no exact change is needed. Of course, where one person sees initiative and ingenuity, another sees clutter and decay. Or the same person sees one thing and now another. Innovations like the garden telephone service easily create the impression that the city is falling apart--and in some ways it is. I suppose perspectives will always clash in a city (and a society) of extremes. Part of what makes South Africa interesting is that it isn't one thing or the other.

This remains a shockingly brutal place. One of the big news stories this week: the Sasolburg farmer who killed one of his workers by dragging him behind his bakkie. How is it that this co-exists with "normality"? Last week I fetched a European friend who has spent a lot of time in South Africa from the airport, and as we were driving into the city he said: "When you look at this country from a distance it looks utterly hopeless. You always forget that normal life is going on too." In a solution of normal

life, bitter realities become palatable.

The role of writers? I take it you mean writers in my neck of the fictional woods. I like to think we play the usual important roles, imagining, interpreting, remembering, and so on. And no doubt for some people, to some extent, we do. Writing can be everything. But I'm afraid that for the society at large we are a pinch of salt.

FW: Do you feel that your writing has changed much in the last two decades, in terms of its nature and concerns?

IV: I am not sure what the "nature" of my writing is. I know that it arises from a more or less unconscious impulse and imperfectly fulfils some personal need. But I do not know what its essential characteristics are. Nothing fogs my brain more thoroughly than the question: "What kind of books do you write?" I always wish I could say "detective stories" or "historical romances" or some or other immediately accessible category. Instead I offer a vague falsehood--"comic novels about South Africa" or something equally unconvincing. The fact is that I am utterly at a loss in the face of this question. I cannot say properly whether the nature of my writing has changed.

As for its "concerns", I am probably on no less shaky ground, but somehow I feel able to answer with more authority that my concerns seem to have stayed fairly consistent. Perhaps I have just had more practice at answering the question: "What are your books about?" It seems to me that as I go along I am exploring the same issues more closely. Probably this is a way of saying

that my later work seems "better", and the questionably positive values come to mind: more complex, detailed, layered etc.

I must also say that I read my earlier work reluctantly. I read it out of the corner of my eye, so to speak, skimming over the surface to remind myself of what's there, but not wanting to plunge into the substance at all. So my evaluations are all a little suspect. My published work has a sort of twilight existence, deliberately repressed. From time to time I've been required to do readings from my earlier books and it always makes me feel extremely unreal, as if I was pretending to have written these texts. The psychology of it, perhaps, is that one writes on some level to be rid of things, to part with parts of one's self, and confronting these fictions again is like seeing one's image in a photograph album, wearing silly bell-bottoms or ridiculous sideburns.

FW: Your writing contains many non-realistic, fantastical features. Why have you opted for these rather than the realism that has dominated--and still continues to dominate--a great deal of South African literature in English?

When Missing Persons appeared at the end of the 1980s it was hailed as being dramatically different from much South African writing in English, which tended towards a straightforward, often deliberately restricted realism, frequently tending to take itself very seriously. To what extent were you aware of this difference? Would you say that your work represents a deliberate reaction against this type of fiction?

IV: In both your phrasings of this question the key thing seems to be the extent to which my writing style--defined as non-realist and fantastical, and presumably also not straightforward, not restricted and not inclined to take itself too seriously--was adopted deliberately, in opposition to other kinds of South African writing.

I think there was very little deliberate about it. When I began writing, it is possible that I was trying to be "different" in the way of a young artist. Yet even this sounds too programmatic and calculating. I think the style evolved in the course of writing (and reading) rather than being assumed. I imagine that it was more imitative than reactive, that I began to write "like" the writing I enjoyed, the books that appealed to me. And these were largely not typical realist texts. There's a set of affinities here, clustered around the impulse that makes me write in the first place, which I am obviously unable to separate out: presumably I liked "non-realist" writing because it appealed to my own sense of language and the world. The writing that provided the models included South African texts, some of Peter Wilhelm's stories, for instance, and some modern Afrikaans writing, which has often been less bound by realist convention.

There's something else: the idea of deliberately adopting a style in order to demonstrate an alternative suggests a view of communication through writing that doesn't chime with my experience of the activity. For me, writing is about doing what must be done, what suggests itself, what arises during the process. The effect that the result might have on the reader is

so far from what happens in the creative moment that the idea of "deliberately choosing" any element of the work seems like a half-truth.

I like "fantastical features", by the way. It sounds better than "fantasy", which tends to make people queasy.

FW: Do you think there are more possibilities for the fantastic in our current situation?

IV: I think there were more pressures on South African writers in the past to deal with socio-political issues, and there was a framework of radical theory and informal "policy" emanating from the liberation movement, the universities, the "alternative" art scene and so on, that supported a particular way of doing this. However, the impulse towards "realism" in South African literature in English probably arises elsewhere, in the particular British colonial tradition we have inherited, or in a conservative, provincial cultural world, rather than in this politicised environment. A diverse set of artistic expressions are sometimes conflated when we look back on the "resistance art" period. If one pages through copies of Staffrider, for instance, which I am particularly familiar with, or the books of the writers we used to call "the Staffrider generation", there is a great deal of work that is politically engaged, that documents or explores or challenges the social and political conditions of the day; but not much of it is what one would call "realist". Generally it does not have that technical polish that "realism" in art or literature presupposes. Even the more accomplished work

is often marked by the "non-realist" elements you talk about. Zakes Mda is an edifying example. Because Mda only emerged as a novelist in the 90s, he is often taken for a "new" emergent fantastical voice in South African writing. But as long ago as the 70s Mda was producing plays like We Shall Sing for the Fatherland, which prefigure his later fiction. I suspect that the bias towards "realist" or "fantastical" qualities has less to do with the political context than individual predilection; and that a highly charged context does not necessarily open or close possibilities for a particular kind of writing; but that this context does make it harder to distinguish between different kinds of writing by subsuming them all into overruling categories of political affiliation and so on. In other words, the overwhelmingly "political" categories of the past made it difficult to distinguish between varieties of realism, just as the overwhelmingly "apolitical" categories of the present make it difficult to distinguish between varieties of fantasy. I'm not sure that the writers now classified as "fantastical" and "magical realist" have any more in common than the writers once classified as "political" and "social realist".

FW: Could you mention some writers--South African and/ or international--who have influenced your work? In addition, more specifically, you say that Borges has been an important influence. Could you expand on this?

IV: I read the Borges collection Labyrinths when I was very young, too young to understand what most of the stories were

about, but the mood of the book made an indelible impression on me. I still prefer his more "labyrinthine" stories, with their invented histories, sources and apparatuses, to the simpler "tales". I love the intricacy and detail, the pieces that recede on the reader like images in mirrors, the games (in the sense of serious play), the objects (how many of Borges's stories revolve around an enigmatic object).

Do you know the short piece by Borges called "Borges and I"? I have it in a collection called A Personal Anthology. He writes: "I like hourglasses, maps, eighteenth-century typography, etymologies, the taste of coffee, and Robert Louis Stevenson's prose; he shares these preferences, but with a vanity that turns them into the attributes of an actor."

By focussing on what fascinates me in Borges I am probably avoiding your question about influence.

FW: In many respects, Afrikaans writing seems more interesting, innovative and experimental than a great deal of South African writing in English. What do you think of Afrikaans literature, and are there certain writers/ books that you particularly like?

IV: I am particularly fond of Etienne Leroux's work. I recently found a facsimile edition of his unfinished novel Die Suiwerste Hugenot is Jan Schoeman and it reminded me of what an inventive writer he was. I have long wanted to reread his early work, especially the Welgevonden trilogy, but have not found the time. I think Magersfontein O Magersfontein may be the best satirical novel in our literature.

I was fortunate to discover Afrikaans literature as a student. My schooling had given me the impression that Afrikaans books were all about unhappy farmers, a notion I was soon disabused of by the Afrikaans Department at Wits University. Reading the Sestigers and prominent writers of the seventies like John Miles and Breyten Breytenbach gave me a very different set of models for writing about South Africa; going back to your earlier question about the sources of the "fantastical" elements in my work, here are some of the culprits. These days I don't read as much Afrikaans writing as I used to.

FW: Why would you say the comic features so strongly in your writing?

IV: You link your question to the earlier one about "fantastical features", and perhaps I can link my answer too. Again, it's not so much a matter of choosing the comic mode as of being chosen by it. Even when I write on the most serious subjects, I sometimes find the text cracking jokes despite me. I believe that some readers have also been moved to tears by my more humorous passages. Perhaps it is a question of temperament? Or perhaps the writer and the reader are uncertain how to respond to the grotesque? The grotesque--the OED says "comically or repulsively distorted"--is a South African speciality.

What amuses me in the act of writing seems to have less to do with situation or character than with the strangeness and artificiality of language itself. Perhaps I spend too much time among dictionaries and thesauruses. Thesauri?

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW WITH ANDRE BRINK, CAPE TOWN, JULY 1999

University of Cape Town

Felicity Wood: I'm particularly interested in the way in which you've moved from an earlier, more realistic mode in your books to a more fantastical mode from Adamastor onwards. Why did you decide to switch to fantasy?

Andre Brink: Oh, I think the urge has always been there in what I've written, sometimes even in a very realistic guise. I try to probe possibilities of the fantastic and the imaginary. Perhaps the most obvious example--although not very far back--would be in the historical section of An Act of Terror, where myth gradually eases into history. I think much of the pervading interest I've always had in history and in genealogy has been coloured by the possibilities of a slightly more fantastic edge to the realistic. So I think it's been a tendency in me--perhaps more than in my writing--for a very long time. Certainly in very much of the humorous writing I've been doing in Afrikaans, not in English, there is almost invariably a slightly exaggerated aspect, which very often develops into something purely fantastical. So it has always interested me and I think in the last few years I've just felt that in the changes that the country has been going through there is more space now to indulge perhaps that sort of enjoyment I take in a particular kind of writing.

FW: The type of writing you did in books like A Dry White Season or A Chain of Voices could be described as belonging to a liberal realist tradition.

AB: I suppose so, yes.

FW: Do you feel that type of approach has played itself out, or not necessarily?

AB: No, I don't think so. I think there's still more than enough scope for that. I just think that especially if one has become aware of a certain inclination in oneself over a long time now one has the space or freedom to explore more than previously. It's difficult to explain, because I don't want to give the impression that I or anybody else felt constrained to write in a certain way during the apartheid years, but it was a matter of perhaps imposing certain priorities on oneself. If I had the choice of writing either a fantastical story or a more realistic one that had to do with the socio-political set-up in the country, then for understandable reasons because that whole struggle experience was so much part of my everyday life, I would opt for that and keep the other on the back burner. Now I don't feel that kind of urgency in that particular respect, so now I can now actually turn to and explore so many things I've been keeping aside, wanting to come back to.

FW: There's far more fantasy in Afrikaans literature than literature in English.

AB: Probably yes.

FW: Why do you think this should be the case?

AB: Oh, that would be very difficult to pin down in a nice little formula. I think it may have to do partly with some very, very old traditions of storytelling in the oral form in the Afrikaner community. I mean the sort of stories that itinerant travellers and commercial travellers would come up with earlier when they travelled by oxwagon and had all the time in the world and spent weeks on end in the deep interior travelling from farm to farm and had to entertain themselves. They would also get customers by telling stories. I think ghost stories would be very important among those and when they started being written down from the first Taalbeweging on, you find those stories in, for instance, Ons Kleintjie. S.J. du Toit collected some of them and especially since Langenhoven and Leipoldt took them over, I think then that particular strain was more or less confirmed in Afrikaans storytelling.

FW: Which aspects of oral traditions do you feel could be particularly important for South African literature now?

AB: I think for me personally certainly the ghost story has proved particularly fruitful and I'm continuing exposing myself to that. But I think so much of this kind of storytelling has to do and had to do even in its oral form with a kind of pre-telling, reinvention of history. Since I've always been passionately interested in history and in the processes that go into the making of history, I think that is something that is really endless in its possibilities for continuous and further invention and exploration.

FW: In some of your critical writing and also for instance in Imaginings of Sand, where Kristien thinks about the stories her Ouma has told her, you seem to suggest that as South Africans we've suffered some kind of deprivation in imaginative and spiritual terms through denying the fantastic

AB: Oh yes.

FW: How would you see your writing as responding to this?

AB: Well I think writing imaginative literature as such is a response to the dreariness of a merely linear, merely realistic approach to the world. Also, for half a century at least an extremely rational kind of ideology was imposed on us, which makes it all the more necessary for the resources of the imagination to be tapped by all kinds of imaginative artists, not just by writers, but also by painters, by musicians, and so on. And the drier, the more arid the intellectual climate within which an ideology like apartheid takes root becomes, the more urgent it is for the survival of the fullness of the human spirit to turn to these other resources, these other areas and dimensions of the mind, to amplify them.

FW: So you would see fantasy playing an important role in this regard because of the way it taps into the imagination?

AB: In a kind of Freudian and Jungian way, it represents that which is repressed by the dominant, and in our case, very

strongly patriarchal and chauvinistic ideology. So everything that's repressed comes out in the form of the stories we tell.

FW: J.R.R. Tolkien, Rosemary Jackson and a range of other critics have pointed out how closely related fantasy is to desire. It's often an expression of what we lack or what we feel is very hard for us to attain in reality. So to an extent, fantasy compensates for this lack. So do you see some of the magical, fantastical elements in your novels--for instance, the dream journey at the end of On the Contrary and the very visionary quality in the conclusions of On the Contrary and Imaginings of Sand--as a way of expressing certain things we lack or are still struggling towards?

AB: Oh yes.

FW: Do you feel that there's a way fantasy can transcend simple compensation and effect a kind of recovery of such things?

AB: Oh it has to, otherwise it becomes a very mechanical sort of process. And that also means it's very hard to give you a straight and easy answer, if you were to ask what exactly is the lack to which I try to respond, it's just a kind of intuition about something lacking, about a whole dimension of experience which is submerged and which has been suppressed for so long. So one almost intuitively tries to amplify the very restricted, everyday experience of thinking and responding to challenges by imagining or by simply allowing the fantasy to wander free and

to bring to light these things which have been left in the dark for so long. Very often one's not even aware of the exact nature, or the significance, or the implications of what one's doing. For example, the birds in Imaginings of Sand, I had no idea of why they had to be there, at a given moment, they just flew in to the storytelling, and I couldn't keep them out. It was much later that completely by chance in one of these books on symbols that I came across one explanation for birds, that they tend to symbolise femininity, the female dimension of experience. Then I knew that this must be where it came from, but it was never intended like that and I think the moment one starts doing that deliberately, I think you're going to impoverish your writing.

FW: Would you regard your more recent work as magical realist or containing at least magical realist elements? Do you feel comfortable with that kind of term?

AB: Yes, comfortable and not. Comfortable because no one has yet managed to come up with something more satisfactory. Personally I would prefer something like mythical realism, but that's really still toying around with alternatives and the problem is that magic realism is a kind of umbrella term nowadays--so much can be swept under it. But it does say something about this ambiguity within it: that the real is never one dimensional, that there is much more than meets the eye. So there is the relative simplicity of the term and the fact that it has been loaded with certain kinds of significance, especially through the contributions of the Latin Americans. And, what to me is even more fascinating is

the way it links up with what I see as a completely indigenous stream of African magic realism, which has been there since storytelling in its oral form existed in Africa, expressing itself in literary form from Amos Tutuola to Ben Okri.

FW: To what extent do you think this was an influence on your work--this African side?

AB: Oh, I think inevitably so. As a writer I am constantly exposed to the discovery of stories and storytelling, and I was aware from the time when I was a small child of the wonders of the world that came to me by storytelling. Many of the early storytellers in my life were black people, the old nanny who brought me up, black men and women on the farms of friends where I spent much of my time when I was young. And I think it sort of naturally, through a process of osmosis, just became part of me.

FW: The world view that's expressed through aspects of magical realism is that the magical or the fantastic isn't something that's out there, separated from us.

AB: No, you're constantly in communion with it.

FW: So it conveys the sense that the fantastic is actually part of reality, and reality's more wonderful and complex than we tend to assume. Would that be the kind of thing you would be exploring in the way you interweave the realistic and the fantastic?

AB: I think so, yes, sometimes perhaps in slightly exaggerated form, as in Devil's Valley, where it becomes a sort of game. I think the ludic enterprise in writing is immensely important for me, certainly. You must be able to derive a very deep not just satisfaction but joy from the process. Through humour, through fun, through a kind of carnivalesque awareness which one brings to the everyday, one discovers so many more possible meanings lurking in the corners of the ordinary and everyday.

FW: The carnivalesque seems to be central in your use of fantasy. Would you see the carnivalesque primarily playing this sort of role? Or are there other functions that you think it might fulfil?

AB: I just think that it breaks down preconceptions and stereotypes which, ironically perhaps, is one of the reasons why I am fascinated by stereotypical characters. I start with stereotypes and break them open with this kind of carnivalesque exuberant joy, to see whether they can be made to mean something quite different.

FW: Could you give me an example in this regard?

AB: Throughout Devil's Valley, the world appears to be one thing, and then suddenly it's turned into its opposite. There are the different stories that people tell about the same event, making more and more fun of it, and yet at the same time discovering more and more hidden darkneses in it. I'm fascinated by the kind

of things which people, especially in rural communities, celebrate: the basic stations of life--birth, marriage, death--and the way in which, very often, that goes hand in hand with a sort of carnival atmosphere. It is an exuberant celebration because it seems to me those are the vulnerable occasions of a society and in an individual's life, when not consciously, but sort of intuitively, one senses that the darker forces, the negative, destructive impulses of the world are very much alive around this little festival that's taking place and therefore one pushes it to an extreme, to exorcise it as it were.

FW: Mikhail Bakhtin sees the carnival as having quite an affirmative role. He gives it a visionary quality, and in his eyes it can lead to a new world view and it can actually contribute to the development of a more harmonious way of seeing and way of being. Would you see the carnivalesque elements in your books containing this visionary potential?

AB: I think so, because at those moments when the sort of Freudian censor is put to rest and one simply allows all the impulses and possibilities of a situation to erupt--I'm thinking of the process of storytelling now--then one tends to see more possibilities in a given situation. You look with what Van Wyk Louw called the multiple eye of the fly. You don't see just one thing, or something from only one angle, and that may bring some kind of visionary sense to it which may or may not be true. It's not a matter of being visionary in the sense of exactly foretelling the future, but of bringing to light hidden meanings

and hidden possibilities of whatever one is experiencing at a given moment.

FW: I have another question about the kind of magical realism you make use of. Magical realism very often gets used to explore history and politics--one thinks of writers like Salman Rushdie, Okri and Isabel Allende, for example. But what I find different between your work and their writing is that they only use magical realism to explore and respond to history and politics up to a certain point. The magical doesn't seem to work as a force for social transformation within their books and it doesn't really get linked to images of political resistance. For instance in Allende's The House of the Spirits when Alba is in prison, the magic stops there, the spirit world can't transform the situation for her or get her out of prison. But I feel in your work the magical goes far more into the socio-political.

AB: But I think it has to, otherwise it remains a kind of experimental thing and you continue to compartmentalise your experience of the world.

FW: So would you see the fact that this doesn't take place in, say, Allende's book, as a lack, a kind of deficiency?

AB: I think in that particular book it is necessary really to show the way in which the stultifying, destructive, deadly political situation in Chile became such that it allowed no scope for the magical, for the inventive, for the imagination and I

think that to a certain extent that is perhaps exactly what she wanted to bring across. It depends so much on the individual project one is engaged in in any particular book and that is always why there will be differences between them.

FW: But your use of the fantastic is very involved with the political--which does seem to be something quite distinctive about it. For instance, in Imaginations of Sand, Kristien's socio-political conscience is developed through the magical, and also, it transforms the ghastly things that happen around her, like the family killing and so on. Yet, over and over again there's this accusation against fantasy, it's through magic that you can achieve things that you can't achieve in reality, it's a means of wish fulfilment. How would you respond to those very frequent charges that get levelled against fantasy?

AB: I'm just sad that people can so impoverish themselves by limiting beforehand the possibilities of fantasy, by saying all right, it's OK to keep it aside for the odd experience in the theatre, or perhaps in a book you read or whatever, but we are rational people living at the end of the twentieth century, we've got to deal with practicalities, and so on. They don't realise that at the root of it all lies certainly, constantly, even in things as ordinary and humdrum as writing a CV or writing a medical report, or whatever, lies the magic of story, which transforms the world through the magic of language and language is just a tool of the imagination. One of my favourite sayings has always been Wittgenstein's: "The limit of my language has been

the limit of my world." And if one sees language as that, on one hand just a tool and on the other hand really Aladdin's magic lamp, then it is operating in politics, in reports of a bank, or whatever it is, this transformative power of the imagination. We must acknowledge, we must celebrate it, and writing is one of the ways one can do so openly and hopefully gradually pervade our whole society with that sense of discovery.

FW: What do you think about the future of the fantastic in the South African literary context?

AB: Oh I think we've just scratched the surface and it seems to me that the more our lives become dominated by machines and computers and statistics and things like that, the more we will need that redeeming, transformative power of the imagination to keep us whole.

FW: Do you feel that fantasy--as opposed to, say, other works of the imagination--would have a unique transformative power?

AB: Yes, I think because it is extreme, because it confronts one with something which immediately is strange, so you're not just sort of gradually lured into it and change your view in the course of that, but because the fantastical confronts you with something which is unusual, with the guise of the other to which normally you don't have access. It is so extreme that you have to stop and pay attention. It may be so extreme that it just switches you off altogether and many people turn away and they're

not interested, so it's always a matter of getting the mix so right that it's not too strange, but not too tame either.

FW: Tell me about more recent South African writers who've made use of the fantastic--like Mike Nicol, Zakes Mda, Ivan Vladislavic, Etienne Van Heerden and Anne Landsman. Which of those writers have you found particularly interesting or exciting?

AB: I think Mda and Landsman. Although mind you I think that Vladislavic is so scintillating. I just love his work. I think something like The Folly is a totally misunderstood and undervalued text. It is just sheer exuberant and subversive fun.

FW: What do you think it subverts?

AB: Our normal way of seeing the edifices of our life. He just reveals that you can build it all in the mind and the fact you can't construct anything from your image of a person to your concept of a financial investment plan without bringing the imagination to that and bringing the whole personality to bear on it. To me it always comes back to that, that the whole of the twentieth century experience seems to have pushed us towards compartmentalisation. And magic--and that is the magic of magic--brings a kind of holism back to one's way of being in the world and without that sense of a whole, of the whole personality being involved in any given situation, in any interaction with another person, you never fulfil yourself.

FW: And Mda and Landsman? What struck you about their work in particular?

AB: Well precisely that, that the surface of the experiences-- whether political or historical or whatever--appear ordinary enough and familiar enough and yet they go in Mda's case especially with the unexpected force of laughter, and in Landsman's case I think with the force of the unusual lurking below the surface of the ordinary that just suddenly makes us realise that the world isn't the way it looks. The old Hamlet thing between being and seeming.

FW: Just a couple of questions about narrative. In The Novel you highlight quite a lot of the dangerous aspects of narrative--it can be used to conceal and distort and create fallacious versions of reality. We've seen how dangerous narrative can be in the South African situation, with destructive political narratives that get created. You do emphasise this in your novels, but ultimately they are very much about the constructive, healing powers of narrative and the sort of self-awareness, reconciliation, regeneration that one gains through it. How would you balance your own awareness of the dangers of narrative against this constructive role that you give to it in your fiction?

AB: If there were no dangers involved, it would simply be too easy. Unless there is in everything one does--it doesn't just go only for writing, I think in anything--a sense of danger, a sense

of risk, one can't go that inch further than one would normally, reasonably allow oneself to. You know you're placing yourself at risk, you know it may not work at all, it may be a total flop, but unless you are prepared to take that total risk, that risk of failure, that risk, of even destruction, self-destruction, you limit your chances of finding something new. I think that ultimately is what it is that gives it its inestimable value, its sense of something really, really special. Because it was not just walking through a park and picking a flower, but really climbing a cliff to reach that flower which may cost your life in the act of plucking it and that is what gives it its value. Without that sense of the destructive, the dark, the dangerous, you won't really fully appreciate the joy, the exhilaration of the more constructive side that you can get in the process. It's not guaranteed and that too adds to it.

FW: Another question about your use of narrative. On the one hand, your books tend to present us with a whole range of very ambiguous, conflicting stories. Often one doesn't know which narratives are reliable, or whether they are all meant to be equally dubious. Yet at the same time, there's a very strong sense in your books of certain values, certain beliefs, a certain moral code. What sort of relationship do you see between these two contradictory strains in your work?

AB: It is a very real contradiction, because if one plays with infinite possibilities, then morality really becomes excluded from the beginning. I'm very deeply aware of the paradox. But if

I have some sort of answer it would be in the fact that if one confronts a reader and oneself in the process with a wide variety, perhaps even an infinite variety of possibilities and at the same time, by the same token also one respects the freedom of the reader to choose between all these possibilities, to choose one which would make sense in a given set of circumstances, and which is more valuable in a given set of circumstances. Then from that respect, that respect of the reader's responsibility in the act of choice, I think one can perhaps load it in a certain way, suggesting that, even though all the other possibilities are there, that this one seems better equipped to respond to the challenge of a given situation, because I don't think the choice is ever totally free either. The writer does tend to load the dice a little bit. That's perhaps as far as one can go. I've never been able to think of literature without a very important moral dimension to it. It's just opening up the morality, so that it doesn't become prescriptive. One must constantly be aware of the fact that even if I choose this, an infinity of other possible choices also exist, but in a certain conjuncture of circumstances, certain responses may be more valid than others and I think that is where morality might come in. It's very tenuous, I realise that.

FW: The Khoisan people are very important in your novels. Often the magical, supernatural elements relate a great deal to them. Why have you focussed in particular on the indigenous African people on the Khoisan instead of perhaps, say, the Zulu or the Xhosa?

AB: I think simply because they're the oldest inhabitants of the continent, as far as anthropologists have been able to ascertain. So because of my fascination with history and the idea of a pervasive thread that runs through all of human experience, and the--almost--awe in which I hold the whole notion of Africa, African cosmology, whatever. So I would like to go for the oldest, the most ancient and therefore the most durable and the most pervasive. And that seems to me to be the Khoisan.

FW: The Khoisan peoples' belief systems, ways of looking at things very often seem to incorporate the natural and the spiritual and they seem to have a very strong appeal, for that reason, I think to urbanised, Westernised society, because they seem to symbolise a lot that in contemporary society people feel has been lost or they've been separated from--

AB: It may be quite simply a certain exotic attraction in it, because it seems so ideal, belonging to a kind of paradise lost as it were, and therefore one may tend to romanticise it, to idealise it, that may certainly be an ingredient in it. But as I said to me I think it is this ancientness of it which I find fascinating in a never-ending way.

FW: Just a few general questions to round off. You write your books in Afrikaans and English, which are such different languages. So wouldn't this result in very, very different types of books? For instance, in Afrikaans there's a kind of vitality, a vibrancy which English seems to lack. Do you not feel perhaps

that some of that quality gets lost in the English version?

AB: It depends so much on the book. Sometimes I feel that something gets across better in Afrikaans, sometimes in English. I thought--but that was for purely structural reasons--that On the Contrary worked better in English simply because I wanted to write it in the form of an 18th century novel and I had no models in Afrikaans or Dutch to go back to. But something like Devil's Valley I think works incomparably better in Afrikaans, because it is an archetypal Afrikaner community and that all comes back to language. One doesn't want to generalise, but Afrikaans seems to be--and I know this is terribly vague and superficial--but it seems to be a more concrete sort of language, it's perhaps more tuned in to the realities of Africa, whatever that may mean. Although English, because of the way in which it has become adapted more and more to African and Southern African needs, has changed a lot from the old colonial English that came with the settlers. I think perhaps also through its exposure to the physicalities, the materiality of the land, and to a language like Afrikaans and some of the other indigenous languages, it has changed its timbre and its fabric, so it is much easier today to capture--if ever one can capture anything in a language--something of Africa than it was perhaps 50 years ago. But Afrikaans shaped here from the beginning is, I think, in a slightly more advantageous position, though.

FW: Finally, you've got a very strong sense of the impact a writer can have on society in terms of the role the writer can

play and the writer's moral responsibility. What do you feel your role is now in post-apartheid South Africa?

AB: Well, it was easier to define a role under apartheid, because the impact of writing on the society, on the development of society of the whole anti-apartheid struggle was more visible, was more dramatic under those circumstances. Even then of course it was very largely sort of wishful thinking. One could never quantify it, and say that this book effected this change. It's not as easy as that, it's a matter of hoping, and wishing and sometimes, to a certain extent, one could assess in terms of the responses one got through letters or whatever to see that this book has touched this individual in this town in South Africa or elsewhere in this particular way. But even then you still can't quantify it. But now it's vaguer, much less adventurous, much less exciting to be a writer because that pivot, that immediate interaction between writer and society simply has dissipated. It's sad, there is a sense of loss, because the kind of experience one had under apartheid with writers all being in a kind of beleaguered situation and as a result exploring and fostering their sense of brotherhood and sisterhood, of being in a situation of solidarity, that was wonderfully inspiring. Now one returns much more to the immemorial role of the lonely writer, not so much in touch with the world outside. But in other respects it's much healthier, of course. I think in a dramatic situation like that which prevailed under apartheid, one tended sometimes perhaps to take oneself a bit too seriously.

FW: But don't you feel the writer has an important role in South Africa right now?

AB: Oh I think so--and that is why I can never abdicate the sense of a kind of moral responsibility. The interaction may not be as direct or as immediate as it was but I would find it very difficult, if not impossible to write anything which is really just a personal indulgement. It would have to interest me, to give me a sense of something worthwhile that I'm trying to immerse myself in, to deal with something which touches on some of the major issues, some of the major problems, some of the major questions of our situation from day to day.

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* The interview with Christopher Hope was published in 1998 in The English Academy Review 15. All page references are to the interview as it appears in the Appendix.