

THE LIBERAL IDEOLOGY AND SOME ENGLISH SOUTH AFRICAN NOVELISTS

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	Page
	ii
Introduction	1
 <u>PART ONE</u>	
Chapter 1 Problems of the white English writer in South Africa: Colonialism.	11
Chapter 2 Problems of the white English writer in South Africa: Apartheid.	31
Chapter 3 Problems of the white English writer in South Africa: The Ideology of the English in South Africa.	47
Chapter 4 The Ideology of Liberalism.	62
Chapter 5 The Fate of Liberalism in South Africa.	91
Chapter 6 Liberalism and The Novel.	108
 <u>PART TWO</u>	
Chapter 7 Olive Schreiner's The Story of An African Farm.	139
Chapter 8 William Plomer's Turbott Wolfe.	164
Chapter 9 Alan Paton's Cry, the Beloved Country.	186
Chapter 10 Dan Jacobson's A Dance In The Sun and The Beginners.	206
Chapter 11 Nadine Gordimer's The Late Bourgeois World.	229
Conclusion	252
Bibliography	253

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Introduction

This thesis has been written in an attempt to answer a question which came to mind when I first began reading white English South African literature. The question itself was quite simple: why is this literature like it is, and, more particularly, why is it a body of work whose quality is generally so mediocre? There is a general critical consensus that it is mediocre, and all the more so when it is judged in the light of standards set by modern European and American literature. Kevin Margarey is representative of this consensus when he writes that "if one attempted to fit South African novels into a hierarchy that contained Henry James, Henry Handel Richardson and J.B. Priestly, one would have, I think, to make some remark such as that no South African novel rises above good third class."¹ And Philip Segal implies a similar low estimation of the value of English South African literature in his discussion of the place of South African writing in university English literature courses:

Can we find time to study books which (chosen not mainly because of their literary value but for some foreground interest of local subject or setting) will make it necessary to drop out of our course a play of Ben Jonson's, a novel of Jane Austen's, a major work of modern criticism or poetry? Certainly the local flavour may be very exciting, and it is delightful to recognize a familiar landscape in a work, or to 'ourselves' in a well-drawn social situation; and no one can deny that enjoying this flavour may encourage wider reading. But what if, when its taste fades from our memory, we are left with little or nothing comparable to what remains in our minds after reading a great work of literature, no permanent disturbance of the spirit, no unforgettable intensity of art? 2

There would seem to be a number of immediate and obvious answers to my initial question as to the relative mediocrity of this

literature. First, it could be said that its lack of distinction is simply because no great talent has emerged, one whose example might have set a precedent for later writers. Secondly, it could be pointed out that the English sub-group in South Africa has always been a small, if conspicuous, minority, and that a scattered million people or so hardly constitutes an adequate base for cultural fecundity and for the emergence of a great body of literature. Thirdly, the brief history, the largely colonial origins and continuing colonial outlook of the English in South Africa could also be advanced in an attempt to explain the thinness of their culture and the parochial, provincial character of their literature. Henry James' much-quoted moral to the effect that "the flower of art blooms only where the soil is deep, that it takes a great deal of history to produce a little literature, that it needs a complex social machinery to set a writer in motion",³ is certainly applicable to English South African culture; and the lack of these conditions is surely one of the reasons for the mediocrity of its art. Fourthly, and finally, attention could be drawn to a number of social conditions such as the structure of South Africa according to the dictates of race and class, to Apartheid and its censorship laws; all these can be seen to have had a destructive and limiting effect upon the achievement of white English South African literature, as well as on every other literature in the country.

I will be discussing the latter three of these four general reasons or explanations in much greater detail below since it is these which (both directly and indirectly) have had the most significant determining influence on this literature. The fact that no truly great individual talent has appeared in it is an explanation of

negligible significance. As Nadine Gordimer has written: "when I began to think about writers in my own country, I saw that the reasons why many of them have written as they have are centred more in the social situation they share than in their individual differences of talent and temperament."⁴ Nor is it a sufficient explanation to argue that ~~whatever~~ whatever mediocrity is to be found in white English South African literature is due solely to artistic failure. Philip Segal, for instance, replying to an article in The Classic by Nat Nakasa, writes: "In our context the failure that must be stressed, when there is one, is the failure in artistic power.' I underline this again because of the loose talk that results when this is forgotten. For instance, a critic quoted in the paper we are discussing, says: "Perhaps if the author had lived among his characters and seen their conduct with his own eyes he would have been able to portray them more powerfully ... This is the cause of the failing of our white writers in general". Now one obviously cannot have too much of raw experience of life if one wishes to write, but even if one has talent, no amount of such experience will automatically lead to the creation of a valid work of art."⁵ For his assertion that all failures in literature are failures of imagination and artistic power - nothing more, nothing less - becomes questionable and unsatisfactory, and especially when, as will be argued in the following chapters of this thesis, these various failures are seen in the light of the specific problems which have confronted the white English writer in South Africa.

Criticism of English South African Literature

Until very recently, criticism of English South African literature

has tended to consist of little more than a condescending tour around the territory of the major literary figures and their landmarks. In a word, it has often amounted to no more than a kind of academic journalism.⁶ It has usually been thematic in approach. Critics have identified and isolated common themes such as that of "exile" and have then proceeded to illustrate these in any number of texts.⁷ Perhaps inevitably, the most common single theme which has been isolated is that of race. For, as Ezekiel Mphahlele has complained, "English fiction in South Africa is obsessed with race relationships. The plot is the thing, and as race conflicts provide innumerable facile plots, we are in for a gold rush; and so character counts for little or nothing."⁸ As is evident in the above quotation, the obsession with the theme of race, and the artistic inadequacies of the ways in which it has been treated, has also been the target for the most frequent critical charge directed against it. Martin Tucker, for instance, noting with disapproval the obsessive concern with the colour question, remarks that "this concern cannot be explained merely by reason of the existing colour problem in the society these writers describe ... The answer appears to lie in the moral, puritanical attitude of South African writers to their work. These writers have not yet broken from a propagandistic orientation and a moral fervour ... The South African novel invariably has been a tract, and instruction - rather than esthetic appreciation - is its excuse for being."⁹ And Lewis Nkosi, in his criticism of fiction by black South Africans, draws a similar connection between the race theme and artistic failure: "what we do get from South Africa (therefore) - and what we do get most frequently - is the journalistic fact parading outrageously as imaginative literature. We find here a type of fiction which exploits the

ready-made plots of racial violence, social apartheid, interracial love affairs which are doomed from the beginning, without any attempt to transcend or transmute these given 'social facts' into artistically persuasive works of fiction."¹⁰

This type of thematic criticism never fails to ignore the important relation between form and content in a literary work. More importantly, it never fails to ignore those supposedly "extra-literary" factors which always have such a decisive determining effect on the nature of any literature. In few works of South African literary criticism is there any evidence of a thorough examination of the relationship between historical circumstances and the distinctive character of the literature which has been produced within them. In none of the works cited above is there any attempt to develop a theoretical framework which might make possible a systematic and less narrow reading of white English South African literature; all of them contain no more than a number of isolated, purely textual criticisms which are strung together, at best, by the broadest and most vague of sociological generalizations.¹¹ And it is the precise intention of this thesis to examine a section of this literature not in order to confirm its inferiority, and nor to establish a canon of valuable books according to a hierarchy of literary values, but to see how various "extra-literary" factors have played the decisive part in determining its character.

The Liberal Tradition

Considering the low level and general incompetence of English South African literary criticism, it is not surprising that those

attempts to discern the lineaments of a tradition running through white English South African literature have been unhelpful. An observation like Arthur Ravenscroft's when he writes that "Olive Schreiner established what I see as the central tradition of South African writing in English: realism unquestionably rooted in the local scene, which, thanks to an open vigorous compassion, results in the numinous vision that invests local concerns with insights that speak to people everywhere",¹² is so vague and generally applicable to a literature from any country as to be quite useless. Nor is J.P.L. Snyman's conclusion to his superficial study of the English South African novel of any greater assistance; he writes that "the two features of the South African novel are the prominence of [Nature] and the fact that most of the outstanding writers are women".¹³

White English South African literature presents a face which is as variegated, amorphous and contradictory as that of any other literature. At first sight it would seem as if the only common factor among the majority of its works is a commitment to the racial problem. What would appear to have been carried over from one book to another seems to be no more than a common theme; however differently it might be approached by different authors. Nevertheless, it is one of the intentions of this study to show that there is a common factor running through the most significant section of white English South African fiction, and that this common factor operates on a far deeper level than that of subject matter or a commitment to realism. This level is an ideological one; and the ideology itself is liberalism. It is this ideology which, whatever the variations and different elements stressed in it by different authors, forms and defines the major tradition in English literature in South Africa.

To study a literature in terms of the ideology which informs it has a number of advantages over purely textual, practical criticism. For it is through ideology that literature manifests its particular relationship to history. Moreover, an ideological study is particularly useful in the case of white English South African fiction, for the liberal ideology itself has a particularly close relationship to the form which this fiction takes. As Stephen Gray has said: "The liberal tradition and realism go hand in hand here [in South Africa], for realism implies a certain capaciousness that can admit a variety of styles, from symbolical and allegorical to the naturalist, which are felt to be necessary to deal with the stresses of the liberal debate ... The animatory word here is 'liberal'. In criticism of the English realist novel the word is implicit in the very descriptive term 'novel'."¹⁴ And thus a study of this fiction in terms of the liberal ideology is able to encompass both its form and its content.

With a few possible additions and omissions, the liberal tradition in English South African literature is constituted by the novels of Olive Schreiner, William Plomer, Alan Paton, Dan Jacobson, and Nadine Gordimer. As Stephen Gray has said: "the logical and coherent tradition of the realist novel in South Africa is a very narrow, but highly organized one. What begins with Schreiner's novel as the liberal tradition in Southern African fiction does continue in Turbott Wolfe, is endemic to Cry, The Beloved Country ... and meets its culmination in later novels."¹⁵ In this study I will be discussing the work of the above five writers and I will also be making some reference to the two novels of J.M. Coetzee; not because these are informed by the liberal ideology but because, like the later novels of Nadine Gordimer, they reflect its breakdown.

Since it deals only with these six writers, and then only with a very small selection of their writings, this study cannot pretend to be inclusive. However, many of my arguments apply equally to novelists like Jack Cope who are not discussed here at all. Also, I should add that I am discussing white English South African writers alone; this is because I have been concerned to examine the connections between a literature and the way of life of white English South Africa and the changing cultural and historical situation of this group of people. I have not dealt with any fiction by black South Africans; it is neither useful nor possible to group the imaginative products of both black and white writers under any single heading. For it is a commonplace that those who live differently will write differently, and for different purposes. Whilst the whites are still largely concerned with preserving and disseminating the values of their Western heritage and civilization, the writings of the blacks are today largely geared towards the imperatives of revolutionary action.

* The sterility and exhaustion of white culture in South Africa has been revealed increasingly with time. Its general degeneration is reflected in many books recently published in this country. Whilst there is no need to invoke a dialectical conception of history in order to explain the sense of death-in-life which pervades and possesses the white culture, whether English or Afrikaans (and pervades, too, the fiction of those members of it who have the clearest sense of its current state and direction), and the contrasting vitality which is present against all the odds in black culture, it remains true at the time of writing that South African culture, in the broadest sense of that word, is marked by a resurgence of the new over against the old. This study concerns

the old; that which is, in fact, already dead.

Its focus will be on that ideology of liberalism which has been the main intellectual inheritance of white English South African writers, and on the exact way in which it has informed their novels. It will be my main intention to show that, more than any other single factor, it is this ideology which has been responsible for many of the failures and limitations of these books. I have dealt with a selection of novels which span almost exactly a century in order to reveal the increasing poverty of the liberal ideology in South Africa and the ways in which it has proved itself to be less and less adequate to the historical realities of this country.

Finally, it might be added that if this thesis is a study of the inadequacies of a literature, then it also implies the inadequacy or failure of the English in South Africa; for a literature ultimately cannot be divorced from the cultural nexus out of which it comes.

Footnotes

1. Kevin Margarey, "The South African Novel and Race", Southern Review, No. 1 (1963), p. 27.
2. Philip Segal, "The Place of South African Writing in the University". English Studies in Africa, 13, No.1 (1970), pp. 177-8.
3. Henry James, Hawthorne (London: MacMillan, 1957), p. 23.
4. Nadine Gordimer, "The Novel and The Nation in South Africa", African Writers on African Writing, ed. G.D. Killam (London: Heinemann, 1973), p. 33.
5. Philip Segal, "Taking Stock with 'The Classic'", Contrast, 2, No. 3 (Summer 1963/1964), p. 7.
6. For examples of this "academic journalism", see Raymond Sands, "The South African Novel: Some Observations", English Studies in Africa, 13, No. 1 (1970), pp. 89-104. H.K. Girling, "South African Novelists and Story-Writers", English Studies in Africa, 3, No. 2 (1960), pp. 80-92.
7. See John F. Povey, "Memory and its Wound: A Comment on South African Poetry", English Studies in Africa 9, No. 1 (1966), pp. 61-71.
8. Ezekiel Mphahlele, The African Image (London: Faber and Faber, 1962), p. 108.
9. Martin Tucker, Africa in Modern Literature (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1967), p. 227.
10. Lewis Nkosi, "Fiction by Black South Africans", African Writers on African Writing, ed. G.D. Killam (London: Heinemann, 1973), p. 110.
11. For an example, see Don MacClennan, "The South African Short Story", English Studies in Africa, 13, No. 1 (1970), pp. 105-23.
12. Arthur Ravenscroft, "South African English Literature", English-Speaking South Africa Today, ed. André De Villiers (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 324.
13. J.P.L. Snyman, The South African Novel in English (Potchefstroom: Potchefstroom University, 1952), (p. xii). It is only with Stephen Gray's Southern African Literature: An Introduction (Cape Town: David Philip, 1979) that a coherent and informative discussion of various traditions in English South African literature has appeared. no - p 180
14. Stephen Gray, "An approach to Schreiner's realism in The Story of an African Farm", Standpunte, 31, No. 6 (1978), p. 41.
15. Stephen Gray, op. cit., *ibid.*, p. 41.

Part One

Chapter 1

Problems of the white English writer in South Africa: Colonialism

The precise nature of the historical forces which have shaped a country almost always presents a number of problems for the writer; this is particularly the case in a country like South Africa which is so much the product of European colonialism. And the degree to which the writer is both able to perceive the nature of the problems caused by this history, and to respond to them, is often a measure of his or her artistic achievement. In this chapter, therefore, I will be discussing those difficulties which the white English writer in South Africa has met with as a result of being in a colonial situation.

General Cultural Impoverishment

The general conditions of life prevailing in a colony, or in a country which has had a long colonial history, have often been described as scarcely providing a suitable climate for the writer. Perhaps the most significant indication of the enormity of the problems with which the white English South African writer has been faced in this country is to be found in his most characteristic response to them; in his retreat to another country, into exile.

In the society of a country whose history has followed the conventional colonialist pattern of taming the land and conquering its indigenous peoples in order that the wealth of the one and the labour of the other might be exploited, material values and mercantile concerns tend to predominate and mental life becomes decisively shaped by the colonial system with its conservatism and traditionalism, with its emphasis on action and its contempt for intellectual values. William Plomer has written: "The colonial attitude to culture might be compared, not unjustly, with that of a dog to a lamp-post ... that artists cannot live in

South Africa is a fact that has been fully demonstrated by the lives of Thomas Pringle, Olive Schreiner and others."¹

The degraded, debased nature of South African colonial society, its tawdry quality, lack of an intelligentsia and general intellectual stagnation, is indicated by the incessant exodus of significant white English South African writers from it. Amongst many distinguished others, Olive Schreiner spent long periods away from South Africa and she seems to have remained eternally ambivalent in her attitude towards it; William Plomer himself, Roy Campbell and Laurens van der Post all left South Africa for good in the nineteen-twenties, whilst Dan Jacobson was in a form of self-imposed exile even before his first novel appeared. The effects of this incessant drain of writers cannot be overestimated in any evaluation of the state of English South African culture and writing; for not only has it helped to keep the country in a condition of nearly permanent intellectual infancy as the best and brightest of each successive generation have departed for more hospitable intellectual climates, but it has long hindered the growth and consolidation of any significant local tradition of culture and literature. Each generation has had to go through the arduous process of re-discovering its past, if it has not been saddled with the virtually impossible task of re-creating a past from scratch. Nevertheless, this phenomenon of exile among white English South African writers, a phenomenon which would loom large in any social history of English South African literature, is only the most conspicuous expression of the problematic relationship between the writer and his or her colonial society. The actual problems themselves are far more specific.

Lack of a Past, a Tradition, a Culture

In his "Introduction" to the Penguin edition of Olive Schreiner's The Story of An African Farm, Dan Jacobson has written:

A colonial country is one which has no memory. The discontinuities of colonial experience make it almost inevitable that this should be so. A political entity which has been brought into existence by the actions of an external power; a population consisting of the descendants of conquerors, of slaves and of indentured labourers, and of dispossessed aboriginals; a language in the courts and schools which has been imported like an item of heavy machinery; a prolonged economic and psychological subservience to a metropolitan centre a great distance away ... One hardly needs to labour the point that such conditions make it extremely difficult for any section of the population to develop a vital, effective belief in the past as a present concern, and in the present as a consequence of the past's concern. 2

As opposed to a country which has had a long and relatively homogeneous civilization, the white English writer in South Africa has been faced with the difficulty of dwelling in a land which, to him at least, is without a past, without a history, and without a general tradition of culture whose established societal forms he could use as a guiding foundation for his own writing. The social deficiencies of his colonial society have been similar to those which confronted the writer in early nineteenth century America, deficiencies which Henry James enumerated in his study of Nathaniel Hawthorne by comparing American society with that which existed in Western Europe in the same historical period:

One might enumerate the items of high civilization as it exists in other countries, which are absent from the texture of American life, until it should become a wonder to know what was left.

No State, in the European sense of that word, and indeed barely a specific national name. No sovereign, no court, no personal loyalty, no aristocracy, no church, no clergy, no army, no diplomatic service, no country gentlemen, no palaces, no castles, nor manors, nor old country-houses, nor parsonages, nor thatched cottages nor ivied ruins; no cathedrals, nor abbeys, nor little Norman churches; no great Universities nor public schools - no Oxford, Eton, nor Harrow; no literature, no novels, no museums, no pictures, no political society, no sporting class - no Epsom nor Ascot! 3.

He further observes that "in the United States, in those days, there were no great things to look out at (save forests and rivers); life was not in the least spectacular; society was not brilliant; the country was given up to great national prosperity, a homely bourgeois activity, a diffusion of primary education and the common luxuries."⁴ In essence, this would have applied also to white colonial society in nineteenth century South Africa. And this absence of "items of high civilization" and an overwhelming devotion to mercantile interests, quite apart from contributing to that thin, tawdry texture which is characteristic of colonial life everywhere, made, in James' estimation, the task of the writer so difficult in the United States in that it provided the latter with no suitable subject-matter for serious fiction. The colonial writer in South Africa was faced with a similar difficulty.

Yet a country without a past inhibits the writer in even more significant ways. For it is primarily a profound sense of the past, of felt history, which is to be found in all great national literatures; this very greatness itself might be said to have been partly inspired by a sense of continuity with previous history and the earlier literature which came out of it. Also, it is a

sense of shared history which, perhaps more than any other single factor, serves to bind together a people into that distinctive, recognizable community whose traditions and cultural life provide the writer with the material for his work, and particularly so if he is a novelist since the novel by its nature commits him to the depiction of a form of life which is specifically societal. Without a past, a people becomes weightless, deracinated and fragmented; and the literature of this people becomes correspondingly weightless and thin as well.

In the case of the white English writer in South Africa, the initial loss of the past which was one of the destructive consequences of colonialism has only grown more profound in time because of the historical position of his people in this country. Initially, being colonizers and possessing a strong Imperial connection, it was inevitable that these people should have regarded their history as British history. Yet with the consolidation of an absolute Afrikaner power after 1948, the sundering of the British connection in 1961, and the subsequent creation of a republic by Afrikaners and largely for Afrikaners alone; with the English being a minority among the white racial group, and with their having been permanently displaced from any rôle as a major political force in this country, it was almost inevitable that their own local South African history should have come to seem more and more of an irrelevancy - and this quite apart from its frequent ignominy and the consequent wish to forget it. Their past became irrelevant because it could no longer serve them in the present; no longer being relevant to present concerns it became forgotten and ceased to exert whatever authority it might have had formerly. In an interview with Guy Butler,

Christopher Hope has maintained that "one of the reasons why the English-speaker in this country has never vaunted past [military] victories has a lot to do with the fact that ultimately he tends to have lost in the power struggle with the Afrikaner."⁵ And most commentators today, both inside and outside the country, now regard the English as totally irrelevant to the future of South Africa; as Peter Temple says, referring to the Oxford History of South Africa as an example of the cursory treatment in historiography that the English may expect in the future: "its lack of interest in English-speaking South Africans probably reflects the now-ruling liberal consensus that the English have a minimal part to play in the future of South Africa, and therefore their past is not of great importance."⁶

That loss of a past, of a defined cultural identity and a sense of history among the English in South Africa, which has only grown more profound with the passage of time since the early colonial period in the nineteenth century and with the Afrikaner rise to power in this one, has meant that it has been virtually impossible for the white English South African writer to utilize English South African history in his own work. Although it cannot be denied that there is a large body of "popular", commercial English South African fiction (by writers like Francis Brett Young, Stuart Cloete and Wilbur Smith) which has exploited the local colour offered by local English history, this body represents both a travesty of fiction and of history and does not demand serious attention.! The irrelevancy of this history both to the colonial past and the present has meant that it has been impossible, for instance, for the settlement of the 1820 British immigrants in the Eastern Cape to be an event of great mythic and historic

significance either for the English writer or for the English people in South Africa as a whole. As a result of the loss of a sense of history both through colonialism and through the political-historical failure of the English in South Africa, their literature is characterized, on one level, by a lack of a sense of the past and also by the absence of a vision of the future.

More importantly, for the serious white English South African writer, the lack of a past has entailed, quite apart from personal problems of deracination, an excessive equivocation over the question of identity. When Christopher Heywood remarks that "the obsessive pursuit of identity by South African writers reflects their insecurity in a maze of contradictory loyalties",⁷ he is also forgetting that, to a very great degree, history is identity, and that the absence of one as an ongoing concern, as a felt presence in the present, will entail the absence of the other and its attendant insecurities amongst which a sense of unbelonging is the obvious one.

In Southern African Literature (1979), Stephen Gray has written of the theme of the harshness of the South African landscape which is to be found so frequently in English South African fiction and the sense of unbelonging which it fosters among its human inhabitants:

the overwhelming intransigence of the landscape in Schreiner, which is one of her major themes, is a reality, and it finds its echo in several major Southern African works that follow Schreiner without any significant alteration in attitude: it is virtually a cliché of Southern African fiction that it depicts vast natural forces at work on puny beings in a way which is degrading and humiliating

to human ambition. Landscape, in South African realist fiction, never merely sustains and magnifies man; it dwarfs and overwhelms, it remains unyielding and destructive. Out of Schreiner's single vision of that landscape comes this enduring vision of it, common to many white novelists: one follows it through Turbott Wolfe, The Beadle, Cry, the Beloved Country, The Grass is Singing and A Dance in the Sun to Gordimer's The Conservationist, unchanged, as a basic given of the genre ... The evidence of these works is that all these authors concur with Schreiner that the land, itself dries the vital juices out of its inhabitants, stunts them and - worst of all - disallows them from achieving man's most sacred desire, the desire to take root in the land and belong. Thus ... the literature of this kind has a basic tenet the theme that its characters do not - cannot - belong. We are confronted with a coherent and continuous stream of fiction that is about permanently alienated beings, white beings who are not part of, and can never be part of, a land which offers them no harmonious, sympathetic growth. 8

Yet he, too, fails to mention or add that this abiding vision of the harshness of the South African landscape and the unbelonging of its inhabitants is a direct consequence of the fact that history has not domesticated the former whilst, at the same time, it has not produced those societal forms, that cultural texture, which would afford the latter a nourishing human environment which would overcome their sense of alienation. This alienation to be found so frequently in English South African literature is just one reflection of an absence of a past and of a shared communal history. And this painful phenomenon is, in turn, one reflection of an infinitely more serious problem for the writer in this country, the problem of that cultural schizophrenia which colonialism invariably creates.

Cultural Schizophrenia

The lack of a firmly established and creatively sustaining indigenous culture in his colonial situation has only served to increase the dependency of the white English South African writer on the culture of his mother country. This dependency was reinforced by the fact that throughout the nineteenth century down to the middle of the twentieth, British power sustained the general English populace in South Africa in their belief in the immutability of the British Empire and the righteousness of its Imperial cause. For many this meant an inevitably divided loyalty and a diminished ability to regard South Africa as something other than a part of a wider entity. Britain was politically, economically, and culturally the metropolis whilst South Africa was, for them, on a provincial periphery. Not only did this breed an arrogance among the English towards the Afrikaner and the black, a sense of Anglo-Saxon superiority and exclusiveness which has been one of the major reasons for their continued cultural isolation, but it gave rise to a kind of cultural schizophrenia which has been one of the most marked features of English South African culture to this very day.

Briefly put, this divided, schizophrenic mentality is the direct result of a continuing dependency and reliance upon Western European culture whilst living in an African context in which that imported culture will not be appropriate without considerable modification. The anomalies inherent in this phenomenon have often been noted. Dan Jacobson, listing some of the general intellectual conditions which govern literary activity within the Commonwealth countries, has remarked upon the "fact that an English-speaking South African ... grows up reading books which

for the most part are from and about England; or from and about other countries; but hardly ever about South Africa ... anybody with a literary bent who grows up under the circumstances I have mentioned, the consciousness of a gap or gulf between his reading and the world around him comes very early."⁹ Significantly, Nadine Gordimer also describes a similar rift (and the sense of estrangement from Africa which it produces) between an unvarnished, harsh African reality and the world of European myth in the opening pages of her first, largely autobiographical novel The Lying Days (1953).¹⁰ And this rift between a European education and upbringing and an African reality remote from it in almost every way is a recurring theme in the writings of white English South Africans. It is a direct consequence of colonialism and the divided mind which it creates.

Colonization entailed for the colonizer writer an abrupt precipitation into a milieu which had not yet undergone a process of literary domestication. As a result, it was as if he was faced with a complete vacuum when he first began writing. He was faced with the particular difficulty of having to learn, in Olive Schreiner's well-known words, that "those brilliant phases and shapes which the imagination sees in far-off lands (were) not for him to portray"; he had to learn to "squeeze the colour from his brush, and dip it into the grey pigments around him ... (to) paint what lies before him."¹¹

Particularly if he was a member of the colonizer group, rather than that of the colonized, this was made that much more difficult for him since, given the absence of a sustaining local culture in the colony, his whole outlook was invariably and inescapably

dominated by the cultural preconceptions which were both imposed by and inherited from the mother country. Being products of British colonialism and imperialism, the earliest English writers in South Africa could hardly have been expected to escape from seeing Africa through European rather than African eyes. Without their European vision, clouded as it often was by the various myths of colonialism, these writers would have had no vision at all. However, it was precisely the dependency on this vision which produced a curious disjunction in their writing, something which, in turn, contributed to its failure as literature.

Writing in 1930 on English South African culture, R.F. Currey noted:

Now it is clear that the culture of England cannot be transported six thousand miles across the sea and be established under new skies without some curious changes taking place and some interesting problems arising. For culture, like other things, unless it adapts itself to its environment, will sicken and die. A purely exotic culture is an abomination: it loses its creative power, which in the main is the justification for its existence, and can only be maintained at an altogether excessive cost, both moral and material ... although we here in South Africa may speak the language of England, and may, perhaps, continue to speak it as it is spoken in England, yet almost the greater part of English literature finds its inspiration in things that do not exist in South Africa ... England is the repository of so much that is excellent in human life, and almost all its spiritual riches can be freely drawn upon by us. And yet, as experience shows, we have to be careful in doing so. On the one hand there is the danger that we may centre our care and efforts on acquiring these things and forget that they have to be adopted in form, if not in spirit, to meet changed conditions; and, if we fail to remember this, we shall inevitably become aliens in our own land. 12

The colonizer writer inherited the cultural preconceptions, the aesthetic norms and literary fashions of his or her mother country,

all of which had developed out of a rich cultural texture and highly developed societal forms; yet none of these were suitable for an accurate literary portrayal of his own colonial milieu; none of these provided suitable tools for an adequate interpretation in fictional terms, of his African reality. The nature of this reality was alien to the aesthetics and literary styles prescribed by Europe. And the failure to adapt an imported literary culture to the nature of Africa meant that the earliest English colonial writing in South Africa was marked by the attempt to superimpose artificial and obfuscatory literary survivals upon it. These were predominantly Romantic survivals from the literary vogue that dominated so much of nineteenth century Europe. And thus, English literature in South Africa, from its beginnings, was marked by the incongruous trappings of a derivative Romantic primitivism and sentimentality which was divorced from anything except its tenuous literary lineage and had only the most trivial connection with the actual South African terrain.

Thomas Pringle, who is often regarded as the founding father of English literature in South Africa, provides a graphic example of this failure to adapt an imported language and culture to another country, and thereby of the effect of cultural schizophrenia on the literary quality of a piece of writing, in his poem "Afar in the Desert":

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

And the mighty rhinoceros wallows at will
 In the fen where the wild ass is drinking his fill. 13

The final effect of this poem is that "exotic" abomination of which R.F. Currey speaks. And, indeed, most of English South African literature of the nineteenth century is characterized above all by a rugged and determined optimism, by a celebration in the high Romantic manner of the natural wonders of a sparsely populated land which had not yet undergone the ravages of industrialization. The most salient feature of the white colonizer's image of Africa was that of an exotic Eden in which Western man could relieve himself of the burdens of his flawed, industrialized civilization and regain a life-restoring sense of prelapsarian innocence and oneness with nature. As in the early United States, this highly romanticized image acted as a kind of objective correlative which, in the words of Henry James again, "would help one to take a picturesque view of one's internal possibilities, and to find in the landscape of the soul all sorts of fine sunrise and moonlight effects."¹⁴ Needless to say, it had very little to do with the actual nature of Africa itself.

Even if this romanticized image of Africa, so prevalent in early colonial English writing, was later supplanted in the work of Olive Schreiner (and in that of many other authors who followed her) by the image of Africa as a savage and barbarous land, a "heart of darkness", then this later perception, too, has also arisen out of the cultural schizophrenia created by colonialism, by the imposition of an alien, white European vision on a land in which it has no natural place. It is because of this divided mentality that white English South African literature has taken so long in becoming a specifically "South African", indigenous

literature. And it is also because of this split mind that so much of this literature seems to be nothing more than an infinitely inferior copy of European originals.

Cultural schizophrenia has confronted the colonizer writer with yet another problem which has had severely destructive consequences. As has been mentioned, the English in South Africa are part of a wider English-speaking world a cultural whole of which South Africa is only a small part (some would say a backwater); and this membership of a wider whole has created a measure of divided loyalty especially among writers and intellectuals. Typically, they have looked to London, Oxbridge and New York and other cultural centres of the English-speaking world. They have been anxious to meet the standards set there, and they have been pre-occupied with not becoming isolated and fossilized. Writing in 1959, Guy Butler could ask: "what market, what audience, can a scattered million of English South Africans be expected to provide for their writers? Our cultural capital is still London, with New York as alternative."¹⁵ This lack of a sustaining local audience has meant that many English South African novels have been addressed to readers in one or other of these metropolitan centres rather than to South Africans. And the very fact that so many of these novels have been and continue to be published overseas, particularly in London, raises serious doubts as to whether one can properly speak of an English South African literature at all. With the widespread practise of publication overseas, it could be argued that it would be far more accurate to call this body of writing the Colonial English Literature of South Africa.

The Movement away from Colonialism

If a colonial literature at the earliest stage tends to be marked and marred by fairly facile copies of metropolitan originals, to be marked by that provincialism which is invariably to be found in a people who are geographically displaced from a parent culture or civilization whose superiority they nevertheless continue to acknowledge and ape, then, at a later stage it usually gives evidence of a certain home-spun originality and a significant eclecticism as the more creative spirits look round for adequate instruments for portraying their own reality. Finally, it tends to be marked by the emergence of new forms and contents which are not only unique to that society, but which compare in depth and wholeness to the literature of the parent society.

Once the colonial writer has taken it upon himself to see his situation with an eye not distorted by the imperative norms of his inherited, transplanted culture, to adapt his imported language to the inevitably different forms of life in the colony, and to utilize even his own lack of a past in his writing, then the progression of it towards an independence from the mother culture has begun. The greatness, uniqueness and independence of Classic American literature, for instance, was an immediate result of the fact that novelists like Hawthorne and Melville had the courage (and also the arrogance of that courage) to perceive their relatively primitive American environment in literary terms that had, of necessity, to be largely of their own making and invention. They were able to use the very rawness and elemental nature of their situation to their own advantage, in the creation of a literature whose power often made the literature of the mother country, Britain, appear pallid and worn-out by comparison. They

were also able to find a fruitful creative tension in the very difference between the Old and New worlds and put this to use in their novels.

However, the position of the white English writer in South Africa has been somewhat different. As Dan Jacobson has written:

The white writer ... is a member of a society which has no roots in the past, or no past at all; his present is altogether tawdry and vulgar and thin, and morally and culturally debased; he, too, does not and cannot write for an audience of his own people (there are simply not enough people to support him); he, too, is without distinctive ideas to energize his work, as the Classic American novelists were energized - even by way of opposition - by the ideas involved in the very establishment of their country. 16

Why keep writing Jacobson's stuff? particularly note the Eurocentrism.

Unlike the great nineteenth century American novelists, the white English South African writer does not seem to have been able to use the inevitable conflict between England and South Africa in such a way that it might have become a truly creative element in his work. Rather, it would seem as if he has been far more concerned to salvage as much of British culture as was available to him, and this often without really questioning its appropriateness to his colonial situation. Whilst a tension or conflict between Europe and Africa is a defining feature of English South African literature, it is one which has never been used consciously enough for it to contribute to an emancipation from literary colonialism.

This may have been because there was never any broad nationalistic political and cultural movement among the English in South Africa such as there was in the early United States and which led in the

latter country to a hostility to all that Britain represented and a determination on the part of the Americans to strike out on their own. But the English in South Africa have never constituted a defined group or community; their predominantly urban and diverse backgrounds and their lack of politicization has meant that they have been, and are, not so much a group or community as a conglomerate of loosely structured sub-groups. They have never been unified by a distinctive nationalism. As N.G. Garson has maintained: "there is no geographical basis for it and, besides, the prior claims and superior numbers of Afrikaners have established pre-emptive rights."¹⁷ In spite of the fact that a number of critics, particularly over the last decade, have claimed that white English South African literature has given evidence of a progressive movement towards independence, that it has sundered its old colonial dependencies and that it reveals an increasingly indigenous "South African" quality, it will be seen that this is largely superficial and that the dependency has remained virtually unaltered since, on the ideological level particularly, the English in South Africa and their culture in general have undergone so few significant changes over the last one hundred years.

Furthermore, if the writing of the colonizer English writer in this country has been marred by the cultural schizophrenia already described and if he himself has been faced with the acute problem of cultural schizophrenia, his actual position and rôle as a writer has only grown more problematic, if not tortuous, with time. For, according to Mike Kirkwood, a certain historical progression is to be observed unfolding in the history of a colonial country. In the first stage of this progression, the white colonizer "fails to assert a critical awareness of his own ethnocentric assumptions

and projections, and uses the colonized as exotic models for rudimentary raids into the fascinating history of his own psyche."¹⁸

This stage or period is followed by a dawning awareness on the part of the colonizer of the real nature of his colonial society; and, lastly, this is followed by the historical initiative passing into the hands of the colonized who then assert their will to independence and freedom from the exploitation and oppression imposed upon them by the colonizer.

Although it has not yet reached any conclusion, this historical progression has clearly occurred in South Africa. And as a result of it, the position of the white writer has become increasingly problematic. More and more he has become oppressed by a sense of having been pushed to the side of an inevitable historical process in which he, as a member of the white colonizer group, has no part to play. Like "all whites on the continent, his future is without any certainty at all - without even the minimal certainty that consoles and nourishes the blacks in their struggle"; and, as Dan Jacobson has also commented: "he is cut off from the surge to political power that is animating the African consciousness in its every aspect."¹⁹ As the colonized (the blacks) in South Africa have had to withdraw into their own kind and to refuse relationships with the colonizers (the whites) in order to gather strength for their own political struggle and to acquire a sense of themselves which is not that which has been prescribed by the whites' denigrating images of them, so the colonizer writer has been faced increasingly with the problem of finding or creating an effective historical rôle for himself and his writing, and of transcending the cultural schizophrenia caused by his colonial background in order to contribute effectively to the making of a common culture in South Africa. It is a problem which remains to be solved.

Footnotes

1. William Plomer, "Preface" to I Speak of Africa (London: The Hogarth Press, 1927), p.v.
2. Dan Jacobson, "Introduction" to The Story Of An African Farm (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p.7.
3. Henry James, Hawthorne (London: MacMillan, 1957), p. 55.
4. ibid., p. 88.
5. Christopher Hope, "A Conversation With Guy Butler", Bolt, No. 7 (March 1973), p. 49.
6. Peter Temple, "A review of English-speaking South Africa Today", English in Africa, 4, No. 1 (March 1977), pp. 67-68.
7. Christopher Heywood, Aspects of South African Literature (London: Heinemann, 1976), p. viii.
8. Stephen Gray, Southern African Literature: An Introduction (Cape Town: David Philip, 1979), pp. 150-1.
9. Dan Jacobson, "The Writer In The Commonwealth", Time of Arrival and other essays (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1953), p. 159.
10. Nadine Gordimer, The Lying Days (London: Gollancz, 1953), pp. 20-21.
11. Olive Schreiner, "Preface" to The Story Of An African Farm (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1975), p. 24.
12. R.F. Currey, "English In The National Life", Coming Of Age: Studies in South African Citizenship and Politics, ed. Edgar H. Brookes (Cape Town: Maskew Miller, 1930), pp. 77-85.
13. Thomas Pringle, "Afar in the Desert", A Book of South African Verse, ed. Guy Butler (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), pp. 3-4.
14. Henry James, op. cit., p. 88.
15. Guy Butler, "Introduction" to A Book of South African Verse (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. xviii.
16. Dan Jacobson, "Out of Africa", Encounter, October 1959, p. 70.
17. N.G. Garson, "English-speaking South Africans and the British Connection: 1820-1961", English-Speaking South Africa Today, ed. André de Villiers (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 19.
18. Mike Kirkwood, "Beyond Butlerism", Poetry South Africa, eds. Peter Wilhelm and James Polley (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1976), p. 121.

19. Dan Jacobson, "Out of Africa", Time of Arrival and other essays (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1953), p. 175. Ezekiel Mphahlele agrees with Jacobson's opinion: "I should be inclined to feel sorry for the white writer in Africa, whose problem, as Mr. Jacobson rightly says, is not made bearable by the same consolation and nourishment the blacks derive from their struggle. He is many generations removed from European culture, and is too scared to come to terms with the indigenous peoples and the human reality they have to offer. His fear has driven him into a civilized posture, in which he fancies that he is custodian of the very civilization his actions are discrediting." The African Image (London: Faber and Faber, 1962), p. 92.

Chapter 2

Problems of the white English writer in South Africa: Apartheid

Those cultural fragmentations and various sorts of impoverishment caused by colonialism have only been aggravated by the policy of Apartheid which, despite the common popular belief, was not an invention of Dr. Malan's Afrikaner Nationalist Party about 1948, but has been a fundamental tenet, in one form or another, since the very beginning of European settlement in South Africa. The racism which Apartheid enshrines and institutionalizes is itself a product of the early colonial situation in this country as well as racial and class divisions.¹ That cultural schizophrenia which was an unavoidable consequence of colonialism has only been compounded by that form of practical, societal schizophrenia, that separation between races which Apartheid has both promoted and enforced.

So far-reaching have the effects of Apartheid been on all spheres and aspects of South African life that the poet Christopher Hope is quite correct when he writes (echoing Olive Schreiner) that "what is important in South Africa is not art but apartheid. That is the single issue touching us all. It's in the air we breathe, bred in the marrow and along the intestines ... The thing that separates us, paradoxically, is our only common ground."² Almost all analyses of art in South Africa stress the profoundly inhibiting, if not the absolutely destructive, determining effect which the Apartheid state, both before and after 1948, has had and continues to have upon art and literature in this country:

Man has no control over the measure in which talent is given to this one and withheld from that; but man, through the state, controls the circumstances in which the artist develops. Innate creativity can be falsified, trivialized, deflected, conditioned, stifled, deformed and even destroyed by the state, and the state of

society it decrees ... there can have been few if any examples in human history of the degree, variety and intensity of conflicts that exist between the South African artist and the external power of society. That external power is at its most obvious in the censorship laws, running amuck through literature and lunging out at the other arts. But it is at the widest level of the formation of our [South African] society itself, and not at any specific professional level, that the external power of society enters the breast and brain of the artist and determines the nature and state of art. It is from the daily life of South Africa that there have come the conditions of profound alienation which prevail among South African artists. 3

And the enduring structure of divisions and separations between races and classes, which defines the Apartheid state, has confronted the artist, and more particularly the writer, with a number of acute problems amongst which the general one of isolation between races is most readily apparent.

Isolation Between Races

The doctrine and practise of Apartheid has had the direct effect of isolating almost all racial groups in South Africa from one another. At the broadest level it has sought to divide the blacks from the whites and to ensure a condition of permanent estrangement between these two races. The limiting of experience and perception which has been forcibly imposed on both black and white writers as a result of this and their consequent inability to transcend, if only imaginatively, the sterilizing confines of their mutual isolations has often been commented upon. Nadine Gordimer offers the best description of the consequences for the writer of this syndrome of ubiquitous isolation:

I now believe [she writes] that George Luckács is right when he says that a writer, in imaginative creation and the intuition that comes with it, cannot go beyond the potential of his own experience. That potential is very wide; but living 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. There are some aspects of a black man's life that have been put impossibly beyond the white man's potential experience, and the same applies to the black man and some aspects of a white man's experience. Both can write of the considerable fringe society in which black and white are 'known', in a meaningful sense, to one another; but there are areas from which, by iron circumstance, each in turn finds himself shut out, even intuitively, to their mutual loss as writers. 4

Inflexible social divisions based on class and colour have resulted in a lack of communication between white and black racial groups in South Africa; and this lack has only grown more profound with time. Each of these groups has either rigidly excluded itself or has been rigidly excluded from any real, authentic participation in the life of each other. Consequently, just as South Africa is a multi-racial society, it is also a multi-cultural one; it consists of a number of cultures all of which flow in separated, isolated channels and which, having no real contact with each other, have had a correspondingly slight influence upon each other as well. In his "Introduction" to A Book of South African Verse (1959), Guy Butler writes that "differences of belief and aspiration, as well as speech, have encouraged an intellectual apartheid between these groups [English, Afrikaans, Coloureds, Africans and Asiatics]. Each has developed along its own lines, suspicious and often tragically ignorant of the others."⁵ And commenting upon the above observation, Ezekiel Mphahlele has added: "Professor Butler has

got his finger on the real malady of South African cultural life, which makes it difficult to talk about a South African literature irrespective of colour or race, the irony of it being that black and white should have lived all these years together, become so deeply involved in each other's lives and influenced each other's way of life so markedly, and yet have continued to move in three separate cultural streams."⁶

Language

Apartheid has made impossible the growth of a single, unified and unifying indigenous culture in South Africa. Notwithstanding the fact that a unified culture is by no means a prerequisite for a flourishing literature, it remains a general rule that a culture or a society which is not a whole cannot express itself as a whole. And if it is remembered that one of the major impulses of the creative imagination lies in its ceaseless endeavour to forge an organic whole out of many disparate parts, the difficulties of the writer in the fragmented Apartheid society become even more clear; because of the societal divisions which have been entrenched by the Apartheid state it is well-nigh impossible for him to gain and to present a whole view of his society. However great his imaginative capacities might be, his real intimate knowledge and understanding is forcibly confined to just one fragment or segment of his society.

This limitation imposed upon the writer's vision by the fractured Apartheid society is reflected in a general limitation or inadequacy in almost all South African literature. T.T. Mayana summarizes this inadequacy when he writes: "Above all, both black and white literature in South Africa, is one-eyed literature; concentrating on one section of the racial spectrum. The artist has no choice.

He knows his clan or tribe more than he will ever know the others. The state presents him with a racial referent with which to interpret what he sees, hears, and thinks."⁷ And Ezekiel Mphahlele goes still further in attributing the general poverty of all literature in South Africa to the impoverishing social conditions created by Apartheid: "as long as the white man's politics continue to impose on us a ghetto existence, so long shall the culture and therefore literature of South Africa continue to shrivel up, to sink lower and lower; and for so long shall we in our writing continue to reflect only a minute fraction of life."⁸

Some Psychological Effects of Apartheid

Another destructive consequence of Apartheid, both for the writer and for all South Africans as well, is to be observed in some of its psychological effects. Although it might be imagined that Apartheid has benefited the writer in that its very evils, absurdities and anomalies have provided him with so much material for his writing, with so many incidents which have inspired his protest, it is all too apparent that its interminable oppressions have often had an imprisoning rather than a liberating effect upon him, that the monolithic reality of Apartheid has resulted in a withering instead of a blossoming of the writer's imaginative capacities and abilities. Nadine Gordimer's remark about South Africans in general can be applied to white English South African writers as well:

While the problems of Africa, in abstract, have had the effect, on people outside the physical sphere of Africa's influence, of expanding them, making them re-examine their moral and spiritual boundaries and

find them too narrow, those same problems have had another response from those of us who actually live on the earth of Africa ourselves. Under the terrors of these problems, we have shrunk rather than expanded: instead of seeking new freedom for man's spirit, we have felt the accepted moral values of the civilized world too large and have changed them to contain us more rigidly and narrowly. A sense of space seems to have oppressed us in our souls as well as in our bodies; we have shut ourselves in. 9

*conclude
or
restarting*

For the very weight of the Apartheid system, its dire distresses and the moral imperatives which it ceaselessly urges upon the writer as a result, can be seen to have led to a dryness and coldness, a withering of the imagination, to an absence of play (in the Nietzschean sense of that word), and to a lack of irony (that hallmark of an amused, sceptical, detached, and mainly benevolent nature) in South African literature in general. Even if satire and comedy are common in this body of work, the restrictions and constrictions of Apartheid, the sense of urgency and lack of time which its problems inspire, have given a sombre and choked character to much of this literature. T.T. Mayana, referring to Solzhenitsyn and the Soviet labour camps, remarks that "the human spirit quite often blossoms in such desolation and repression defeats its own purpose. But where the oppressor has not taken away everything; in a situation where a Gordimer is permitted to operate in the half-light of a spurious freedom, or in a situation where the black writer is permitted to operate piecemeal in occasional moments of repose from the grinding tortures of the law, the human spirit does indeed wither, the creative imagination dying with it. That is the lesson of the South African situation for art."¹⁰

In addition to this, the writer's enforced lack of knowledge of the other races in the country often enough results in a series of fantasies which arise out of his need to bridge the gap of unknowing between the races. In a psychological sense it may be said that South Africa is held together by a nexus of peoples "dreaming" each other in terms of the myths that the distance between them creates. And with the imperative necessity of achieving a knowledge of races other than his own, a necessity which imposes itself upon him both because it is politically essential and because the imagination desires to know and make whole, and yet with his inability to get to know other races because of Apartheid, it would seem as if the writer cannot escape from mere fantasies of knowledge which operate as consolations on his psyche which is imbalanced by the fears, hatreds, and anguishes sparked off by living alongside races of people who are often no more than a play of shadows on the edge of his consciousness. The inhibiting psychological effects of this syndrome, peculiar to the Apartheid system, scarcely need mentioning or elaboration. Nor does the fact that it is precisely the estrangement between peoples in South Africa, that alienation and distance, which forms the breeding-ground of those myths about each other which serve only to increase, and often to justify, that very estrangement itself.

Although the Apartheid system is notorious for its brutalizing effects upon almost all the human beings whose lives it controls, in the specific case of the white writer its dehumanizing effects operate in a more subtle manner. Of the latter, Breyten Breytenbach has written:

He [the white writer] cannot identify with anyone but his colleagues, any other class

but his own white, well-to-do one. His culture is used to shield him from any experience, or even an approximation of the reality of injustices ... The artist who closes his eyes to everyday injustice and inhumanity will without fail see less with his writing or painting eyes too. His work will become barren. When one prefers not to see certain things; when one chooses not to hear certain voices; when one's tongue is used only to justify this choice - then the things one turned away from do not cease to exist, the voices do not stop shouting - but one's eyes become walled, one's ears less sensitive, therefore deaf. One's tongue will make some decadent clacking noises, and one's hands will be groping over oneself. 11

Even if the white English writer, unlike his black counterpart, automatically inherits a number of privileges such as leisure in which to write and a relative freedom from official harassment because of his class position and skin colour, he frequently pays for this through a fear, guilt and shame which blunt his spirit and take the edge off his perceptions. In the case of many of these writers it is possible to assert that the power of their writing is weakened by their relatively comfortable, privileged position. Despite the nausea which is a frequent reaction in white South African writing to the South African landscape (both literal and figurative), it is yet another indication of the manifold schizophrenias of this country's life that one seldom receives the sense that this literature is terribly afflicted by the sufferings caused by Apartheid. The evasion of these sufferings is made easy through the white writer's class position. In the absence of a common cultural inheritance (say, a common language) uniting all the social strata in South African society it is of course especially difficult for the writer of one class to identify with the problems of another class, for the bourgeois writer to identify with the lot of the oppressed proletariat. Nevertheless, it might

not be mere conjecture to say that it is because of this that so seldom has a truly powerful voice emerged from white English South African literature. Jack Cope has written:

If one can accept (this) idea of a certain energy and vitality deriving from the sufferings of an oppressed condition - an energy that tends to get lost up among the privileged and powerful - then it is easier to see a connection between the rhetorical weakness of much writing by the best-intentioned liberal whites and the social group from which they find it so difficult to wrench themselves ... Such writing, poetry or fiction, fails (then) on the test of subjectivity, of experience and identity. It is a literature about things, well observed and descriptive, perhaps, but inevitably external, surface work. 12

The white English writer is largely a voyeur of the sufferings caused by Apartheid, and his exclusion from these, from that radical drive created by the experience of pain itself, is another reason which might account for the lack of energy evident in his writing. He has remained an observer rather than a participant.

Censorship

Censorship is essential to the functioning of the Apartheid state, and the abolition of the former cannot hope to be achieved without the abolition of the latter. Of the writers dealt with in this study, both Nadine Gordimer and J.M. Coetzee have had novels banned or embargoed and, with the exception of Dan Jacobson, the others have all suffered some form of official state harassment; Olive Schreiner was virtually under house-arrest in Hanover for part of the Boer War and Alan Paton's passport was withdrawn in 1960. Far more importantly, however, the wide-ranging censorship laws have

contributed to the almost complete eradication of writings by blacks such as Mphahlele, Modisane and Brutus; they have erased significant areas of history and have served to reinforce the tragic barriers of non-communication between races. Also, they have played an important part in establishing that sullen atmosphere of oppression, that "climate of fear" which has so often been noticed in South Africa and which has scarcely proved congenial to the creative writer. Once again, Nadine Gordimer provides the best description of the crippling effects of censorship:

X

Writers whose works are banned may hope to be read another day, or elsewhere; but a whole generation of South Africans is growing up with areas of the world of ideas closed to them, and without any insight into the lives and aspirations of their fellow countrymen, black or white as the case may be, living on the other side of that net of legislation through which we may all only peer at each other dumbly. A book may be banned under any of the Publication and Entertainments Act's ninety-seven definitions of what is 'undesirable'. The success of censorship must be seen in the completeness with which we are cut off not just from the few books dealing with our own ingrown society, but also from the books which formulate the thinking that is going on all around us, in particular on this continent to which we stake our lives on belonging ... As South Africans we do not know what the rest of Africa is thinking, just as, as whites, we do not know what the black and coloured population is thinking ... All this - intellectual isolation, isolation of ignorance among white people about the inner life of their countrymen of another colour - this is the blunting of human faculties that control of communication is steadily achieving. 14

Although it is not possible to assess the extent to which the existence of censorship has actually altered, either consciously or subconsciously, the manner in which writers have treated certain controversial topics and, furthermore, whether it has led to a process of self-censorship in the mind of the writer himself, the

— censorship laws of the Apartheid state and its banning of books have only increased the number of writers who have left South Africa and gone into exile. Censorship itself is yet another specific expression and instance of the enormous control which politics has had and continues to have over literature in South Africa.

The Apartheid State and Ideology

Nevertheless, such factors as isolation, censorship, and the psychological effects of Apartheid which have imposed such destructive limitations on the writer and his creativity become relatively minor problems when set against the overwhelming destructive influence which the very social formation of South Africa has had on all South African literature. The savage, inhuman ramifications of Apartheid have not only provided an uncountable number of racial situations which, in turn, have given the writer his distinctively South African subject matter; nor can the effects of the Apartheid state be limited to its efficient and diligent obliteration of much of the valuable writing in South Africa along with the lives, mainly black, of those who have written it. The provision by the state of a national and, indeed, inescapable topic for all writers, as well as a bureau of "grey ones" to ensure that it is treated only within certain official bounds, is only the most conspicuous crowning feature of its determining and constraining influences. Infinitely more importantly, it is the social formation of South Africa itself, consolidated and reinforced by the Apartheid state, which is the most significant determinant of all South African literature, even down to the manner in which the latter has treated its abiding topic of racism.

For just as in a racist society ideologies of cultural difference are an invariable phenomenon which serve either to legitimize or to challenge the domination of one class by another through emphasizing the dehumanization of the one or the genetic superiority of the other,¹⁵ so too in a class society there will exist a number of different ideologies among the various class strata and even within a single class itself.¹⁶ Not only do these class divisions reinforced by the state give rise to those differing ideologies which serve to increase the isolation and estrangement of one class from another, but these class ideologies themselves often serve to reinforce a blinkered, transfixed perception of a certain historical situation. The Apartheid state, by entrenching a class system in South Africa through a monolithic system of controls, has made all too easy the perpetuation of an untenable ideology amongst a significant sector of the English South African sub-group. And it is this ideology of liberalism (which will be discussed in much greater detail below) which has been responsible, more than any single factor or determinant, for the very nature of white English South African literature and also for its failures and limitations. Its hegemony over a small but significant sector of the white ruling class, and particularly white English South African writers, has frequently blinded them as to the real historical nature of their situation; and their class position has often prevented them from transcending the inadequacies implicit in their ideology. As Memmi has remarked: "it is not easy to escape mentally from a concrete situation, to refuse its ideology, while continuing to live within its actual relationships."¹⁷

The most important function of ideology is to make a set of beliefs, values and ideas appear "natural", unquestionable and all-pervasive.

It serves to create the illusion that the world view which it constitutes is "universal" and, moreover, is totally applicable to and capable of comprehending the entire reality of a class-divided society when, in fact, it is frequently nothing more than mystifying when brought to bear on anything outside the class of people whose lives it informs. Time and again in white English South African literature one witnesses the attempts of writers to interpret a situation in the light of an ideology and its appropriate literary forms which, though these might have a great value and reality for them because of their privileged class position and their European background, have little reality and allow few possibilities for illuminating interpretation and understanding when they have to deal with those aspects of South African life which lie outside the protective fence surrounding their own class.

Terry Eagleton has correctly said: "Literary works are not mysteriously inspired, or explicable in terms of their author's psychology. They are forms of perception, particular ways of seeing the world; and as such they have a relation to that dominant way of seeing the world which is the 'social mentality' or ideology of an age. That ideology, in turn, is the product of the concrete social relations in which men enter at a particular time and place; it is the way these class-relations are experienced, legitimized and perpetuated."¹⁸ And it is precisely because the class divisions of the Apartheid society, both before and after 1948, have given rise to a number of different ideologies, and also because the latter have had the crucial determining effect on its various literatures, that any understanding of white English South African literature in particular must involve a discussion of the class

out of which it comes and the ideology which informs it; any understanding necessitates a discussion of the nature of white English South African culture and society. For it is the very ideology of this culture, an ideology which has formed the world view of the writers discussed here and which finds expression in their writing, which has been and is at once the most immediate and far-reaching of the problems with which they have been faced - and this whether they have been aware of it or not.

Footnotes

1. For a concise discussion of the roots of Apartheid, see L. Schlemmer, "The Factors Underlying Apartheid", Anatomy of Apartheid, ed. Peter Randall (Johannesburg: Sprocas-Ravan, 1970), pp. 19-30.
2. Christopher Hope, "Letter", in Contrast, 10, No. 4 (August 1976), p. 91.
3. Nadine Gordimer, "Relevance and Commitment", mimeo, p.2.
4. Nadine Gordimer, "The Novel and The Nation in South Africa", African Writers on African Writing, ed. G.D. Killam (London: Heinemann, 1973), p. 52.
5. Guy Butler, "Introduction" to A Book of South African Verse (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. xvii.
6. Ezekiel Mphahlele, "Black and White", New Statesman, 10 September 1960, p. 342.
7. T.T. Mayana, "Problems of a Creative Writer in South Africa", Aspects of South African Literature, ed. Christopher Heywood (London: Heinemann, 1976), p. 86.
8. Ezekiel Mphahlele, The African Image (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), p. 109.
9. Nadine Gordimer, "The Novel and The Nation in South Africa", p. 39.
10. T.T. Mayana, "Problems of a Creative Writer in South Africa", p. 94.
11. Breyten Breytenbach, "The Alienation of White South Africa", n.d., n.p., n.pag.
12. Jack Cope, "Notes" in Contrast, 8, No. 2 (April 1977), pp. 95-96.
13. For a discussion of this, see André Brink, "Censorship - Climate of Fear", Contrast, 7, No. 2 (June 1971), pp. 17-22.
14. Nadine Gordimer, "Apartheid and Censorship", The Grey Ones, ed. J.S. Paton (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1974), pp. 5-6.
15. For a discussion of this point, see Leo Kuper, Race, Class and Power (London: Duckworth, 1974), p. 156.
16. In a sociological study on differences in ideology and conceptions of utopia among various racial groups in South Africa, K. Danziger has shown how different outlooks - "conservative", "technicist", "catastrophic", "liberal", and "revolutionary" - pertain to different groups according to their position in the class structure of South Africa, with the dominant whites tending to hold conservative views on political change and the dominated blacks inclining towards revolutionary beliefs. "Ideology and Utopia in South Africa: A Methodological contribution to the Sociology of Knowledge",

British Journal of Sociology, 14 (1963), pp. 59-76.

17. Quoted by Mike Kirkwood, "Beyond Butlerism", Poetry South Africa, eds. Peter Wilhelm and James Polley (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1976), p. 131.
18. Terry Eagleton, Marxism and Literary Criticism (London: Methuen, 1976), p. 6.

Chapter 3

Problems of the white English writer in South Africa: The Ideology
of the English in South Africa

It is often mentioned that the ideology of the English in South Africa has always been that of liberalism. Yet, ironically, although this has always been the major political philosophy and ideology associated with them as a group, few English South Africans have been drawn to liberalism. English ideas about the Rule of Law and civil liberty took root at the Cape and, to a lesser extent, in Natal in the nineteenth century, and Thomas Pringle championed the freedom of the press in the early part of it. These habits are among the defining features of liberalism, and yet the number of English South Africans who have campaigned for their universal application (for all South Africans) has been comparatively small at all times. Significantly, probably the most prominent liberal in South African history has been an Afrikaner, J.H. Hofmeyr.

The fact that liberalism has been traditionally the ideology of a small minority within a minority white group in South Africa has not only been one of the main reasons for its lack of political efficacy; it has also been the cause of a major division within those people who constitute white English South Africa, a division which makes it difficult to view them as a homogeneous group. For the views of English writers and intellectuals have often been at considerable variance with those of the rest of the members of white English South Africa; characteristically, they have held views which have often been in absolute contradiction to those held by the majority of their own kind.

Commenting on the frequently observed anomaly evident in the fact that the English churches, universities, press and intelligentsia have often been politically far to the left of the community which

they represent, David Welsh has suggested that this "apparent anomaly or discrepancy should be viewed in terms of a differing regard for tradition."¹ He mentions the nineteenth century English heritage of liberalism and radicalism, the reluctance of most English-speaking whites to see the rights embodied in this heritage extended to all inhabitants in South Africa, and concludes that "there are, however, certain rôles, such as clergyman, university teacher, writer, or journalist, which are inherently and particularly concerned with the articulation of cultural tradition and with protecting or promoting the values which are part of it. Heightened awareness of, or proximity to, a heritage may explain why it is that outspoken opponents of official policies are more common in these areas than elsewhere in English-speaking South Africa."²

This hypothesis seems to me to be fundamentally correct. For, on one level at least, white English South Africa gives evidence right throughout its history of a division running between a relatively small group of liberal writers, teachers and intellectuals who have taken it upon themselves to uphold and defend the various ideals deriving from British liberal and radical thought, and the vast majority of their kind who have persisted in their colonial rôle as a visionless, sectarian bourgeoisie overwhelmingly devoted to material comforts and mercantile concerns. Despite the common bourgeois status of both groups, it is for this reason that it is difficult to identify the English in South Africa as a unified community with a specific communal rôle to play by virtue of their Englishness. Rather, they have been, and still are, in the well-known words of Anthony Delius, no more than a "vague communion"; and this communion has only grown more vague with time as the

practical possibility of a unifying nationalism amongst them has grown more remote.

Nevertheless, however much white English South Africa cannot be regarded, either in the past or present, as being collectively and authentically liberal in its ideology, both its intellectual élite and its much greater number of conservative members have been united at least in their common possession of a common inheritance which can be called the English ideology. Rooted in certain liberal tenets, this ideology is also constituted by a common pattern or structure of feeling, by a characteristically pragmatic type of sensibility which drastically delimits the range of experiences and the nature of political beliefs and actions open to it. Guy Butler implies this when he describes the English in South Africa as having "a practical instinct for making things work. They are suspicious of magnificent political ideas or ideals, which make absolute demands upon men, and usually spell personal, social and natural disaster (Jingoism, Nazism, Fascism, Communism). They have an ancient belief in the primacy of the individual, in the value and wisdom of discussion, in the necessity for social adjustment etc."³

At the basis of what I have called the English ideology is to be found the specifically liberal belief in the primacy of the individual and the fundamental importance of human relationships. One of the classic statements of this belief has been formulated by E.M. Forster in his essay "What I Believe": "I live in an age of Faith - the sort of epoch I used to hear praised when I was a boy. It is extremely unpleasant really. It is bloody in every sense of the word. And I have to keep my end up in it. Where do

I start? ... With personal relationships. Here is something comparatively solid in a world full of violence and cruelty."⁴

It is above all from this sort of credo that there follows the type of sensibility which characterizes the English ideology. For with the primary emphasis being placed upon personal relationships it is inevitable that those virtues which will enhance these will be emphasized and valued above all others, that Forster's "tolerance, good temper, and sympathy"⁵ (or kindness, courtesy, and charity), a reverence for good manners and reasonableness, and a heavy stress on "certain private virtues, such as inner strength and integrity" will be seen as cardinal, and an individual consciousness of "marked moral intensity" will be considered the highest achievement.⁶ Following from this conception of fundamentals is a seemingly innate (because part of an engrained sensibility) suspicion of and scepticism towards any political ideas which demand an absolute commitment from men and women, a preference for 'common sense' as opposed to reason, for dialogue, discussion and mediation, for reformism rather than revolution, and for the preservation of cultural continuities as opposed to the fomenting of discontinuities. In addition to these features, and also as a result of its primary stress on the individual, the English ideology is marked by "a general avoidance of both the 'abstract-analytical' and the 'visionary-daemonic' as modes of thought - say, Hegel at one extreme, Dostoyevsky at the other."⁷ In literature this is expressed in a preference for "sensuous empiricism" rather than for the above modes which Dostoyevsky and Hegel respectively epitomize.

The specific limitations of this ideology and the sensibility which

it informs, as well as many other features of it, will be enlarged upon below.⁸ At this point it is sufficient to say that this ideology which is common to white English South Africa dictates the latter's easy-going tolerance, the laissez-faire attitude it displays to the society around it and its distrust for ideology. Its ^{Leadership by an State of confederacy} hegemony is often the reason for the absence of historical vision among these people and, in some cases, among its writers as well. And in its implication that the fulfillment and realization of human beings depends on personal relations and on acts of individual choice, it tends to ignore the power of the environment, of political and social institutions which determine men and thus circumscribe the possibilities of individual autonomy. In the case of white English South African writers it is this ideology which is responsible for a number of radical deficiencies in their work; it is also the direct cause of the most crucial contradiction in their culture as a whole, a contradiction which has had a decisive influence on the literature which they have produced.

The Contradiction of the English ideology

The English ideology and its perpetuation is the result of several factors. Amongst these the most significant is the fact that the English in South Africa, almost from their very first settlement in the country, have been members of a colonizer bourgeoisie and have been, until relatively recently, deeply dependent upon their close historical connection with Britain for their values, their sense of identity, and their culture in the widest sense of that word. This, in turn, has meant that a moat of intellectual and spiritual isolation has never ceased to surround their cultural life. Eric Harber suggests three inter-related causes for this cultural

isolation:

The first cause was the continued rejection of the challenge of Africa. On arrival in South Africa, the English-speaking European has generally found his tools for measuring, defining, and penetrating his new country unsuitable, and he has not bothered to devise the right ones. Secondly, he has made do with the curious combination of positivism and subjective romanticism which was available for so long at British educational institutions, and, though now devoid of any intelligible content, was still able to hold most South African minds in its clutches. The third cause, related to the others and aggravated by their bigotry and pusillanimity was racialism. It was based on the fear of extinction that a civilization which considers itself superior feels for one that it believes to be inferior ... The combined effect of these attitudes made English-speaking South Africans reluctant to assimilate what was there around them, and it made them sparing in their absorption of their own acknowledged European heritage ... It caused them to be concerned with 'states of mind' and 'moral consciousness' rather than achievements or events, with 'values' rather than virtues. It created, to borrow a phrase used with approval in a slightly different, but not unrelated, context by Professor Anthony Woodward, a 'state of suspended animation' in the minds of those who were aware of the multiple choices before them, but availed themselves of none. 9

The isolation of the English has been aggravated by the fact that they have never really been forced by historical events to abandon their class position and their ideology; they have been able to continue living almost undisturbed within the stockade of a genteel, impoverished colonial culture. Even if today their 'cultural' position is commonly perceived as an embattled one, the English, in the words of Lawrence Schlemmer, "have not had their material privilege and relatively affluent life-style threatened in the least. Theirs has been a comfortable political suffocation."¹⁰

Above all, it is precisely the fact that white English South Africa has neither of its own volition nor through external force had to abandon its class position as a colonizer bourgeoisie and all the values which are consequent upon it which is the source of the most crucial contradiction in their culture. For being insulated from South Africa by their British heritage, enjoying all the freedoms consequent upon their long-standing class position, the ideology of this group, and especially of its intellectuals, stands in total contradiction to the semi-totalitarian complexion of South Africa as a whole. And this has always been the case.

As has already been briefly mentioned,¹¹ the essence of this contradiction is that whilst this liberal English ideology is a direct expression of the class position of the English and is adequate to the lived reality of their position and the number of relative freedoms they automatically inherit by virtue of inhabiting it, that whilst it is an ideology which is quite viable within the enislanded, bourgeois realm of white English South Africa, and is also quite appropriate to the internal structure and nature of their culture, it is in fact an ideology which is totally inappropriate and mystifying when it is brought to bear on anything outside their own insulated and isolated enclave in South Africa. By being part of the white ruling kingdom and yet remaining hemmed in by their British cultural heritage, white English South Africa has been able to preserve the illusion of the efficacy of an ideology which has no viability in this country and which, moreover, has never afforded many possibilities at any time for a true understanding of it.

The illusion of free choice, of that possibility of choice and

refusal which is the essence of freedom, and the myth of individuality which has been perpetuated so successfully and for so long by the illusory freedoms offered by the bourgeois nature of white English South Africa and enshrined in its liberal ideology, has given rise to the most acute form of schizophrenia which is to be observed in white English South African literature: the disjunction between an ideology and an historical reality. The conflict which this disjunction generates is to be seen particularly clearly in a general thematic pattern which frequently appears in this literature; a character imbued with the liberal ideals of the novelist himself (or herself) attempts in some way to realize these in the South African context, yet is invariably forced to realize that the liberal ideology with all its assumptions as to the primacy of the individual and his or her free development is impotent in this context. An irreconcilable conflict is thus established between the dreams of an individual character and the many forms of determinism which circumscribe the individual life in South Africa. This conflict is then artistically "dissolved" by death (tragedy), by renunciation (escapism), or culminates in a sterile impasse, in an inability to act which in the end is rooted in individualism.

It may be argued that a conflict of this sort is one of the defining features of the novel throughout its history, whether in Europe, America, or Africa and the fact that much English South African fiction is structured around a conflict between a liberal individual and an illiberal society says nothing for or against it. It may also be contended that the impotence of the liberal ideology in the historical circumstances of South Africa, both past and present, does not necessarily imply that something is inherently

wrong with this ideology, which might justify its being morally condemned. However, that there are intrinsic limitations to this ideology is something which will be argued in the following chapter. At the moment it is sufficient to add that, considering the failure of the liberal impulse which Olive Schreiner's The Story of An African Farm records, it is surprising that the basic elements of the liberal ideology and the literary forms (particularly the traditional realist novel) which are the main vehicles for its expression should have remained the prevailing ones in white English South African fiction to almost this very day. It is surprising that so many novelists who have followed Schreiner in time, having also done little more than record the failure of the liberal ideology in different contexts, have made no attempt to utilize a different ideology and to develop other literary forms which might be more appropriate.

Historical Developments

It would be wrong to assume that various historical developments have not had a significant effect upon white English South African culture and ideology. For the purposes of this thesis, the most important of these occurred after 1948 with the Afrikaner Nationalist victory at the polls and the subsequent entrenchment of racism in the policy of Apartheid. For with this event and the later sundering of the British connection in 1961, the assassination of liberalism as a political programme, and with the individual becoming increasingly constrained by the controls of the South African state, the position of the English was perceived as increasingly threatened. In his opening address to "The Conference of Writers, Publishers, Editors and University Teachers of English"

which is exactly what this thesis does.

held at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1956, Professor I.D. MacCrone remarked of English South Africans:

Up to the quite recent past many of us had been able to live a sheltered kind of existence, culturally and psychologically speaking. As a result we have hitherto been able to avoid facing up to the realities of South African life ... We have felt, and been encouraged to feel, that somehow or other our privileged status could continue to be enjoyed, and that we should never be called upon to change our ways and attitudes ... All that has changed now and, as a minority group, we are wandering around in a political wilderness largely of our own making ... Our privileged status, as a minority group, has gone with the wind, for we are now a minority group under pressure. 12

As a result of this sudden sense of being threatened, a host of doubts began to be expressed by liberal English intellectuals like Guy Butler concerning the rôle, the identity, and the future of English-speaking South Africa. The following statement by the latter is representative of this new sense of uncertainty and insecurity: "the predicament of many English-speaking South Africans is acute. They feel a lack of purpose of direction; they want to feel they belong; and they are afraid of belonging: they don't know what to belong to."¹³

This is a new development. For, however great the cultural isolation of the English has been, Denis Worrall is correct when he asserts:

From shortly after their arrival in South Africa until the early fifties, English South Africans implicitly identified themselves with the South African totality. Culturally, constitutionally, socially, economically, it was their kind of society and their social and political values were 'givens' in the situation. It is this which explains the extraordinary absence of self-consciousness which was such a

marked characteristic of English South Africa until relatively recently. Questions about the contribution or role of English South Africa are post 1953 questions; Guy Butler's remark in a widely-quoted article he contributed to New Nation in March 1968 about the need 'to consciously locate ourselves and strike root' would not have made sense in 1938. 14

Butler's comment itself not only registers the recent and burgeoning sense of obsolescence that the English began to experience in a Republic which was largely a creation by Afrikaners for Afrikaners alone, nor simply the generalized projection of an uprooted intellectual perceiving his own dilemma as the experience of his own people (though this is certainly part of it), but also the end of the era of liberalism in South Africa. For implicit in both Butler's and MacCrone's numerous doubts and exhortations in the post-1948 period is the recognition that the era of the individual is over, that the English will only have a rôle, will only possess an identity more substantial than that which is based on a number of personal relationships, if there is a genuine community among them, a common centre and a common purpose.

That this is simply impossible with their present class position and social organization in South Africa is something which Butler consistently ignores, and hence the complete inadequacy of the solutions he proposes for the disintegration he so rightly perceives and accurately describes. For the white English-speaking community to become the concerned custodians of the English language in South Africa (one of Butler's repeated suggestions) cannot possibly be a solution to their pervasive anomie since this is the result of historical factors which Butler never analyzes, but simply describes.¹⁵ Nor can any attempt to resuscitate their past compensate for their present deficit, for their sense of displace-

ment which has come about through their being pushed to the sidelines of history.¹⁶ For a past history cannot be artificially resurrected; it can only have a meaning if it is the living possession of a cohesive community of people who possess a definite conception of their historical rôle. Otherwise, it is little more than sentimental folklore.

In essence, the uncertainties which have come to pervade the English culture and its ideology are the result of the relegation of the English as a group to a politically powerless minority in South Africa. With this relegation and the blow it has dealt to those settled convictions of power, security and self-importance which are such a feature of a liberal bourgeoisie, there is some evidence (particularly among intellectuals and writers) that the English liberal ideology has become more and more *emphasises an existence of individual* existential in character. For Existentialism, as has so often been noted, is the ideology of the breakdown of liberal bourgeois society and all its securities.¹⁷ And although it is impossible to establish whether there has been an ideological change in English South Africa as a whole, over the last three decades an increasingly existential element has emerged and become apparent in white English South African literature. More and more this literature, whether poetry, fiction, or drama, has become one of anomie, alienation, angst, and of bewilderments about identity. When an ideology starts disintegrating because it is no longer adequate to an historical reality, then that stability of the self which it produces usually starts breaking down as well; and this process precipitates what is commonly called an "identity crisis".¹⁸ Recent white English South African fiction gives much evidence of "identity crises" and often records the endeavours of lonely, abandoned individuals to define a self through

choice and action in a world in which former values provide no guidelines. Given the uncertain position of the English and the fact that their liberal ideology has become increasingly inadequate, it is perhaps not surprising that these quandaries and areas of human experience which Existentialism has described so well should have become such conspicuous features in their writing.

However, a good many white English South African authors have continued writing as if the breakdown of liberalism has never taken place. Again, this illusion might still be possible for those living within the insulated island of white English South Africa. A number of others, on the other hand, having perceived this breakdown and yet not being able to adopt an ideology or identify fully with an alternative ideological tradition, have been reduced to an ineffectual gesturing in the dark or to a hollow rhetoric directed either towards their own kind or to the blacks in whose hands they perceive the future to lie.

That ideology of liberalism which has been the source of the crucial contradiction in white English South African writing is also defined by a number of other problematic features. And so, before examining a number of novels, a more specific discussion of the limitations of liberalism as an ideology and of the relation between this ideology and the novel itself is required.

Footnotes

1. David Welsh, "English-Speaking White South Africans", n.d., n.p., p. 11.
2. *ibid.*, p. 12.
3. Guy Butler, "The Future of English-Speaking South Africa", New Nation, March 1968, p. 4.
4. E.M. Forster, Two Cheers for Democracy (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957), p. 75.
5. *ibid.*, p. 75.
6. Bernard Bergonzi, The Situation of The Novel (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 70. Bergonzi's discussion of the ideology of being English (pp. 67-94) is a particularly valuable one and many of the points he makes are applicable to white English South Africa.
7. *ibid.*, p. 70.
8. See below, Chapter 4.
9. Eric Harber, "South Africa: The White English-speaking Sensibility", Journal of Commonwealth Literature, 11, No. I (August 1976), p. 58.
10. Lawrence Schlemmer, "English-Speaking South Africa Today: Identity and Integration into the Broader National Community", English-Speaking South Africa Today, ed. André de Villiers (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 96-97.
11. See above, Chapter 2.
12. I.D. MacCrone, "Opening Address", The Conference of Writers, Publishers, Editors and University Teachers of English (Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand, 1956), p. 7. Guy Butler, referring to his generation of war poets has communicated something similar: "We came back [to South Africa]... hoping that our country would gradually move into a climate of mutual racial tolerance and social justice within a strong Commonwealth ... Then, as they say, the balloon went up. Just as the Europe we had met in our campaigns was not the Europe which our parents had led us to expect, so the Africa we had conjured up while in Europe suddenly began to disintegrate. It is very difficult to communicate, at this distance in time, the body blows, and the protracted nausea of disillusionment in the years that followed the 1948 election: the ineluctable implementation of apartheid; the removal of the coloured voters from the common role; the banning of virtually all black writers ... The result was that, within a decade, we felt like exiles in our own country." "On Being Present Where You Are: Some Observations on South African Poetry", Poetry South Africa, eds. Peter Wilhelm and James Polley (Johannesburg: Ad Donker, 1976), pp. 90-91.
13. Guy Butler, "The Purpose of the Conference" (Opening Address

to the English Academy of Southern Africa: Conference, Grahamstown, 7-11 July 1969), English Studies in Africa, 13, No. I (March 1970), p. 11.

14. Denis Worrall, "English South Africa and the Political System", English-Speaking South Africa Today, ed. André De Villiers (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 212.
15. For example, Butler writes: "We [the English] can take considerable courage from the spread of our cultural goods, particularly our language ... The language needs to be well taught and spoken if it is to remain the superb instrument it is; and it cannot be maintained unless the English-speaking community nurse it: not merely by seeing to it that it is well taught, but by propagating the great literature in that language, with its enormous civilizing freight of masterpieces ... It is not merely a question of perpetuating a language, but an ethos, a system of values." English-Speaking South Africa Today, ed. André De Villiers (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 12.
16. Writing of the autobiographies and records of early English colonists and pioneers, Butler, for instance, suggests that "a greater knowledge of this body of literature is likely to hasten that progress of identification with Africa of which there are many signs. It will correct the image of the South African Englishman as a mere townee [sic] who had little share in pioneering and adventure." English and South Africa, ed. Alan Lennox-Short (Cape Town: Nasou, 1975), p. 7.
17. See William Barrett, Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy (London: Heinemann, 1967), p. 30.
18. See Ernesto Laclau, Fascism and Ideology (London: New Left Books, 1978). He writes that since "the function of all ideology is to constitute individuals as subjects, ideological crisis is necessarily translated into an 'identity crisis' of the social agents." p. 103.

Chapter 4

The Ideology of Liberalism

The Concept of Ideology

The word "ideology" has frequently been used in the preceding chapters but its precise sense has not yet been defined. At the broadest level, "ideology" refers to those ideas, values, feelings and beliefs which contribute to a specific world view in terms of which men perceive their particular historical reality. There is invariably a profound connection between a set of ideas, values, feelings and beliefs; for, as Lionel Trilling has noted, "just as sentiments become ideas, ideas eventually establish themselves as sentiments."¹ Thus, when one speaks, for instance, of the liberal ideology, one is not simply referring to a political and economic doctrine and practice, but also to a whole climate of feeling and opinion as well. And it is this inextricable mingling of ideas with feelings, and vice versa, characteristic of all ideologies, that gives to them their great influence and effects their tenacious hold over the minds of people. For whilst it may be relatively easy to renounce the specific ideas which an ideology contains, quite the reverse is true when the effort is made to abandon the specific structures and patterns of feeling (the characteristic forms of emotional expression, a certain usage of language) which are an indivisible part of it. It is this very meshing of ideas with feelings which gives to an ideology an appearance of inner coherence.

In Ideology and Utopia Karl Mannheim defines ideology as follows:

The concept "ideology" reflects the one discovery which emerged from political conflict, namely, that ruling groups can in their thinking become so intensively interest-bound to a situation that they are simply no longer able to see certain facts which would undermine their sense of domination. There is implicit in the

word "ideology" the insight that in certain situations the collective unconscious of certain groups obscures the real condition of society both to itself and to others and thereby stabilizes it. 2

Terry Eagleton, a more recent theorist, in a sense echoes Mannheim's central perception when he writes of ideology that it is

a relatively coherent set of 'discourses' of values, representations and beliefs which, realized in certain material apparatuses and related to the structures of material production, so reflect the experiential relation of individual subjects to their social conditions as to guarantee those misrepresentations of the 'real' which contribute to the reproduction of the dominant social relations. 3

Implicit in the above quotation is the specifically Marxist distinction between the actual 'lived' relation between men and their world and a theoretical knowledge of it. As Althusser has said: "Ideology is the 'lived' relation between men and their world, or a reflected form of this unconscious relation ... It is distinguished from a science not by its falsity, for it can be coherent and logical (for instance, theology), but by the fact that the practico-social predominates in it over the theoretical."⁴ It is from this distinction between theoretical understanding and 'lived' practical experience of historical circumstances, and the frequent wide discrepancy between the two, that the notion of ideology as 'false consciousness' has arisen. In his study Marxism and Literature (1977), Raymond Williams distinguishes between three common versions of the concept of ideology: firstly, "a system of beliefs characteristic of a particular class or group"; secondly, "a system of illusory beliefs - false ideas or false consciousness - which can be contrasted with true or scientific knowledge"; and, thirdly, "the general process of the

production of meanings and ideas."⁵ And in this study I will be using the word "ideology" in the first two of these three senses; I will be describing a system of beliefs (in the next section of this chapter) peculiar to a particular class or group, namely bourgeois liberalism, and will be pointing out the inadequacies of various of these beliefs and some of their practical consequences both in the South African literature which it informs and in South African politics.

However, it is important to note that an ideology is not usually totally false; it has to be grounded in some way in a real understanding of the world for it to exist at all, although it usually only provides a reflection of partial aspects of this world and thus only allows a partial understanding of it. In this respect it will be more appropriate to my purposes to speak of an 'inadequate' or 'deficient' consciousness - and particularly because all the writers under discussion here are opposed to that supremely false consciousness which is reflected in Apartheid and the racist mentality.

moralistic nationalism?

The particular falsity or inadequacy of an ideology is revealed through its relationship to history and the contradictions which exist between the two. As Terry Eagleton has said: "Strictly speaking there can be no contradiction within ideology, since its function is precisely to eradicate it [contradiction]. There can be contradiction only between ideology and what it occludes - history itself."⁶ Whilst the contradictions between the liberal ideology and South African history have been acute, it must be remembered that they have not been as severe as those created by the ideology of Apartheid. As K. Danziger has said:

The extent to which an intellectual model of society is able to generate truthful propositions depends upon the relationships between the interests expressed in this model and the actual trend of historical development. Where these two factors are as sharply opposed as in the case of the ideology of apartheid there arises the spectre of a totally 'false consciousness' whose every cognition must necessarily be wrong. 7

The Ideology of Liberalism

The difficulties encountered in attempts at defining liberalism have often been noted. The main reason for this difficulty is, as James Burnham has noted, that "liberalism is not a complete system of thought comparable to, say, dialectical materialism, Spinozism, or Christian philosophy as taught by the Thomist wing of the Roman Catholic Church. Liberalism has no single, accepted and authoritative book or person or committee that is recognized as giving the final word: no Bible, Pope, nor Presidium. Liberalism is lesser, vaguer, harder to pin down".⁸ Moreover, liberalism itself has undergone a significant transformation since its Classical period in the nineteenth century; what began as a doctrine which stressed the rights and freedom of the individual from State interference has increasingly come to recognize and emphasize the necessary rôle of the State in the creation and protection of the freedom of the individual. Nevertheless, its character can be specified in a number of different ways. First, as regards its historical origins:

Liberalism was closely allied with the rise and later with the defence of the middle-classes, in a period of growing industrialization ... By and large liberalism, an approach in existence well before the term was conceived early in the nineteenth

century in Spain, emphasized reason instead of tradition, contract rather than status, the present and the future instead of the past, the value and rights of the individual instead of that of existing power-holders, whose claims based on the superiority of cast or creed it challenged. Basically liberalism has been an attitude in defiance of the arbitrary acts of government. It has been anti-authoritarian in its desire to challenge and limit the strength and scope of the powers that be. 9

And as the above commentators, Melhuish and Bramsted, go on to say, "The basis of the liberal ideology is a high premium on individual liberty. It served as a weapon in the rise of the middle classes, of its struggle over the claims of feudal aristocracy and of absolutism".¹⁰

They discern three strands running through the complex fabric of this ideology. One of these, the primary one in classic liberalism, had a basically political content; it undertook to protect the individual from arbitrary actions of the government and its agencies and hence is defined by its emphasis upon civil equality of all before the law, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and association, habeas corpus, trial by jury, strict enforcement of legal procedure, security of property, democracy, and so on. It is specific features like these which form the political meaning and content of liberalism.

However, the above writers point out that later liberalism developed a broader concept of the individual and began to attach much more significance to the individual per se:

In line with a trend of thought going back to the days of the Renaissance it viewed the individual as potentially unique and spontaneous. The individual had to be

rescued not only from the arbitrariness of power-holders but also from the tyranny of the majority, which in the modern democracy claimed increasingly that its standards and mores were binding for everyone. Individualism as a 'habit of mind', as the right of the individual to follow his own preferences and tastes within the limits imposed by the law instead of having them dictated by the conventions of society, became an additional strand in the liberal attitude. 11

In essence, it can be seen that the political doctrines and practises (some of which have been noted above) which liberalism considers valuable and desirable, are an extension of the historically unprecedented value which it places on the individual; the political content of liberalism is a logical consequence of what it regards as desirable for the individual. And it is the emphasis on the latter which is, perhaps, the most remarkable feature of liberalism as a whole.

This emphasis is also of great significance for this study, and particularly as it appears in the third strand which Melhuish and Bramsted discern in liberalism. Because of its importance, it requires extensive quotation. They write:

If it [liberalism] also claimed freedom of the individual from the tutelage of the State and from the pressure of public opinion, it wanted to make use of this freedom for advancing towards an ideal, for a norm of individualism. Though it is true, the cult of the many-sided personality, of the appreciation of the individuality as a work of art did not begin with Wilhelm von Humboldt and the younger Mill, only they gave it that modern note and consideration which one can describe as 'qualitative liberalism' or aesthetic individualism ... When Humboldt gave his reasons for confining the activities of the State to a minimum, he was under the spell of the idea of Bildung, of the perfectibility of man. It

was an image of man far removed from that of Bentham's felicific calculus ... The great object of human endeavour was 'the individuality of power and development' which could only be achieved with the help of two prerequisites, 'freedom and variety of situation'. Together they can bring about 'individual vigour and manifold diversity', in other words 'originality'. In the perspective of this civilized individualism making for harmony and sense of proportion the danger signals were one-sidedness, disproportion, unthinking conformity and lack of originality. What mattered was self-realization. This kind of liberalism was not functional but normative. If Humboldt had a social concept it was that of an ensemble of highly individualistic beings, each of them eager to develop his potential to a maximum degree. 12

The importance of this quotation is twofold. For not only is the "liberal" novel in general concerned above all with the development of "aesthetic individualism" (originality, spontaneity, integrity) in its particular characters, but also the endeavour to achieve "self-realization" (along with the élitism and other contradictions that go with it) is absolutely central to a novel like Olive Schreiner's The Story of An African Farm as well as to many others which follow it in time; and this centrality of a primary focus on "self-realization" is a major index to the fact that the liberal ideology is the informing one in a particular work. Moreover, in literature, it is this third strand of "aesthetic individualism" which is often far more prominent than the bald doctrines of political liberalism - though elements of the latter are clearly to be seen in Alan Paton's Cry, the Beloved Country as well.

If liberalism, then, ascribes an historically unprecedented value to the individual and to those political doctrines and practises which will ensure his or her freedom, this is merely its surface

content, as it were. Its actual ideological aspects, its "latent" contents, are most clearly revealed in its various beliefs, faiths, and in its image of man. There are a number of these which, when unearthed and laid bare, are open to serious question.

Melhuish and Bramsted write that "in spite of the variations in the three main strands of liberalism, the features which classic liberals from Locke to John Stuart Mill had in common should not be overlooked. Rooted largely in the outlook of the Enlightenment there was a constant emphasis of man's fundamental rationality and reasonableness".¹³ Liberalism, having its origins in a so-called age of reason, is a rationalist ideology. It is, as James Burnham maintains, "confident that reason and rational science, without appeal to revelation, faith, custom or intuition, can both comprehend the world and solve its problems".¹⁴ And from this belief in reason, along with the advance of science and the new self-confidence of the diligent bourgeoisie in nineteenth century Western Europe, stemmed a belief in progress, in an advancing civilization.

"Liberalism believes man's nature to be not fixed but changing, with an unlimited or at any rate indefinitely large potential for positive (good, favourable, progressive) development. This may be contrasted with the traditional belief, expressed in the theological doctrines of Original Sin and the real existence of the Devil, that human nature had a permanent, unchanging essence, and that man is partly corrupt as well as limited in his potential".¹⁵ Following from this, liberalism believes that the main obstacles to human advancement and betterment are extrinsic or external - such as ignorance, or bad social conditions - rather than being intrinsic to man's nature.

In sum, it views man as a creature defined and motivated by an inherent rationality and by those social characteristics of scepticism, toleration and reasonableness which stem from it.¹⁶ But liberal humanists (and liberalism itself) can be criticized for entertaining an over-optimistic estimate of the power of human reason in its struggle with unreason. For, as Burnham goes on to maintain:

It is not merely the record of history that speaks in unmistakable refutation of the liberal doctrine of man. Ironically enough - ironically, because it is liberalism that has maintained so exaggerated a faith in science - almost all modern scientific studies of man's nature unite in giving evidence against the liberal view of man as a creature motivated, once ignorance is dispelled, by the rational search for peace, freedom and plenty. Every modern school of biology and psychology and most schools of sociology and anthropology conclude that men are driven chiefly by profound anti-rational sentiments and impulses, whose character and very existence are not ordinarily understood by conscious reason. Many of these desires are aggressive, disruptive, and injurious to others and to society ... And these negative impulses (if they are to be designated so) are no less integral to the human psyche than those positive impulses pointing towards the liberal ideas. 17

Furthermore, as a consequence of its rationalism, liberalism cannot come to terms with force or power. The very foundation of this ideology, its rationalism, demands that the liberal utilize peaceful methods of rational discussion, education, example and compromise to resolve any conflicts; and because of it, too, he cannot become reconciled, either morally or intellectually, to force.

The Secular Nature of Liberalism

The ideology of liberalism, like the bourgeois class whose creation

and possession it largely is, is undoubtedly the most radically secularist ideology that has ever appeared:

Bourgeois society is without doubt the most prosaic of all possible societies. It is prosaic in the literal sense. The novel written in prose, dealing with the (only somewhat) extraordinary adventures of ordinary people, is its original and characteristic art form, replacing the epic poem, the lyric poem, the poetic drama, the religious hymn. These latter were appropriate to societies formally and officially committed to transcendent ideals of excellence - ideals that could be realized only by those few of exceptional nobility of character - or to transcendent visions of the universe wherein human existence on earth is accorded only a provisional significance. But bourgeois society is uninterested in such transcendence, which at best it tolerates as a private affair, a matter for individual taste and individual consumption as it were. It is prosaic, not only in form, but in essence. It is a society organized for the convenience and comfort of common men and common women, not for the production of heroic, memorable figures. It is a society interested in making the best of this world, not in any kind of transfiguration, whether through tragedy or piety. 18

It follows from this, from its "domestic conception of the universe and of man's place therein", that the liberal ideology is not concerned with heights and depths, with the so-called dark side of life, with tragedy or transcendence. It has in its blood little of that dark infusion that flows from the nineteenth century's irrational springs; from Kierkegaard to Dostoyevsky and Friedrich Nietzsche. The moderate, secular nature of its idea of the good life is epitomized in a passage by John Stuart Mill:

The happiness which they meant was not a life of rapture, but moments of such, in an existence made up of few and transitory pains, many and various pleasures, with a decided predominance of the active over the passive, and having as the foundation

of the whole, not to expect more from life than it is capable of bestowing. A life thus composed, to those who have been fortunate enough to obtain it, has always appeared worthy of the name of happiness. And such an existence is even now the lot of many, during some considerable portion of their lives. The present wretched education, the wretched social arrangements, are the only real hindrance to its being attainable by almost all. 19

Liberalism represents a kind of "middle path" between all extremes, and the major area of its conflicts is not between forces of "good" and "evil", "darkness" and "light", but is most often to be found in the area of social morality. Because of its radically secular nature, and its avoidance of the "irrational", the liberal ideology is largely impervious to psychology and particularly to the depth psychologies of thinkers like Freud with their explorations of the unconscious and the irrational. Because its province is largely that of society and its concerns that of the improvement of social relationships, its primary focus is on "manners" and social morality rather than on psychology.

It is this focus, and, indeed, its inability (by its very nature) to focus on the "dark", irrational aspects of life, that gives the liberal ideology its facile appearance. In The Mass Psychology of Fascism, Wilhelm Reich, after arguing that there exist in man three different layers of biophysical structure - a superficial one in which the average individual is "restrained, polite, compassionate and conscientious", an intermediate consisting of "cruel, sadistic, lascivious, predatory and envious impulses" and a "deepest biological core" in which man is "an honest, industrious, cooperative animal capable of love and also of rational hatred" - draws the following political conclusions:

In contradistinction with liberalism, which represents the superficial character layer, and to genuine revolution, which represents the deepest layer, fascism represents the second character layer, that of the secondary impulses ... in the ethical and social ideals of liberalism we recognize the advocacy of the characteristics of the surface layer of character, which is intent upon self-control and tolerance. This liberalism lays stress upon its ethics for the purpose of holding in suppression the "monster in man", our layer of "secondary drives", the Freudian "unconscious". The natural sociability of the deepest third layer, the core layer is foreign to the liberal. He deplores the perversion of the human character and seeks to overcome it by means of ethical norms, but the social catastrophes of the twentieth century show that he did not get very far with this approach. 20

The liberal ideology is shallow in the sense that it is the ideology of a class of people who have, at least apparently, exempted themselves from such notions as Fate and Tragedy - notions which reflect both the experienced malevolence of the universe and the upheavals of history. It is the ideology of those who are materially secure and who are optimistic because of that security. It is because of this that there is neither a pressing nor ostensible need for this class to be concerned with the "dark" side of life - until, of course, it breaks through their shallow securities and beliefs whether in the form of the irruption of the repressed unconscious in an individual's psychology or in the form of an historical eruption.

It will be seen that much English South African literature by members of the middle-class is continually being faced with this dilemma: the dark side of things is for ever breaking through the thin, fragile veneer of the liberal ideology of both author and his or her characters, and the rationalism and optimism which is so central

to this ideology is for ever being called into question and made to seem pitifully inadequate by various irrational forces. This is especially apparent in Schreiner's The Story of An African Farm, Plomer's Turbott Wolfe (as well as in several of his short stories such as "A Child of Queen Victoria"), and in the work of other writers who will be dealt with in this study. The very fact that these forces are continually subverting the beliefs of the liberal ideology is a very real indication of its poverty, of its inadequate view of man. As Burnham says of liberalism, in a scathing passage:

There is no tragic dimension in its picture of the good life. Men become willing to endure, sacrifice and die for God, family, king, honor, country, from a sense of absolute duty or an exalted vision of the meaning of history ... And it is precisely these ideals (and institutions) that liberalism has criticized, attacked and in part overthrown as superstitious, archaic, reactionary and irrational. In their place liberalism proposes a set of pale and bloodless abstractions - pale and bloodless for the very reason that they have no roots in the past, in deep feeling and in suffering. Except for mercenaries, saints and neurotics, no one is willing to sacrifice and die for progressive education, medicare, humanity in the abstract, the United Nations and a ten per cent rise in Social Security payments. 21

And although Burnham slightly misses the point in not recognizing clearly enough that liberalism is the ideology of a class which has (again, at least apparently) escaped from history and its depre- da- tions, and therefore has no need of a "tragic dimension" since it would seem to be just this from which it has finally escaped and from which, moreover, it has always been attempting to escape, a very great contradiction occurs when the liberal is confronted by the "tragic" in whatever form. There being no tragic element in his ideology, he cannot come to terms with this inescapable aspect of life when it appears, as it must, time and again. This

contradiction becomes particularly glaring in a country like South Africa whose tragic history reflects anything but the liberal world-view and its image of man. In Alan Paton's Cry, the Beloved Country, for instance, the dilemma caused by this contradiction is all too evident. On the one hand, the novel is informed, if not "animated", by the classic and traditional liberal vision, and yet, on the other, the suffering and desolation which brims over within its narrative makes the liberal ideology per se untenable; and, hence, the novel becomes a kind of latter-day religious tragedy replete with transcendence in order to cope with that irreducible suffering which so radically subverts (though Paton does not realize this) his liberal vision. And a similar contradiction is at work in The Story of An African Farm.

Liberal Guilt

Another manifestation of this contradiction which results from the inadequate view of man contained in the liberal ideology, is the much-mentioned guilt of the liberal. Usually this guilt is explained by the fact that the liberal feels conscience-stricken by the discrepancy between his middle-class prosperity and security and the poverty and suffering of others who do not enjoy the comforts which are consequent upon his class position. Yet at the same time it is also arguable that this guilt is a product of the contradiction between the optimistic, rationalistic world-view of the liberal ideology and those ideologies (whether articulated or not) which are implicit in the condition of the oppressed. The liberal vaguely feels that there is something inauthentic about his ideology as a result; hence his guilt.

There is an additional reason for this guilt. It has already been mentioned that liberalism equals a faith in "intelligence", or reason. For the liberal, freedom is synonymous with the ability to choose, and to act on the basis of a freely and consciously-made choice. And yet the dilemma of the liberal humanist is to understand too much to be able to act. He realizes that good and evil mix in the consequences of almost all action; he also realizes that a good deal of his actions have their genesis in a desire to relieve himself from the burden of his guilt. As Burnham says: "The real and motivating problem for the liberals is not to cure the poverty or injustice or what not in the objective world but to appease the guilt in their own breasts".²² Because of this, of his sensitive perception of the impure motives for most of his actions, and (from his usually "unengaged" vantage-point) his ability to see all sides of the problem, he often enough ends up by not acting at all. And it is this failure to act, to participate, that is the main cause for his corrosive sense of guilt. It is the liberal, in fact, who is characteristically in the classic existentialist position of having the freedom to choose among many possibilities and who, confounded by the very multiplicity of possibilities (all of which have some drawback), avails himself of none. The liberal is often representative of someone in whom there exists a very wide gap between thought and action. In the existentialist sense, this is inauthenticity or bad faith.

The significance of the phenomenon of guilt cannot be over-estimated in any discussion of liberal literature, and particularly in the liberal literature of white English South Africa. As will be seen, the inability to act because of an awareness of many sides to a

specific issue, and the guilt which is the ultimate consequence of this failure, is absolutely central to works like Dan Jacobson's A Dance In the Sun and Nadine Gordimer's The Late Bourgeois World. Jack Cope has suggested that

Guilt felt by the English-speaking liberal writer in terms of the South African scene arises from intense and probably unrealized anxieties. We wronged the Boer-Afrikaner and therefore we deserve to be punished. At the same time we affront his language and denigrate his cultural status and justify our own loss of dignity as a nerveless minority. Towards the black man the liberal guilt is an expression of a deeper complex of anxieties - fear of darkness equated with sin; fear of the defeat of our sexual potency implied in our surrender as a politically impotent group; fear of death and destruction as the punishment earned by our own injustices and those of our forbears towards the black and coloured races. More particularly, the continued enjoyment of ease and privilege based on a moral injustice throw burning coals on the conscience. Dissociation is impossible except in momentary acts of expiation or in physical flight. 'Crossing the colour line' socially, sexually, in sport, in art; acts of political defiance - courageous because they may earn punishment and suffering - these are parts of the confused pattern. 23

Furthermore, the liberal individual striving valiantly in the harsh South African climate can be seen as a kind of scapegoat, or at least a way of projecting the author's guilt at being white and informing the black that all whites are not necessarily so evil.

In general, the comment by an anonymous reviewer in The Times Literary Supplement that "the mixture of paternalism, guilt, sentimentality and evasiveness that has until recently characterized much liberal thinking, and in particular the fundamental desire to work for rather than to work with Africans, is evident in many novels and short stories; and the essential aloofness from the

actual political struggle, particularly the African struggle, prevents liberal literature from being genuinely committed" is an apt description of this literature and of some of its shortcomings.²⁴

Tolerance

As a result of the radically secular nature of the liberal ideology and its relativist theory of truth (i.e. its belief that there is no absolute truth, or that, if there is, it cannot be known - liberalism, from one point of view, can be seen as a critique of all absolute values), and also as a result of its faith in reason, an important part of the liberal ideology is its emphasis on toleration. If nothing absolute can be known - whether God, or History - nothing can be absolutely denied or absolutely affirmed. Toleration itself can be seen as a reflection of this belief (stemming from "reason") and transposed onto a social level where it becomes the specifically social virtue of "reasonableness" or "tolerance".

The concept and practise of toleration is a two-bladed sword. On the one hand its importance is well recognized in a statement such as the following by the liberal theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr:

Toleration of persons who are different in kind requires an awareness of the similarities and identities above and beneath the differences; it requires an awareness of a common humanity, for instance, underneath ethnic distinction. It is therefore a spiritual achievement of great moment. Toleration of people who differ in convictions and habits requires a residual awareness of the complexity of truth and the possibility of opposing views having some light on one or the other side of a many-sided truth. 25

This is an eminently liberal statement in its implicit assumption of the relativity of truth, of its "many-sidedness", and its belief in a kind of universal "common humanity" underlying all the manifest and latent differences between people and peoples, races and classes. And it ought to be mentioned that toleration, whatever its importance in human relationships, is an indispensable feature of all the great liberal novels, and, indeed, unavoidably so, since the novel form itself is a reflection or mutation of liberal ideology. Not only is toleration an essential part of the imaginative process (it is largely through the empathy which toleration presupposes that the author is able to create characters and fictional worlds independent of his own personal reality), but it is also indispensable to the novel itself since it is a form which does not recognize any absolutes which assert a dogmatic truth over-riding all others. At the very basis of the liberal ideology is a concern for the freedom of the individual. But for liberalism to attempt to give an absolute and dogmatic meaning to this "freedom" would be to subvert the very freedom which it advocates. That which it demands must remain relative and existential if it is to survive as a meaningful concept at all.

However, it is this very toleration that is the cause of much of the weakness of the liberal ideology. Liberalism has never adhered to one definite creed and thereby become a dogma; it is best understood as an "attitude", a kind of framework which in itself contains little which can be an object of absolute belief and passionate devotion or conviction. Moreover, this framework has resulted in an attitude of mind, a focus, which has been definitely pragmatic, secular and empirical. Unlike Christianity or Marxism, for instance, it harbours no transcendental, meta-

physical faith or historical certainties - beliefs without which it would seem that any 'long-range' programme is condemned to retain little hold over the imaginations of men. Lacking this, it is also inevitable that liberalism should lack or forfeit the compelling power and conviction that comes from a single, monist vision of the world and history, and which, however destructively in the last instance, gives an attractive strength and power to an ideology. Liberalism's necessary rejection of any of the straight and narrow ways of Marxist or Christian thinking (to use the same examples) has, on the one hand, been one of its self-proclaimed virtues.

On the other, against the essentially liberal notion of tolerance, it is sufficient to place this statement made by Thomas Mann:

Humanity will no longer mean a tolerance that endures everything - even the determination to destroy humanity. Face to face with fanaticism incarnate, a freedom which through sheer goodness and human scepticism no longer believes in itself will be irrevocably lost. It is not the sort of humanity which is weak and patient to the point of self-doubt that freedom needs today. Such an attitude makes freedom look pathetic and contemptible in the face of a power-concept which is not in the least sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought. 26

For the fact remains that liberalism frequently cannot embrace power or force without subverting that freedom and toleration which is its doctrinal essence. It frequently has to cease being liberalism in order to protect freedom. And it has never been able either to resolve or to reconcile itself to this paradox. Instead, it has been stalemated, and those individuals who have remained its adherents have become more and more isolated - which is the same as saying, less and less powerful. Thus, just as it

is characteristic of the liberal ideology that it can face neither evil nor violence without responding in such a way as to make manifest its inadequacy in dealing with them, so it has to back down and admit defeat when it is faced by extremism of any sort. It only retains any strength in a contest which is kept on the same level as its own superficial rationality. Given the above weaknesses in its position, weaknesses which only become more glaring in a situation like South Africa, the practical outcome of the liberal ideology for those who continue to subscribe to it would seem to be anomie. In this context the liberal becomes the itinerant voyeur, a passing spectator rather than a participant. He becomes an eavesdropper, an artist. And if at the beginning of this section it was maintained that liberalism equalled a "faith in reason", it has in practise come to equal something very different. For as this century has advanced, humanitarian liberalism

has seemed pale and ineffective to many people. Groups who regarded themselves as underprivileged expected little from the mild zeal of liberal reformers and much more from radical socialist and communist methods. After 1918 it was not liberal individualism but the belief in a collective - whether class or nation - which seemed to carry the day ... The emphasis was now on integration, not on freedom, on the collective not on human rights, on the claims of nation and class and not on those of the individual. Many young people regarded liberalism as a thing of the past. By the middle of the century Gilbert Murray admitted resignedly that liberalism had "become largely a fruitless longing in the hearts of specially conscientious or thoughtful people for something lost or unattainable." 27

In practise it has come to equal isolation and loneliness.

Philosophical Problems

There are very definite philosophical reasons in liberalism itself for this "loneliness"; it is not merely the result of the insufficient view of human nature which is contained in the liberal ideology and the fact that "the doctrines of liberalism, formed in an age of reason, were [in the twentieth century] received in an age of irrationalism".²⁸ If liberalism equals loneliness, or contributes to it because of its insufficient view of man, and if it is a source and cause of loneliness because with the advance of this century more and more emphasis has come to be placed upon the collective rather than the individual,²⁹ and the latter has consequently been isolated by his values which no longer enjoy the favour of many people and are no longer appropriate to many of the social and historical conditions of the twentieth century, then there is a further specifically philosophical reason for the "loneliness" of liberalism and the isolation of the liberal.

A common image of the liberal bourgeoisie is that of a man alone with his "nuclear" family in his own private castle which is his home and separated by this from other members of his class who are in a precisely similar position. This image of mutual isolations is only a practical social instance of individualism. De Tocqueville in his Democracy in America described individualism as "a mature and calm feeling, which disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellow-creatures; and to draw apart with his family and his friends; so that, after he has thus formed a little circle of his own, he willingly leaves society at large to itself".³⁰ And he went on to say that "not only does democracy make every man forget his ancestors, but it hides his descendants and separates his contemporaries from him; it throws

him back forever upon himself alone and threatens in the end to confine him entirely within the solitude of his own heart".³¹

Individualism, which he deplored as an aspect of the individual's will to isolation and selfishness, and which he so accurately describes, is merely a practical consequence of the philosophy of liberalism itself, which, based on the motive of self-interest alone, forfeits the possibility of realizing trans-individual values. As Robert Paul Wolff argues:

liberalism views man as a rationally calculating maximizer of pleasure and minimizer of pain. The term 'good', says Bentham, means 'pleasant', and the term 'bad' means 'painful'. In all our actions, we seek the first and avoid the second. Rationality thus reduces to a calculating prudence; its highest point is reached when we deliberately shun the present pleasure for fear of future pain. It is of course a commonplace that this bookkeeping attitude towards sensation is the direct reflection of the bourgeois merchant's attitude towards profit and loss. Equally important, however, is the implication of the theory for the relations between one man and another. If the simple psychological egoism of liberal theory is correct, then each individual must view others as mere instruments in the pursuit of his private ends. As I formulate my desire and weigh the most prudent means for satisfying them, I discover that the actions of other persons, bent upon similar lonely quests, may affect the outcome of my enterprise. In some cases, they threaten me; in others, the possibility exists of a mutually beneficial cooperation. I adjust my plans accordingly, perhaps even entering into quite intricate and enduring alliances with other individuals. But always I seek my own pleasure (or happiness - the shift from one to the other is not of very great significance in liberal theory, although Mill makes much of it). For me, other persons are obstacles to be overcome or resources to be exploited - always means, that is to say, and never ends in themselves. To speak fancifully, it is as though society were an enclosed space in which float a number of spherical balloons filled with an expanding gas. Each balloon increases in

size until its surface meets the surface of the other balloons; then it stops growing and adjusts to its surroundings. Justice in such a society could only mean the protection of each balloon's interior (Mill's private sphere) and the equal apportionment of space to all. What took place within an individual would be no business of the others.

In the more sophisticated versions of liberal philosophy, the crude picture of man as a pleasure maximizer is softened somewhat ... Nevertheless, society continues to be viewed as a system of independent centers of consciousness, each pursuing its own gratification and confronting the others as beings standing-over-against the self, which is to say, as objects. The condition of the individual in such a state of affairs is what a different tradition of social philosophy would call "alienation". 32

If the basis of society is seen to rest on free-floating individuals motivated by a high degree of psychological hedonism, then the basis of society's values rests on individual ones to the neglect of the wider community. In terms of its system of morality, liberalism relies on a general public good accruing from the actions of individuals: by some mysterious hidden hand, "public good" is assumed to emerge from "private vices". As Wolff has argued, liberalism is unable to make the jump, short of radical revision, from the notion of private value to one of community. Utilitarianism, he argues, in its concern for the greatest happiness for the greatest number, rests only on private values and a development of liberalism towards the direction of interpersonal values is the only way of resolving this problem and developing a liberal morality that recognizes the existence of a wider community.³³

By treating the individual as the "axiom" and society as the "derivative"³⁴ rather than (as was formerly the custom) vice versa, liberalism is tempted either to ignore or to under-value the

inherently social nature of human activity. And whilst it did initially serve the valuable function of liberating the individual from many forms of governmental oppression, its undue emphasis on the freedom of the individual led it to both postulate an absolute division between so-called "private" and "public" spheres of life and to a failure to recognize the enormous importance of the value of community:

Insofar as our enterprises are inherently social, the public-private, interference-non-interference model of human relationships breaks down. The central problem ceases to be the regulation of each person's infringement on the sphere of other person's actions, and becomes instead the coordination of the several actions and the choice of collective goals. 35

And if, from a Marxist point of view, the liberalism that describes itself as a pure respect for persons, untainted by ideology, is in fact very much an ideology, a mystification or form of words, which conceals the crude social realities of exploitation and economic oppression which underlie it, then, perhaps even more importantly:

The severest criticisms of liberal society, both from the left and the right, focus on the absence of community in even the most efficient and affluent liberal capitalist state. Conservative critics bemoan the loss of tradition and look back longingly to an earlier age when men were bound to one another by feelingful ties of loyalty and trust; radical critics decry the reduction of all human interactions to the exploitative rationality of the cash nexus, and look forward hopefully to a time when work will unite men in cooperative production ... To Burke, Durkheim, to Tönnies, the instrumental conception of society was impoverished, diminished, a revelation of what had already been lost rather than of what remained to be won. The free man of liberal society was to them a pitiful creature, alone in a hostile world, alienated, unchecked in his ceaseless

acquisitiveness by the conventions of society, prone - as Durkheim warned - to be driven by egoism and anomie to the final despair of suicide. 36

As Wolff goes on to say:

The liberal assurance that the burdens of freedom can easily be borne is contradicted by the facts of contemporary life, as the conservative sociologists so clearly perceived. The elimination of superstition, on which the eighteenth century philosophes counted so heavily, and the liberation from social constraints for which Mill had such hopes are at best ambiguous accomplishments. The problem which forces itself upon the unillusioned supporter of liberal principles is to formulate a social philosophy which achieves some consistency between the ideals of justice and freedom on the one hand and the facts of social origin and nature of personality on the other. 37

In fact, liberalism has never managed to reconcile the claims of individualism on the one hand and the claims of collectivism on the other. At its extreme, its romantic ideal of freedom is a form of dis-relationship of the self from other selves. All along it has been faced with the dilemma of reconciling the ideal of the free self with the need to bring this free self into relations with society.

The recognition of the necessity of the latter has led to an increased emphasis on State controls, on socialism; - and yet a similar recognition of the conformism and oppression which has seemed to characterize the latter, has led to an ever-growing individualism. This finds its theoretical expression in the writings of Existentialism, a broad philosophical movement which arose directly out of the breakdown of genuine community among people and classes. And hence its obsessive concern over the solitary human being, on Kierkegaard's Single One, bounded by

everything and nothing. But the dangers of this extreme individualism are only too evident (as have been pointed out), as are the historical causes for its dramatic appearance. If liberalism has come to equal loneliness because of its inadequate philosophical base and ignorance of the necessary values of community among men and women, then the liberal is isolated as well because, with his emphasis on individualism, he has no power to combat the forces of collective masses (in whatever form) which are ranged against him and are set on undermining his supreme value. His loneliness is also his impotence, the impotence of the Single One when faced by the power of the Many.

Nowhere is this more evident than in South Africa. The particular loneliness which is liberalism finds an almost ubiquitous expression in the liberal literature of white English South Africa with which this study is concerned. In this geographical context, the liberal novel is a novel of isolation, anomie, and loneliness, of solitary heroes and heroines (or anti-heroes) alienated from any authentic community and engaged in a hopeless endeavour to realize themselves in situations in which their very isolation renders them impotent in the struggle to do that. This can be seen in the struggles of Lyndall, one of the central characters in The Story of An African Farm, in Plomer's Turbott Wolfe, and in the novels of Alan Paton, Dan Jacobson, and Nadine Gordimer. Wherever there is a liberal impulse there is loneliness; every English South African novel that is informed by the liberal ideology gives ample evidence of this: the pursuits of their characters invariably terminate in an extreme isolation and in the death which is so often the result of it.

Footnotes

1. Lionel Trilling, The Liberal Imagination (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), p. 11. In the same place he goes on to say that "the word liberal is a word primarily of political import, but its political meaning defines itself by the quality of life it envisages, by the sentiments it desires to affirm."
2. Karl Mannheim, Ideology and Utopia (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976), p. 40.
3. Terry Eagleton, Criticism and Ideology (London: Verso Editions, 1978), p. 54.
4. Louis Althusser, Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays (London: New Left Books, 1971), p. 160.
5. Raymond Williams, Marxism and Literature (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 55.
6. Terry Eagleton, Criticism and Ideology, p. 95.
7. K. Danziger, "Ideology and Utopia in South Africa: A Methodological contribution to the Sociology of Knowledge", British Journal of Sociology, XIV, (1963), p. 76.
8. James Burnham, Suicide of The West (London: Jonathan Cape, 1965), p. 39. (This essay by Burnham on the meaning and destiny of liberalism is by far the best available study of liberalism's ideological syndrome, even though its radically hostile view of liberalism in general and its conservative stance is, in many respects, extremely suspect. In this chapter, I am heavily indebted to it.) See also D.J. Manning's conclusion to his Liberalism (London: Dent, 1976): "the essence of liberalism cannot be found in the works of a founding father, in the work of an author who wrote at what is deemed to be the pinnacle of its development, or in a position to reflect upon the whole of its past. Moreover, it is not to be distilled from the work of any number of leading liberal authors." p. 143.
9. E.K. Bramsted and K.J. Melhuish, Western Liberalism (New York: Longman, 1970), p. xvii.
10. *ibid.*, p. 3.
11. *ibid.*, p. xviii.
12. *ibid.*, pp. 26-27.
13. *ibid.*, p. 36.
14. Burnham, p. 53.
15. *ibid.*, pp. 49-50.
16. M. Salvadori writes that "Concerning the inner process; the acceptance of a few other principles besides that of liberty,

makes a European a Liberal. The most important are reasonable-ness as the proper way of thinking, individualism as a basic value, a moral equality as the criterion for relationships with others. Liberty being inherent in reason, the Liberal stresses not only the priority of reason over nonreason (revelation, intuition, emotion), but also reasonableness which expresses itself as open-mindedness, moderation in one's aspirations, tolerance towards others; which uses as much as possible the canons of the scientific method; which is the antithesis of rational and arational dogmatism. Reason belonging to the individual mind, the basic liberal value is individualism". European Liberalism (New York: John Wiley, 1972), p. 7.

17. James Burnham, p. 54.
18. Irving Kristol, "The Adversary Culture of Intellectuals", Encounter, LIII, No. 4 (October 1979), pp. 5-6. Lucien Goldmann regards the secular nature of bourgeois society with extreme hostility: "bourgeois ideology, bound up like bourgeois society itself with the existence of economic activity, is precisely the first ideology in history that is both radically profane and ahistorical; the first ideology whose tendency is to deny anything sacred, whether the otherworldly sacredness of the transcendent religions or the immanent sacredness of the historical future. It is, it seems to me, the fundamental reason why bourgeois society created the first radically unaesthetic form of consciousness. The essential character of bourgeois ideology, rationalism, ignores in its extreme expressions the very existence of art. There is no Cartesian or Spinozian aesthetics, or even an aesthetics of Baumgarten - art is merely an inferior form of knowledge." Towards A Sociology Of The Novel (London: Tavistock, 1975), pp. 14-15.
19. John Stuart Mill, Utilitarianism (Glasgow: Collins, 1962), p. 264.
20. Wilhelm Reich, The Mass Psychology of Fascism (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), pp. xi-xii.
21. James Burnham, op. cit., p. 291.
22. ibid., p. 196.
23. Jack Cope, "The Liberal Conscience", Contrast, I, No. 3 (Winter 1961), p. 8.
24. "South African Conflicts", Times Literary Supplement, 16 August 1957, p. xxxvi.
25. Reinhold Niebuhr, "Tolerance", in Collier's Encyclopedia (New York: Crowell-Collier, 1964), 22, p. 353.
26. Quoted in Melhuish and Bramsted, op. cit., p. 720.
27. ibid., pp. 677-78.
28. D.J. Manning, Liberalism (London: Dent, 1976), p. 110.

29. This, of course, is by no means a universal phenomenon. In certain quarters it would seem that more and more emphasis has been placed on the individual. Witness the fact that the last decade in the United States of America has been called the "Narcissistic Era".
30. Alexis De Tocqueville, Democracy In America (New York: Vintage Books, 1954), Vol. II, p. 104.
31. *ibid.*, p. 106.
32. Robert Paul Wolff, The Poverty of Liberalism (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), pp. 141-2.
33. See Robert Paul Wolff, pp. 162-95.
34. Raymond Williams has noted that "In England, from Hobbes to the Utilitarians, a variety of systems share a common starting-point: man as a bare human being, 'the individual', is the logical starting-point of psychology, ethics, and politics. It is rare, in this tradition, to start from the fact that man is born into relationships. The abstraction of the bare human being, as a separate substance, is ordinarily taken for granted. In other systems of thinking, the community would be the axiom, and individual man the derivative. Here individual man is the axiom, and society the derivative ... The whole Liberal tradition, following from this, begins with the individual and his rights and, judging society as an arrangement to ensure these abstract rights, argues normally for only the necessary minimum of government." The Long Revolution (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p. 94.
35. Robert Paul Wolff, p. 50.
36. *ibid.*, pp. 183-4.
37. *ibid.*, p. 147.

Chapter 5

The Fate of Liberalism in South Africa

Some of the inherent inadequacies of the liberal ideology (outlined in the previous chapter) find a definite expression in the fate of political liberalism in South Africa. In turn, the ultimate inability of political liberalism to solve or resolve the very great difficulties it has met with in the South African context provides something of an image of the fictional difficulties and conundrums found in the liberal novels themselves.¹ In 1939 R.F. Alfred Hoernlé was forced to admit that "a multi-racial society offers the greatest obstacles to the liberal spirit, when in such a society one race is dominant over the others and determined to maintain that dominance at all costs".² And as if to underline his pessimism about the possibilities open to the liberal spirit in South Africa, the conclusion to his series of lectures was that

Like post-War England, in Mr. George Bernard Shaw's famous play, South Africa, too, is an example of 'heartbreak house'. It cannot be otherwise for men of liberal spirit, if our preceding analysis is correct that the multi-racial society of the Union is steadily developing towards an intensification of white domination in a racial caste-structure; and that of the three theoretically possible escapes into a social, economic, and political order more conformable to liberal ideals none is really practicable - certainly not in the present temper of dominant white public opinion, which is hardening under the influence of doctrines of race and volk imported from Europe to provide a philosophical rationalization for our traditional practise of racial discrimination. 3

However, if this was his conclusion, then some of the actual problems which contributed to the failure of political liberalism (with its commitment to multi-racialism) in South Africa, and the fictional image of these problems in the novels, remain to be specified.

Paternalism

As Hoernlé himself was concerned to point out, "The greatest moral danger in the very heart of the liberal spirit itself is that, in the relation of the well-meaning superior to stricken inferior, it is so apt to become paternalism and condescension".⁴ And Martin Legassick, having outlined the changing emphasis and direction in the philosophy of the missions and in Cape liberalism in the latter part of the nineteenth century ("in a direction compatible with seeing Africans as a conquered people who must be fairly administered and governed, treated in accordance with their different roles in society indeed, but with their development controlled to preserve overall white rule - rather than as potential participants in the common society") asks rhetorically: "the question is perhaps whether in the context of South Africa there exists a liberalism which is not mere benevolent paternalism".⁵ And it is incontestable that a "benevolent" paternalism in political liberalism has been one of the major reasons for its failure as a political force in South Africa.⁶

For just as it has served to alienate blacks from white liberals - and progressively so in time - it is shown to alienate black person from white person in a good many novels. On the one hand, the paternalism of certain writers is largely unconscious, is an implicit, unquestioned feature of their authorial consciousness. This is particularly true of Schreiner's and Paton's attitude to blacks in The Story of An African Farm and Cry, the Beloved Country respectively. On the other hand, paternalism is often part of the very subject matter of many of the writings of Dan Jacobson and Nadine Gordimer. Nevertheless, if their work at the same time contains a criticism of it, they can point no way out of the

humiliating dilemmas which paternalism entails for the "helper" and the "helped". For between the powerful (the whites as a rule) and the powerless (usually the blacks) and in a situation in which the former has to act proxy for the needs and claims of the latter, the outcome can only be mutual degradation for all the parties involved. The white is shamed by his position, the black receives a shaming handout. In general terms, no one has described the dilemmas of paternalism (as well as provided the obvious solution to it) in a better way than Lewis Nkosi in his essay "Black Power Or Souls Of Black Writers":

Against the vastly aggressive thrust of White Power, which presently menaces black populations around the world, there is no antidote - no simple vision of workers of the world uniting or democracy fulfilling its promises. The only remedy is a conscious acquisition of power by the non-white world, and the readiness to wield this power as ruthlessly as the white world has done in the past ... It would seem to me that only when the black world is powerful enough to neutralize the camouflaged but hideously menacing power of the white nations of the West will it be possible for black and white men with a humanistic, conciliatory vision to share an identity of interests across the colour-line. No such community of interests is possible between the free and the enslaved. Such relationships are dogged by guilt, by equivocation, and major problems of communication in a world deeply divided by colour. Until such a time as the black world achieves this countervailing power, any friendship between black and white, any compromise or cooperation, can only be based on the powerfulness of one and the powerlessness of the other. 7

Against the guilt, equivocation, and humiliation which paternalism both presupposes and creates, the liberal can advance no solution - except the mutual rejection or alienation between "free" and "enslaved", which is, in fact, precipitated by the discrepancy between them. A handout given by the powerful to the powerless is

only yet another instance of that tinkering with symptoms instead of causes for which liberals have been so frequently condemned. And because of a concentration on this patchwork (or ambulance work) rather than working hand in hand with the powerless in order to gain power and that equality which would render paternalism no longer necessary, it lays them open to the charge of being agents of social control rather than genuine activists.

Minority Tradition and Isolation

If one traces the history of the liberals in South Africa, it is at once apparent that from the days of the London Missionary Society and John Philip, of Fairbairn, the Cape Parliamentarians and the entrenchment of British humanitarianism as Cape liberalism to its attempted extension to the rest of South Africa after Union through various persons (Ballinger, Brooke) and institutions (churches, universities, the Joint Councils, the Institute of Race Relations), liberalism has always been a minority tradition in this country. It has always been the creed of a very few people and, moreover, has never possessed an effective power base. Moral responsibility without power has been the prerogative of the liberal-minded. That this should be one of the reasons for its demise is obvious. What Hoernlé wrote in 1939 was as true before that date as it is today:

The old Cape Liberalism survives only in a few grand representatives of its departed glory. The younger generation, as a whole, tends to regard the term with loathing and contempt. Some - a minority - do so because they stand further to the 'left': Liberalism, to them, is too half-hearted, too cowardly, too ready to compromise; tinkering with symptoms instead of advocating revolutionary cures. The majority interprets Liberalism

solely as that attitude towards race relations which is most opposed to the traditional outlook and policy of South Africa as formulated and practised by the Voortrekkers. 8

And there is no doubt that this minority had little chance in the somewhat arid conditions of South Africa, that, in the words of Denis Worrall, "liberalism ... really had no more than a passing chance between the more powerful and dynamic forces of Afrikaner and African nationalism"⁹, two mutually hostile nationalisms, both antagonistic towards liberal principles and liberal methods.

Summing up the failure of liberalism, Nadine Gordimer wrote in 1971:

Concurrent with the disappearance of a black political identity came the dispersion and ultimate failure of the liberal ideal in South Africa. That centuries-long creation of a tiny minority of whites is today reviled by Africans in harsher terms than they use for Nationalists ... The sin for which retribution is now falling on their heads from all sides was the sin of failure. The upholders of white supremacy, whether they called it baaskap or white-leadership-with-justice, never really offered the black man anything more than a handout. The radical liberals offered everything, and were powerless to give anything. Even the worth of personal friendships that were formed between black and white, out of affinity, not patronage, became soured by this circumstance. Against the cold measure of the needs of our historical situation, the liberals with small or large 'l' failed twice over; first, to gain a following where political power existed, among whites; second, by inevitably falling into the role of acting proxy for black aspirations. 10

In almost direct proportion to the extent that liberalism was the political tradition of a tiny, powerless minority, so the individual who adhered to the values of liberalism was profoundly isolated in the South African context - if he or she were not regarded as complete outcasts by both left and right. This

isolation, if not utter alienation, finds a direct reflection in liberal novels. From Schreiner's Lyndall and Plomer's Turbott Wolfe, down to the characters attempting to realize liberal ideals and values in the novels of Paton, Gordimer, and Jacobson, a common factor is their distance and estrangement from their society. And if their great isolation is not the reason for their ultimate downfall, then the absolute opposition between their aims and that of the society in which they live, and their inability to reconcile them, only serves to increase their isolation and position as impotent "anti-heroes".

The historian Janet Robertson quotes Junod on the hardships which faced any white man (or woman) who deliberately chose to belong to an ostracized political group:

... The fact that his action may be acclaimed by many non-whites and the greater section of the outside world cannot fully compensate for his sense of loss, his immediate unhappiness, his loneliness. Non-whites who become so politically involved stand to lose as much in the material sense - jobs, income, and so on. But rather than becoming outcasts in their own community, they became acclaimed leaders, the heroes, and the martyrs. 11

The appropriateness of this comment to a novel like Gordimer's The Late Bourgeois World (1966) is obvious: the white liberal activist is reviled rather than welcomed by his own community as well as by others. And the singular isolation of the liberal on a practical political level (because of the minority powerlessness of the liberal political group and the uselessness of their values in a South African context) is doubtless the reason why, on another level, the debate over either remaining in South Africa or leaving it (the "exile" debate) appears in so many liberal novels

so frequently. If liberal values are inappropriate, then the liberal has either to abandon these values and exchange them for others; if he cannot, leave the country; or try to affirm the value of the individual in the face of the spiritless conformity around him. Since the last way out is largely a futile gesture (it does not solve the isolation but only increases it; nor does it solve any political problems), and since the first course is very difficult, it is no wonder that the debate about exile should be a feature of novels like Dan Jacobson's The Beginners (1966) and of many of Gordimer's. The liberal must be for ever moving on in an attempt to find a country where his values still have some meaning and where they do not condemn him to an impotent isolation.

Evolution and Revolution

Perhaps the most common way of defining a liberal, and one of the values most often stressed in that definition, is his belief in gradualism, in evolutionary rather than revolutionary change.

Prominent liberals in South Africa have never ceased emphasizing the commitment of the liberal to non-violence.¹² However, the latter's firm faith, in the words of Leo Marquard, "that nothing worth while is achieved by violent means", and his belief in "the continuing dialogue, however tedious, and not in resort to violence",¹³ has met with crippling difficulties in South Africa. In a situation in which the Nationalist Government over the last three decades has made the parliamentary game unwinnable for its opponents (whilst it insists that the latter go on playing it), the very principles which liberals advocate commit them to political means which are futile. And even earlier on in this century,

liberals met with the same difficulties.¹⁴ Ezekiel Mphahlele is surely right when he maintains that

It's an awkward thing to be called a moderate in South Africa, or in any situation that requires nothing less than militancy to redress wrongs done to any section of a people ... A liberal in an African context is a white man who believes in redressing political wrongs by constitutional means. More often than not he accommodates himself in [sic] the legislative machinery in the hope that he can use the concessions by which he has come to occupy a certain position inside the machinery to persuade the oppressor to change heart. A liberal will thus fight parliamentary elections so that he can advocate reforms from a constitutional platform. For several years now we have been told continually by liberals to make use of statutory bodies like urban advisory boards, so-called Bantu authorities, where black people can serve in an advisory capacity. 15

There is no doubt that an awkward commitment to non-violence is an informing feature of a novel like Paton's Cry, the Beloved Country.

In liberal literature this repugnance for violence tends to be expressed in a general recoil from all violent manifestations of life as well as in Paton-like sermons for political and constitutional reform as opposed to revolution. Not only does the liberal advocate evolution rather than revolution, but his very sensibility shies away from the fact of violence itself; he believes that violence or force is irrational and therefore reprehensible.

Moreover, the security and protected nature of his class position has the invariable result of making him unfamiliar with violence and ways of coping with it. This can be seen particularly in Turbott Wolfe, in A Dance In The Sun, and in many of the novels of Nadine Gordimer. The characters are incapable of coping with the institutionalized violence which is so much the essence of the various situations in which they happen to be involved. Invariably,

the result of this is something similar to that which Leo Kuper describes so accurately in his comment on the position of the political liberal in a situation of extreme racial conflict:

There can be little doubt that liberals are not viable in extreme racial conflicts. They have no mass following, they have no power, they have no skill in, nor inclination for, violence. In consequence they are easily emasculated by governmental repression, or liquidated by extremists on both sides. The mediating position becomes a no-man's land. When combat is once engaged, and the groups begin to polarize, the appeals for conciliation, moderation and humanity become strangely insipid and meaningless. 16

In a country like South Africa, rigidly polarized along racial and class lines and dominated by a single racist vision and its semi-totalitarian manifestations, it is again inevitable that the liberal mind with its scepticism and optimism, its "reasonableness", "normalcy", and "tolerance", will fall helplessly and hopelessly between the two stools of white nationalism and black nationalism. Denis Worrall in his essay "English South Africa and the Political System" is referring implicitly to this quandary of the liberal individual when he writes that "English South African intellectuals are deluding themselves if they think they have some sort of mediating role to play; apart from the fact that people, however well-intentioned they may be, are, if they have no power base, generally thrust aside in a pinch situation, Afrikaner nationalism has shown that it does not require mediators in its relations with Black Africans".¹⁷ Without a power base and committed by his very principles to the methods of constitutional reform and a rejection of the revolutionary's appeal to force, and confronted by an extremism and gross immoderation in almost every aspect of South African life, the liberal stance becomes essentially that of the uncommitted individual. In a situation so polarized, and therefore

demanding a specific choice in one direction or the other (a definite practical identification either with the white ruling-class or with the black proletariat they oppress) if power, or a possibility of power, is to be won, the liberal is prevented from responding to this demand by the very nature of the principles in which he places his faith.

In South Africa, the liberal is again faced with an irreconcilable conflict: if he is to act effectively on a political level he has to cease being a liberal. The other ways open to him, such as verbal protest (of the kind to be found in so many liberal novels) are ineffective. For, as Hoernlé writes: "To protest in words against dominance is ineffective: domination is too firmly entrenched to be shaken by merely verbal assaults. There is some relief for one's feelings in vigorous denunciation: but any liberal who thinks that by doing this, and nothing but this, he is striking a valiant blow for liberty is fooling himself".¹⁸ And if a realization of the helplessness of their position drove a small wing of the Liberal Party, the African Resistance Movement, into acts of sabotage, in 1964 (this being the historical background to Nadine Gordimer's The Late Bourgeois World), then these desperate acts merely had the effect of finally isolating whites in general from Liberal Party policy and driving them into the white laager.¹⁹ Again, whether on the practical political level, in history, or in literature, the liberal becomes an isolate, condemned by his obsolescence and by opponents on all sides of the political spectrum.

Individualism

As has been pointed out, another fundamentally important element in the liberal faith is individualism, a stress on the primary importance of the individual and a belief that he or she, having been given sufficient education, and with a change of heart and sufficient goodwill, might have profound repercussions on a political situation; in a word, that change on a national scale might come about through change on an individual scale. And yet Leo Kuper, paraphrasing Franz Fanon, writes that "in a world of radically opposed and irreconcilable interests there can be no evolutionary change towards a shared society. Individualism cannot bridge the collective destiny of the parties in the struggle for freedom; and concessions may merely be the cloak for a less blatant but more complete servitude".²⁰ And he quotes Ezekiel Mphahlele who, in criticizing the Church of South Africa, maintains that

with its emphasis on the value of the individual personality, (it) has continued stubbornly to bring outmoded standards to the situation; a situation where a powerful herren volk has for 3 centuries done everything in the interests of the volk. Where persons have been oppressed as a race group, the Church has sought safeguards and concessions for the individual, evading the necessity and responsibility for group action. 21

And indeed the major criticism of political liberalism has been, precisely, its failure to take account of group interests, to see the necessity for group action if change in South Africa was to be effected, and to recognize the powerlessness of the individual act (or the individual "friend of the native") in the face of competing nationalisms. This serious ideological deficiency in liberalism, its exclusive emphasis on the individual, led to its lack of

understanding of nationalism and group identities within South African society and its failure to meet the challenge which nationalism presented.²²

If this was one of the main contributory factors to the demise of liberalism in South Africa, then it is also one of the reasons for the demise of the various characters in the liberal novels. The individual, on the basis of his own initiative and friendly feelings (for example) towards the blacks, can nevertheless not achieve the change which he desires. The very structure of controls in the country renders the problems which he is attempting to solve or mitigate totally unamenable to an individual solution. This is particularly conspicuous in Dan Jacobson's A Dance In The Sun in which two white hitch-hikers, caught willy-nilly in a racial imbroglio in a small Karroo town, attempt to solve the predicament of a black servant; yet since the latter's predicament is merely a local instance of a national predicament all they can do is to resort to some paternalistic offers of ambulance work - which, moreover, are rejected. This is true, too, of Turbott Wolfe. The answer to this predicament is not to be found in a greater emphasis being placed on the value of the individual in proportion as his individuality is threatened by all sorts of constraints and conformities, but in group action. But the liberal novel tends never to perceive this. The more the individual is threatened the more individualistic he becomes in reply; he never perceives the necessity of organizing with others to get rid of the threat to his and everyone's individuality.

It has already been mentioned that a novel informed by the liberal ideology cannot, as a rule, penetrate very deeply into aspects of psychology, libido, or "evil". More importantly, this lack of depth is reflected frequently in the belief in South African liberal novels that a little "goodwill" and a "change of heart" will be sufficient to solve the country's racial problems. This betrays the poverty of the liberal critique. It is nowhere more obvious than in Paton's Cry, the Beloved Country. Unwittingly, and more often than not, it is just these features of liberal morality which are so often advanced as "solutions" in liberal novels. That they are not solutions at all should be self-evident. Though literature cannot give, for instance, the economic causes behind a particular historical period which it describes since this is simply not the province of literature, it can be more aware of the reasons behind the dilemmas which it portrays in fictional terms. The liberal novels discussed in this thesis only betray this awareness indirectly, if at all: the failure of the liberal ideology which all of them announce is not only an implicit criticism of the illiberal nature of South African society and its conditions, but it is also a reflection of the inadequacy of the liberal ideology itself.

The particular problems which political liberalism has failed to solve and the appearance of corresponding problems which the liberal novel has also foundered upon is one way in which these two separate streams of activity reflect each other. But a further reflection is to be found in the fact that the demise of political liberalism in South Africa is reflected in the demise of the liberal novel here. This is a large claim to make. Nevertheless, the historical period from the days of what has come to be called

"the Cape Liberal tradition" during the last quarter of the nineteenth century down to 1968 when the liberal ideal of equal political rights in a common legislature received its death-blow with the Prohibition of Improper Interference Act,²⁶ is definitely reflected in a change in the liberal novel. As will be seen in the following chapter, just as political liberalism becomes less and less viable through this period, so the tradition of the liberal novel becomes less and less viable as well.

Footnotes

1. As an anonymous reviewer has suggested, "the trend and polemic of liberal literature is partly an echo of the faults and vagaries of liberal politics." "South African Conflicts", Times Literary Supplement, 16 August 1957, p. xxxvi.
2. R.F. Alfred Hoernlé, South African Native Policy And The Liberal Spirit (Cape Town: University of Cape Town, 1939), p. 152. He also remarks that in "such a multi-racial society, under White domination, the liberal found himself baffled and, indeed, defeated. He might gain a small concession, here and there; but he never gained a victory on the battlefield of principles; or, if he did, it was either a barren victory - the principle apparently established was not applied; or else a purely temporary victory - the principle gained was presently lost again." pp. 137-8.
3. *ibid.*, p. 178.
4. *ibid.*, p. 150.
5. Martin Legassick, "The Rise of Modern South African Liberalism: Its Assumptions and Social Base", mimeo, p. 2.
6. Janet Robertson has noted the extent to which "the strong feeling of paternalism which was so integral a part of liberalism on the colour question among South African whites - a paternalism which continued to distinguish even the Liberal Party after its formation in May 1953", contributed to the alienation of blacks from it. Liberalism In South Africa (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 59. And Tim Couzens, too, has remarked: "After a period of collaboration with white groups blacks have tended to become disillusioned with whites, even liberals, who are often perceived as watering down the efficacy of black political resistance." "Black Poetry in Africa", Poetry South Africa, eds. Peter Wilhelm and James Polley (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1976), p. 58.
7. Lewis Nkosi, "Black Power Or Souls Of Black Writers", South African Writing Today, eds. Nadine Gordimer and Lionel Abrahams (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p. 190.
8. Hoernlé, p. 103.
9. Denis Worrall, "English-Speaking South Africa and The Political System", English-Speaking South Africa Today, ed. André-De Villiers (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 198.
10. Nadine Gordimer, Speak Out: The Necessity For Protest (Durban: University of Natal, 1971), pp. 7-8.
11. Janet Robertson, p. 222.
12. See Hoernlé: "A liberal, we must repeat, is committed by his principles to the methods of constitutional reform: he may not use the revolutionary's appeal to force." p. 155.
13. Leo Marquard, Liberalism in South Africa (Johannesburg: Institute of Race Relations, 1965), p. 43.

- 14. See Paul Rich, "Liberalism and Ethnicity in South African Politics: 1921-1948", African Studies, 35, Nos. 3-4 (1976), pp. 238-9. He writes that the "articulation of liberalism based upon the unit of the individual in South Africa had the effect of forcing liberals to work inside the existing political system without being able to suggest any radical alternative. The implicit assumption that liberal ideals could be best achieved by gradual reform within what was accepted as a parliamentary system meant that liberals were unable to suggest any significant alternative social model to the segregationist ideals of the majority of politicians in the House of Assembly and Senate in the 1920s and 1930s."
- 15. Ezekiel Mphahlele, The African Image (London: Faber and Faber, 1962), p. 67.
- 16. Leo Kuper, Race, Class and Power (London: Duckworth, 1974), pp. 266-7.
- 17. Denis Worrall, "English South Africa and the Political System", English-Speaking South Africa Today, ed. André De Villiers (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 216.
- 18. Hoernlé, pp. 152-3.
- 19. See Janet Robertson, Liberalism in South Africa: 1948-1963 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), pp. 223-25.
- 20. Leo Kuper, Race, Class and Power, p. 70.
- 21. *ibid.*, p. 247.
- 22. See Paul Rich, "Liberalism and Ethnicity in South African Politics: 1921-1948", pp. 237-39.
- 23. See Martin Legassick and Paul Rich for an analysis of this failure.
- 24. Hoernlé, p. 179.
- 25. Denis Worrall, "English-Speaking South Africa and the Political System", p. 206.
- 26. See Janet Robertson, pp. 230-1.

Chapter 6

Liberalism and The Novel

As many studies such as Ian Watt's The Rise of The Novel (1957) have shown, and as is well known by now, the relationship between the novel form, the rise of a European bourgeoisie and their liberal, humanistic values (the chief among them being individualism) is a very direct one. W.J. Harvey loosely summarizes this connection as follows:

One of the few Marxist generalizations about literature to hold up reasonably well when put to the test of detailed historical examination is the thesis that the development of the novel is intimately connected with the growth of the bourgeoisie in a modern capitalist system. From this social process derive the assumptions and values we may conveniently if crudely lump together as liberalism. We may fairly say that the novel is the distinct art form of liberalism, by which I mean not a political view or even a mode of social and economic organization but rather a state of mind. This state of mind has as its controlling centre an acknowledgement of the plenitude, diversity and individuality of human beings in society, together with the belief that such characteristics are good as ends in themselves. It delights in the multiplicity of existence and allows for a plurality of beliefs and values ... Tolerance, scepticism, respect for the autonomy of others are its watchwords; fanaticism and the monolithic creed its abhorrence. Kant's second general principle of morality is its first commandment. 1

The most characteristic of the structure of oppositions in the novel, that of the individual versus society, is itself a reflection of the liberal ideology's characteristic way of perceiving the relationship between men and society; and it is one index of the close relation between liberalism and the novel.² But Harvey's summarizing statement is inadequate; he is guilty either of naïveté or a rather prudent hypocrisy in not recognizing the extent to which the liberal state of mind is very definitely bound up with "a political view or even a mode of social and economic organization".

For it is precisely a specific mode of economic organization (namely nineteenth century "free enterprise" capitalism) which made possible and provided a basis for that aesthetic of delight "in the multiplicity of existence" and in a "plurality of beliefs and values" whilst, at the same time, lessening the possibilities of actually achieving that delight through the restrictions imposed by capitalism itself.³ Lucien Goldmann, a far more rigorous and suggestive theorist than Harvey (the latter's comments on the novel are themselves a perfect example of the liberal tone of mind and general temper), has written:

The novel form seems to me, in effect, to be the transposition on the literary plane of everyday life in the individualistic society created by market production. There is a rigorous homology between the literary form of the novel ... and the everyday relation between man and commodities in general, and by extension between men and other men, in a market society. 4

Goldmann goes much further than Harvey (a quotation from the latter's work was necessary merely to indicate the general connection between a class, a literary genre and an ideology) and is considerably less idealist in his analysis of the sociology of the novel form. In his Towards A Sociology Of The Novel, he argues that the hero, the central figure of bourgeois realism, gradually disappears from the novel under the impact of capitalist economics: "with (the) transformation of economic life and the replacement of the economy of free competition by an economy of cartels and monopolies (between 1900 and 1910), we witness a parallel transformation of the novel form that culminates in the gradual dissolution and disappearance of the individual character of the hero"; and he speaks of a period following upon this development in European capitalism "which begins more or less with Kafka and continues to the

contemporary nouveau roman, and which has not yet come to an end, and which is characterized by an abandonment of any attempt to replace the problematic hero and individual biography by another reality and by the effort to write the novel of the absence of the subject, of the non-existence of any ongoing search."⁵

Goldmann, in fact, correlates liberalism with the development of the novel form; capitalism engenders the liberal individualistic values of personal liberty, equality, tolerance, the rights of man, and the unhindered free development of personality upon which "the category of individual biography as the constitutive element of the novel" develops, taking the form of a problematic hero seeking authentic values. The decline of the hero thus parallels the decline of liberalism. The hero either vanishes and is replaced by the collectivity and the organization, or turns into the anti-hero, the individual who is isolated from any kind of human collectivity. To him, the mutations in the novel form in the twentieth century are both an index and symptom of an ever-increasing loss of freedom, dehumanization and alienation in the life of men under monopoly capitalism.

If Goldmann's thesis is correct, if the novel form has been bound up historically with the rise of the bourgeoisie and a set of liberal and humanistic values which were in turn bound up with this class and its economic individualism, then it would appear to be highly unlikely that the traditional form of the novel, the distinct art form of liberalism with all its assumptions about the primacy of the individual, of characters who are secure in their freedom to refine on their motives, truly to understand each other and, above all, themselves, would flourish as a viable and

appropriate literary form in an historical context of monopoly capitalism, fanaticism and the monolithic creed - or at least not without considerable modification. The dilemma of the liberal (by definition a pluralist) in actual reality when confronted with the Either/Or dilemma of clashing monistic imperatives, becomes in this case the dilemma of an art form. Still more specifically, it would appear to be even more improbable that a tradition of liberal novels should flourish in the South African context in which, since the initial societal vacuum of colonialism so well suggested in The Story of An African Farm, the individual has been increasingly subjected to collective controls, whether by a bureaucratic state apparatus, by the pressures of industrialism, or by the conditioning apparatus of a capitalist high-consumption society. And although there have been instances of the liberal novel becoming the dominant art form in an illiberal society (the nineteenth century Russian novel is the salient example), and this provides evidence of the essentially oppositional, critical function of the novel in general, the very landscape of South Africa both as literal fact and symbol has scarcely offered a congenial climate for the cultivation of liberalism, whether as a political programme and movement, or as the ideology of an art form.

The corrosive action of the very geography of South Africa, its deterministic effect upon the lives of human beings and the fatalistic cast of mind which it creates,⁶ scarcely contributes to a suitable climate for the liberal novel; the latter is predicated upon liberty rather than fatality, on freedom from necessity rather than determinism, and on the existence of a highly developed society rather than its absence.

Even more specifically, it may be asked what happens to the liberal novel when, as Nadine Gordimer has written, "living 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 ... [and] aspects of a black man's life have been put impossibly beyond the white man's experience ... and there are areas from which, by iron circumstance, each in turn finds himself shut out, even intuitively"⁷ The answer of course is that the liberal novel, dependent as it is upon an intimate knowledge of society in all its ramifications and stratifications, becomes a totally inappropriate artistic mode.

And this brings me to one of my major points. Until a decade or so ago, white English South African writers have been utilizing, have adopted wholesale and with few significant modifications, a form of the novel which by its very nature assumes that liberalism is a going concern in South Africa. Perhaps this was inescapable considering their dependence upon a predominantly British literary heritage.⁸ Yet it is no wonder, then, that given the fanatic, monolithic complexion of this racist society and the erosions of individuality caused by alienation, an absence of society and capitalism, the liberal form of the novel should be an inadequate one, just as the individual characters whose exploits and endeavours it records should be revealed as inadequate as well.

As one example of this all too frequent inadequacy, it is a frequent criticism of English South African literature as a whole that the white writers' characterizations of blacks, and vice versa, have never amounted to genuinely sympathetic, "round" portrayals (to use Forsterian terminology), and that endlessly the reader or critic

is presented with "flat" stereotypes of the black (usually as the inscrutable and/or virile servant) and with equally "flat" stereotypes of the white (usually as the vicious and/or sterile "Baas" or "Madam"). In so far as the novels in this literature take a traditional realist form (and almost all of them do), that is, of the novel of character which assumes the importance of the individual and his or her individual destiny, this criticism is just. But the traditional novel, it must be noted, goes hand in hand with the age (the nineteenth century) of the apogee of the individual; it is the characteristic literary form of an age of bourgeois individualism when, in the words of Alain Robbe-Grillet, "it was something, to have a face in a universe when personality was at the same time the means and end of every endeavour",⁹ and the individualistic, free and unconditioned response to experience was valued above all and, moreover, was practically feasible. It is to be doubted whether such an age and the conditions necessary for its existence and continuance have ever existed in South Africa. Given the enormously wide racial schisms and class divisions throughout recent South African history, its fanatic, monist nature, and also the fact that the members of its society are identified according to the dictates of these schisms rather than possessing the freedom to make their own identities and identifications, it should not be any cause for wonder nor complaint (nor blind Euro-centric criticism in terms of E.M. Forster's distinction between "round" and "flat" characters) that the characterizations of white and black by black and white writers respectively should have been so frequently stereotypic, shallow, and eviscerated - and this quite apart from the individual talents of these South African writers, or their lack of them. The point is that in the racist society the stereotypes are the reality.¹⁰

The very function of racism and the schisms that it deliberately engineers is to stereotype everyone. In effect, then, those writers guilty of lifeless characters have been equally guilty of using a form of the novel in order to deal imaginatively with a social, economic and political system which, through its anti-individualist and anti-humanist character, has rendered that form anachronistic, if not obsolete. Given the harshness of the South African environment, whether seen in terms of sheer geography, politics, economics, race or class, it should be no surprise that the major tradition in white English South African fiction should serve to underline the formidable, if not insurmountable, obstacles confronting the liberal impulse in South Africa, and the ceaseless failures of this impulse as a result. For the liberal, "open" society has never taken root in South Africa. Thus the liberal impulse, at least as it is expressed in literature, has tended to create or culminate in a form of tragedy; for tragedy, as has been said, is an image of Fate, of extreme compulsion and constriction, and it is precisely this Fate, this necessity, which has dominated so much of South African history and which has done more than anything else to create that harsh and arid atmosphere which defines the country's national life.

In the history of the English South African novel there was, as David Rabkin has noted, a "relatively quick transition from the novel of adventure, which was basically metropolitan in origin, to an authentic South African form, the social problem novel", the latter proving to be "the hardiest and most prolific indigenous growth."¹¹ But if there is any truth in Goldmann's hypothesis it is equally possible that the novel of "social problems" will in turn give way to another changed form, will abandon liberal

realism and all it implies (indeed, demands) about the accurate description of society and the intricate delineation of interpersonal relationships against that background. And, in fact, (even though this can only be the most tentative of hypotheses), it would seem as if this mutation has taken place in the best of the recent English South African novels. In Coetzee's two books, in Gordimer's latest novels, in Dan Jacobson's most recently published novel, The Confessions of Joseph Baisz (1977) - set in an imaginary land, part South Africa, part Eastern Bloc country - traditional realism would seem to have been largely sacrificed and a species of naturalism, with all that it implies about a deterministic, fatalistic world and about characters increasingly alienated, bewildered and dehumanized, has taken its place. For whereas realism in the novel is bound up with liberalism, naturalism is bound up with determinism. On the evidence of these novels it would seem as if the South African social reality has altered to such an extent (the present is the age of monopoly capitalism and "Total Strategy") that it is no longer possible to write the conventional liberal realist novel and, at the same time, to achieve a sufficiently penetrating art. The conventional white South African hero or heroine, the benevolent, kindly person desperately striving to uphold and disseminate humanist values in the teeth of an anti-humanist environment, has been succeeded by characters who take violence and violation as the norm and, indeed, the axiom of their situation and who play out their personal psychoses against a landscape of pillage, rape, and degradation:

The English South African novel of the seventies (The Conservationist, Dusklands, In A Dark Wood, In The Heart of the Country) is characterized by the presence, within a tough and violent linguistic design, of unpleasant protagonists. The effectiveness

of these hard-talking novels depends on the measure of disgust they can arouse in the reader. No doubt the loss of amiable individuality is meant as a reflection of a society which disallows decency and certainly - as the generalizing titles suggest - we are reminded that persons are only cyphers of something bigger - political animals (the stress is on animals) formed, moulded, directed and finally destroyed by the political ambience that has, in South African literature, the force of an inclusive cosmic design. 12

In short, the determining forces of the apartheid society would seem to have led to the disappearance of liberalism as a political force and of the unique individual of the liberal realist novel around whose biography the novel's plot has most usually been spun. In referring to the nouveau roman and writers like Robbe-Grillet, Michel Zeraffa asks rhetorically: "considered as 'modern art', was not the novel both index and symptom of kinds of alienation that were even more in evidence in 1950 than they had been twenty-five years earlier?"¹³ And one might well ask whether the increasing alienation registered in recent English South African novels is not also a kind of index of an increasing alienation and reification in South African society, a society in which people have become things. In this case the answer is probably also a 'yes'. Although it is too early for anything more than speculation, and although what follows can only be the most tentative of hypotheses again, it would appear that the white English South African novel is following the lines of that pattern of development which Lucien Goldmann has elaborated; from the novel of character to the novel of its absence, to that limitless and narcissistic expansion of the self which occurs when the individual is no longer related to society and the self becomes the only reality and, paradoxically, the great irreality as well. Mehring in Gordimer's The Conservationist is one example of this process, as is Magda, the central

figure in In The Heart of the Country, cynically saying: "Here in the middle of nowhere I can expand to infinity just as I can shrivel to the size of an ant. Many things I lack, but freedom is not one of them".¹⁴

The above novels as well as others with their experimentations with the novel form, with their destruction of the stable ego which is so important to the bourgeois world-view, may be read as a reflection of the decline of liberalism. As Harvey says, somewhat ruefully:

It may well be, of course, that we are moving towards a form of society where such a state of mind is no longer viable, that liberalism is a luxury rarely allowed by history. In this case the novel will, like other art forms in the past, cease to be an available imaginative mode and will be supplanted by other art forms, either entirely new or drastic mutations of the novel itself. Considered in this way, the radical experiments of many modern novelists may be seen as the first attempts at such mutation, the first imaginative responses to a changing world view which involves the gradual death of liberalism. 15

But if J.M. Coetzee's focus on myth and Gordimer's concern with "identity crises", which directly reflect an ideological breakdown, are one indication of a "changing world view which involves the gradual death of liberalism" (Harvey puts the cart before the horse in not stating that it is a changing world that gives rise to a changing world view, not vice versa), then the catalogue of angsts, horrors, obsessions and alienations which characterize South African fiction in the late sixties and seventies are another reflection of the decadence of the white world, a reflection of its increasingly threatened position of dominance in the South African totality. But against these works with their self-destructiveness,

their isolation and mutations of the novel form, must be placed the self-confidence, vigour and implicit sense of collective power to be found in recent writing by blacks, if a comprehensive and truly representative picture of the way in which literature is reflecting a complex, changing social process going on in South Africa is to be established. Of necessity this other side of the South African coin is not discussed here.

Liberalism and the Novelist

An obvious corollary of Goldmann's correlation between changes in the novel form and changes in capitalism is that, given certain conditions in a market society, a certain type of novel becomes an anachronistic literary mode. But if this provides a partial explanation of the impotence of so many English South African novels, then there is a further reason for this impotence, one which is to be discovered at the very heart of the liberal ideology itself. For if, on the one hand, liberalism is often attacked by Marxists as the self-serving creed of a privileged bourgeoisie determined to legitimize and maintain their position of privilege in an iniquitous class system through a spurious rationalism, then, on the other, it is also attacked with equal vehemence by others (particularly Existentialists) who see in its exclusive rationality a petrifying denial of those deep irrational sources from which much that is considered to be truly creative and life-giving is seen to flow.¹⁶ And it is from this latter critique that another limitation of liberalism, as it informs literature, is revealed.

For it is ironic that liberalism - so prevalent among intellectuals and so widely regarded as the truly creative outlook in modern

society - has failed to attract any of the major creative writers of the twentieth century. In a well known essay, "Science, Literature & Culture: A Comment on the Leavis-Snow Controversy", published in Commentary in 1962, Lionel Trilling discussed this little remarked but surely significant fact:

It is one of the cultural curiosities of the first three decades of the 20th century that, while the educated people, the readers of books, tended to become ever more liberal and radical in their thoughts, there is no literary figure of the very first rank (although many of the next rank) who, in his work, makes use of or gives credence to liberal or radical ideas. I remarked on this circumstance in an essay of 1946. "Our educated class," I said, "has a ready if mild suspiciousness of the profit motive, a belief in progress, science, social legislation, planning, and international cooperation, perhaps especially where Russia is in question ... Yet it is a comment, if not on our beliefs then on our way of holding them, that not a single first-rate writer has emerged to deal with these ideas, and the emotions that are consonant with them ..." 17

He goes on to point out that none of the major writers has been a liberal and that most of them have been anti-liberal; and that there is no great twentieth century work infused with the liberal ideology as De Rerum Naturae, the Aeneid, The Divine Comedy, Don Quixote, Faust and War and Peace were infused with other ideologies. Many secondary writers and a substantial majority of critics have been and are liberals; but "Proust, Joyce, Lawrence, Yeats, Mann (as novelist), Kafka, Rilke, Gide (also as novelist) - all of them have their own love of justice and the good life, but in not one of them does it take the form of a love of the ideas and emotions which liberal democracy, as known by our educated class, has declared respectable."¹⁸

However, the explanation for this cultural curiosity is surely to be found in the very way Trilling defines liberalism in the same essay: "a ready if mild suspiciousness of the profit motive, a belief in progress, science, social legislation, planning and international cooperation". It is obvious that these defining features of the programmes of the social and political levels of liberalism cannot be readily translated or transposed onto that imaginative level out of which literature is made. Unlike Christianity, for example, whose public creed or dogma has the potential of touching the individual at the deepest level of his or her being and, at the same time, also has the potential for answering to the deepest needs of the human psyche, liberalism's ignorance of these deepest needs means that it cannot plumb the same depths and speak meaningfully of that level which most profoundly engages the writer's attention. And it is to be doubted whether Trilling's brief list of liberal tenets can be transposed onto any other level at all.

Addressing himself to just this anomaly, Dan Jacobson, having asked just what it is in the catalogue of liberal virtues and programmes to make anyone feel uncomfortable, writes:

Only this, I would say: the refusal to acknowledge the fact that conflict is the prime, painful condition of existence and growth. Hidden deep within the drift of most modern liberal or radical thinking is the notion that if only we were cleverer, kinder or better organized than we are now, it should be possible, somewhere, somehow, for us to enjoy success without failure, repose without strain, achievement without sacrifice, pleasure without pain - and yet be human. Now we know perfectly well that nowhere, in no way, are these enjoyments offered to us; nor is there any chance that they will ever be. But we shrink from going on to recognize that our aspirations are

inextricably dependent upon our fears and frustrations; that were it not for our experience of hardship, danger and loss, we would not know what to cherish and value. Conflict of this kind cannot be legislated, psychologized or wished away; it is what we live by. 19

And he also argues that however much liberalism is to be admired for its efforts to prevent and alleviate suffering and for its pleas for a reduction of conflict of all and any kinds, it simply fails to confront people's deepest sense of what life is really like; in short, it is not "in resonance with what one conceives to be the full truth about the nature of our life".²⁰ And it is this inability of liberalism to speak meaningfully about suffering, about the irrational and the absurd, and its failure to acknowledge this aspect of life and incorporate it (if this happened liberalism would of course cease to be liberalism), which is one reason why it has failed to attract any major novelists.

Laura Riding and Robert Graves have commented upon the repugnance of "genuine professional modernism" for bourgeois liberalism. The latter, they write, "being a position of compromise between all extremes, is the breeding place of settled, personally secure convictions."²¹ But there is a further cause for the almost constitutional revulsion of major writers for the cloying, middling securities of the bourgeoisie, securities which are seen to be at odds with the deepest and finest energies of life and thus to be hypocritical; and it has something to do with the appalling nature of twentieth century history and its abundant examples of extremism which have had the effect of rendering liberalism progressively more inoperative and ineffectual as a literary ideology.

For, as has been mentioned, just as political liberalism, by its very nature, must frequently founder hopelessly when stranded between two vehement nationalisms, so again by its very nature it must founder when, through the medium of the novel form, it attempts to come to terms with so many South African situations which, being based on a profound irrationality, spawn unreason and violence everywhere. Time and again, the liberal novel in South Africa, in its attempt to both depict and confront a daemonic incident, has to declare defeat (and this is particularly the case with Gordimer, Paton, and Jacobson) or to mystify (as is the case with Paton again).

It has been customary to regard the novelist as a humanist, as one who finds inspiration in man's personal quest for truth and goodness and who shuns confining systems of philosophy, religious dogma, and abstract reasoning in favour of human values and value systems which emphasize the worth of each individual.²² Once again W.J. Harvey summarizes this customary conception:

the novel cannot be written out of a monolithic or illiberal mind. Because of the range of his subject matter, because he must see all life as divers et ondoyant, because he must accept his characters as asserting their human individuality and uniqueness in the face of all ideology (including his own limited point of view), the novelist must tend to be liberal, pluralistic, foxy.

Consider the two greatest systems of belief which are liable to evoke a monistic commitment in their adherents, Christianity and Marxism. Where is the truly great Christian or Marxist novel? ... The novelist must acknowledge, if he is to create a faithful imitation of mankind, that most human beings will always elude or overflow the categories of any ideology; such a belief is part of what I have called the liberal state of mind.

But this conception of the novelist as liberal and humanist is derived from the example of the great nineteenth century novelists, and it is one which has long since changed. For, as Trilling asks: "Is not the essence of the modern belief about the nature of the artist, the man who goes down into the hell which is the historical beginning of the human soul, a beginning not outgrown but established in humanity as we know it now, preferring the reality of this hell to the bland lies of the civilization that has overlaid it?"²⁴ And although he fails to mention the fact that the "civilization" the modern artist or novelist was revolting against was most usually a liberal bourgeois one, he does comment on the fact that much of the most compelling literature since Dostoyevsky's Notes From Underground is violently opposed to all civilization and society as such. Moving further and further away from the stifling certitudes and pallid pleasures of society the more its inauthenticity was perceived, the novelist, similar to artists in other mediums, has tended to cease being a kind of humanist god scrupulously balancing many, ultimately indeterminable, varieties of societal life, and has tended to become something of a prophet of the irrational (something which is seen as healthily subversive of the complacency of bourgeois society and whose denial by the latter is seen as the major reason for its sterility); or, alternatively, he has rejected a pluralist ideology as being bound up with the inauthenticity of the pluralist society and has embraced a monist one in its place. But whatever the position of the novelist subsequent to his or her abandonment of humanism, common to many of the best of them has been a radical critique of society.

Now it seems to me that the thin, un compelling nature of most

English South African literature by whites (whether novel, poetry, or drama) derives, at least in part, from its often uncritical acceptance of the society which it is so intent upon describing. For, as Lionel Trilling remarks elsewhere in Beyond Culture, "the energy, the consciousness, and the wit of modern literature derive from its violence against the specious good."²⁵ One has almost come to expect that authentic literature will involve a far more radical rejection of society and of the "specious good" than that which is to be found in the majority of the works which comprise this literature. And it is significant that the most forceful English South African novels (The Story of An African Farm, Turbott Wolfe, Dusklands and In The Heart of the Country) are also those in which South African society or "civilization" is most forcefully rejected. It is as if the very energy of these works stems from their rejection, an energy of rejection which is similar to that which is characteristic of so much of the best of modern European and American literature. But in other cases such as Gordimer, Paton, and Jacobson, it is as if by not rejecting South African society thoroughly enough, by failing to depict it from a sufficiently critical point of view (which also often means a sufficiently alienated one), the very prose of these novelists inherits that inauthentic tone which is writ large in the society it is supposed to be criticizing. Thus it is to be doubted whether the liberal-humanist novelist escapes a complicity with that which he or she is attacking. It is rather through those "outsider" novelists such as Schreiner and Coetzee and through the mixture of the visionary and the daemonic characteristic of their uncivilized worlds that the most compelling literature has come. Their novels of "isolation" with their existentialism and monist visions of transcendence escape the taint of the bland South

African society; and these novels also give evidence of a far greater energy in their use of language.

Language and the English Novel in South Africa

It is almost to be expected that, along with the traditionalism and conservatism of a colonial or neo-colonial society like South Africa, and as a result of its remoteness from the rest of the world, combined with a disturbing ignorance of contemporary developments elsewhere until, say, a decade or more after the event, there will be a sense of deadness in the language of its literature, and a serious lack of experiment or verbal daring. The following acerbic comment which Lewis Nkosi makes about fiction by black South Africans, applies equally to fiction by whites:

If black South African writers have read modern works of literature they seem to be totally unaware of their most compelling innovations; they blithely go on 'telling stories' or crudely attempting to solve the problems which have been solved before - or if not solved, problems to which European practitioners, from Dostoyevsky to Burroughs, have responded with greater subtlety, technical originality and sustained vigour; and black South Africans write, of course, as though Dostoyevsky, Kafka or Joyce had never lived. Is it not possible without sounding either superior or unpatriotic, to ask how a fiction written by people conversant with the history of the development of modern fiction can reveal no awareness of the existence of Notes From Underground, Ulysses or such similar works? For make no mistake about this, it is not an instance of writers who have assimilated so well the lessons of the masters that they are able to conceal what they have learned; rather is it an example of a group of writers operating blindly in a vacuum. 26

With the exception of the experimentations of J.M. Coetzee and Nadine Gordimer in fiction, Athol Fugard in drama and perhaps

Sydney Clouts and Douglas Livingstone in poetry, there has been precious little awareness of overseas developments - particularly modernism - in the work of white English South African writers:

A test of progress in literature throughout the English-speaking world is the incidence of modernism ... South Africa, apart from an upsurge of literary vitality in the twenties and the current revival of poetry, may also be said to be as yet largely untouched by the movement. The reasons for this apparent backwardness perhaps lie in the loss of writers to England and in an exaggerated regard for and a somewhat timid dependence on overseas achievement along with a certain conservatism of practise. 27

And in fact the English South African novelist's attitude towards his craft would appear to be somewhat similar to the English one which Bernard Bergonzi describes in a comparison between contemporary American and English novelists; "in starting to read an American novel one begins with a sense of language being used with real openness to its possibilities, something remarkably rare in English novels ... Novel-writing in England is seen as a visible and established tradition, the niceties of which can be picked up as one goes along."²⁸

But apart from the proverbial colonial traditionalism and conservatism and the natural possession of and familiarity with a language which so commonly produces a lazy usage of it, there is another important reason for the curious linguistic deadness that one finds in much English South African literature. It has often been said that South Africa's multilingualism has been responsible for creating barriers of misunderstanding between people of different language groups; but less often has the specific rôle of the English language amidst the South African Babel been noted. André Brink takes the first step towards clarifying this rôle when

he writes:

while the majority of the British settlers of 1820 were from the lower classes the very nature of the South African situation soon established English as a bourgeois language on the continent. (Afrikaans, on the other hand, retained its working-class connections until at least the Second World War.) It was, in fact, as difficult for English to adapt to Africa in the nineteenth century as it would have been for a gentleman in top hat and tails to adjust to life in the bush. Adapt and adjust it did, let there be no doubt about that - and the current renaissance of English literature in South Africa provides splendid confirmation of that fact - but for a long time, it seems to me, the very nature of the language itself acted as a deterrent in the evolution of a significant indigenous literature. 29

Though Brink does point out the significant fact of the bourgeois nature of the English language in Africa and its long estrangement from the African reality, he unfortunately does not attempt to draw a connection between these two features.

This connection becomes clearer when the actual political rôle which has been most frequently assigned to the English language in South Africa is discussed. Guy Butler, for one, writes that "the role of English - caught between two increasingly violent and exclusive nationalisms - is to keep on stating, with patience and courage, that our common humanity can unite us."³⁰ And in an essay published in 1973, and significantly entitled "Instrument of Reason", Mario Schiess contends that

English in South Africa is, by the turn of events, suddenly cast in a rôle of extreme importance. It will have to be the upholder of human dignity and the tool of communication of reality as it is, untouched by wilful manipulation or wishful thinking. English will have to be the instrument of

rational, analytic thought in this time of increasing hysteria that will accompany the demise of nationalism as we have known it. 31

Common to both the articles from which the above two quotations have been taken, and to many others like them on the rôle of the English language in South Africa, is the emphatic claim that English, like liberal politics with its ability to see all sides of the matter in question, is more neutral, rational and civilizing than other available languages; that, somehow, it occupies a position at some remove from an internecine reality and thus is blessed with a more objective, considered view of it and that, in short, it is the prime tool of clarity and reason amidst the barbaric Babel surrounding it in South Africa. English is thus assigned a rôle which is the linguistic analogue of the rôle of liberal politics; like the latter, its function is seen to be that of the mediator and conciliator. But that which is "neutral" and "objective" is also distant from. And, in reality, the English language, the tongue of a largely bourgeois group of whites in South Africa, has been as alienated and alienating as this group of people has been historically; the alienation of this language in Africa is analagous to the alienation of this bourgeoisie in the same place.³² And although in certain respects (though even this is to be doubted) the inevitable divorce between a transplanted language and an alien land might grant it the advantage of a greater objectivity, this is surely not the case when the subject on which it is brought to bear ceases to be political analysis (for example) and becomes literature. For here a close and indeed intimate engagement between language and land is necessary if the literature is not to inherit the estrangement and distantiation inherent in the concepts of "objectivity", "rationality" and

"mediation". If, then, "the apathy that was a feature of 'English politics' in South Africa ... applied equally to the language",³³ its deadness can also be attributed to that lack of intimate involvement with the land caused by its being assigned the bourgeois liberal rôle of "an instrument of reason".

Language itself provides the most crucial indication of the ideology at work in a novel. A certain usage of language, a certain style, both encapsulates and reinforces the ideology which is often more immediately apparent in the contents of a particular text, in its "ideas". As Terry Eagleton has written:

Language, that most innocent and spontaneous of common currencies, is in reality a terrain scarred, fissured and divided by the cataclysms of political history, strewn with the relics of imperialist, nationalist, regionalist and class conflict. The linguistic is always at base the politico-linguistic, a sphere within which the struggles of imperial conqueror with subjugated state, nation-state with nation-state, region with nation, class with class are fought out. Literature is an agent as well as effect of such struggles, a crucial mechanism by which the language and ideology of an imperialist class establishes its hegemony, or by which a subordinated state, class or region preserves and perpetuates at the ideological level an historical identity shattered or eroded at the political.

34

Although there obviously cannot be such a thing as a specifically "liberal" usage or "style" of language, and although each individual novelist will tend to create his or her own individual idiom and will modify it to suit the particular problems he or she is trying to solve, the characteristic type of language used by the liberal novelists is analagous to the liberal ideology itself. I have suggested already that the liberal ideology is a facile one, that it can take into account only superficially those irrationalities,

irreconcilable conflicts, and sufferings which most often give the deepest sense of life and thus engage the creativity of the writer and the attention of the reader most profoundly. Writing by liberals tends to display a similar orientation and similar limitations as a result. It tends to consist of a "surface" language, to be cool, level-headed, conversational and anecdotal ("chatty"), and to be clean of those imponderables, myth and symbol. If liberalism had an aesthetic First Commandment it would probably be: it must be Rational. And the language of the liberal novel tends to be that everyday, "ordinary" language which expresses an automatized experience of the world. This has important consequences:

The relation of the literary work to 'ordinary language' is relevant ... for it is in 'ordinary language' that ideology is produced, carried and naturalized, and the text's relation to it is a crucial index of its ideological character. Apart from the case of works whose 'relation' to ordinary language is one of direct negation - those, for example, written in the alien language of an imperial ruling class - every text bears some relation to the common discourse of its society. But there is a clear difference between the text which seems to reproduce it ... and the work whose devices radically transmute such speech. 35

The "surface" realism of liberal language, its "ordinary" (i.e. bourgeois) nature and its heavy reliance upon descriptions of the phenomenal world and its paraphernalia, are often nothing more than a kind of security. Both for the writer and the reader, this type of language along with the conventional "story-line" is the most easily assimilated (because most traditional) and, hence, least unnerving and threatening form of literary discourse. Consequently, if it is at all the intention of the writer to try to criticize or subvert the established order of his society, then his criticism or subversion would itself be subverted if it is expressed in a

type of language and through a form which has already been "naturalized" by his society. Michel Zeraffa makes this point when he writes: "For Dos Passos and Kafka, for Musil and Faulkner, social reality is literally fatal to man and humanity. But their protest would have stayed a dead letter if these novelists had not expressed this offence against society by means of forms in themselves offensive to the established order and official culture."³⁶ It is clear than much of the "criticism of life" that is to be found in English South African literature, if not overt, didactic "protest", is amputated and cauterized, as it were, by its lackadaisical use of "ordinary" language (i.e. the common discourse of the white English bourgeoisie), and its preference for a form of the novel which is by no means subversive in any way.

But the best way of illustrating the language of liberalism and its inadequacies is to compare two passages. The first is from Dan Jacobson's novella, A Dance In The Sun:

This is a story of what happened once to myself and a friend, and of what we saw and heard in a house near a little village in the Karroo. We were hitching, down to Cape Town, at the time, from my home-town, Lyndhurst, in the northern Cape.

The first day of our hitch-hike we were lucky. We made about three hundred miles on only two lifts, both of them quite pleasant people, and both of them in motor-cars, not lorries. But the next day our luck changed. We took up our position outside the village in which we had spent the night, and stood there for hours, while the sun climbed higher and grew fiercer, and the sky paled, and dust hung in the air above us. 37

And so on. The second is one of the numbered paragraphs or "snapshots" chosen from J.M. Coetzee's In The Heart of the Country:

91. The schoolhouse is empty. The ashes in the grate are cold. The rack above the stove is bare. The bed is stripped. The shutter flaps. Jakob and Anna are gone. They have been sent packing. They have gone without even speaking to me. I watch the motes of dust dreamily ascend a shaft of sunlight. There is what tastes like blood at the back of my nose but is not. Truly, events have a power to move unmatched by one's darkest imaginings. I stand in the doorway breathing fast. 38

Now the first extract from Jacobson is perfectly characteristic of his general fictional style (and indeed there is almost no modulation or change in pitch between his journalism and his fiction); it is prosaic, "chatty", cool and thin and, in Eagleton's words quoted above, it simply reproduces 'ordinary' language, that 'ordinary' language which is the vehicle of the liberal ideology. But on the other hand, with the extract from Coetzee which is also characteristic of his particular style in its intensity and subjectivity, one is at once aware that he is using language with an infinitely greater sense of its dramatic possibilities; and this drama is achieved both through the series of short, bitten-off sentences and through the sardonic use of cliché. Coetzee's style, eminently modernist (post-modernist might be more accurate), does not allow the reader to slip into the narrative; it distances and, in the Brechtian sense of the word, "estranges". To enter into one of the novels or short stories of Jacobson, however, is rather like slipping into a warm bath; all the familiar and taming props of conventional realism are there. And although it is one of the prime intentions of a novella like A Dance In The Sun to reveal the limitations of liberalism in a certain context, this revealing is undercut by the liberal language in which it is expressed.

It is little realized, and even more seldom commented upon, that

the language, form and techniques of traditional liberal realism have by now been largely appropriated by journalism. Today the question is whether this realism is not an anachronism, whether it is still an appropriate fictional mode for dealing with the present realities of South Africa. Significantly, the most accomplished white English South African writers over the last decade have been those who have been most aware of the poverty of the liberal ideology and have consequently adapted and adopted those models which came out of what was later to be called the Modernist movement, one whose literary experiments began appearing in Europe in the first two decades of this century. And it is worth noting that these experimentations were also largely a response to an historical period in which the reigning bourgeois ideology and the artistic forms appropriate to it had been revealed as inadequate by a new and unprecedented historical reality. For the use of Modernist techniques by writers like J.M. Coetzee, Athol Fugard, and, increasingly, by Nadine Gordimer, has not been simply an instance of a belated, if not long overdue, conformity to a style which has long since become internationally fashionable. Its adoption has been made necessary by the Apartheid state which, over the same last decade and before, by forcibly widening the rift between races to the point of utter estrangement, has reached new heights in its programme of dehumanizing all peoples in South Africa. And since Modernism is the broad artistic and literary movement which has developed those styles and techniques through which dehumanization can be most accurately portrayed (as well as representing a quasi-religious reaction against the arid nature of liberal bourgeois society), it has been essential for an adequate treatment by those writers of that alienation, anomie, bewilderment about identity, as well as angst, which have been some

of the most direct consequences of this programme in white South Africa particularly. Modernist techniques have become an indispensable means for an effective writing about that sense of impotence which has become such a feature of certain sectors of the white world. In general, they have been required for an adequate portrayal of the destructive reality which we inhabit.

In the introduction to this thesis I argued that an approach to the English South African novel by white writers through the terms of the liberal ideology has the advantage of being able to take both form and content into account - a relationship which most previous criticism has simply ignored in concentrating on either form or content. As mentioned, the liberal tradition (an ideology) and realism (a specific type of literary style) go hand in hand in South Africa.³⁹ But the commitment to realism (and, by implication, to liberalism), although "tied directly to the stage of development of South African culture, and further, to the dominant problem of that culture, racial and linguistic sectionalism",⁴⁰ may be said to have been largely abandoned by now; for historical conditions in South Africa have now developed beyond the point where this literary mode and its ideology is consonant with them. When Stephen Gray speaks of the difficulties which Olive Schreiner met with in the South African context, he is also referring to all those other novelists (Plomer, Paton, Jacobson, Gordimer, and others) who, in following the liberal tradition initiated by her, one which was to become the dominant tradition in English South African fiction, collided with increasingly severe difficulties of the same sort:

Schreiner, the left-wing reformer, knew that she was only one against an entire capitalist

society that never could, and never would, afford her thoroughly civilized and liberal sentiments much currency. The great liberal British tradition, once it was applied to an African colonial situation, had to battle against extraordinary tensions in order to survive at all ... The adventure novel offered easy solutions to every African dilemma. The tradition of the liberal realist novel in South Africa offers few. 41

Footnotes

1. W.J. Harvey, Character And The Novel (London: Chatto and Windus, 1965), pp. 25-26.
2. See Raymond Williams, The Long Revolution (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), pp. 89-119.
3. Lucien Goldmann remarks upon "the internal contradiction between individualism produced by bourgeois society and the important and painful limitations that this society itself brought to the possibilities of the development of the individual." Towards A Sociology of The Novel (London: Tavistock, 1975), p. 12.
4. *ibid.*, p. 7.
5. *ibid.*, pp. 12-13.
6. See Stephen Gray, Southern African Literature: An Introduction (Cape Town: David Philip, 1979), p. 154.
7. Nadine Gordimer, "The Novel and The Nation", African Writers on African Writing, ed. G.D. Killam (London: Heinemann, 1973), p. 52.
8. As David Rabkin has written: "The adoption of prose fiction (the novel and short story) as the most frequent form of writing in English was not, of course, deliberately decided upon by writers conscious of its socially heuristic tendency. It was largely inevitable. For when South Africans began to write books, the novel dominated all other literary genres in English, and had done so for at least fifty years." "Ways of Looking: Origins of the Novel in South Africa", Journal of Commonwealth Literature, 8, No. I (1978), p. 29.
9. Quoted by Bernard Bergonzi, The Situation of the Novel (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), pp. 45-46.
10. See Leo Kuper, Race, Class and Power (London: Duckworth, 1974), Chapter 1.
11. David Rabkin, p. 43.
12. Jean Marquard, "Novel as critical tool", Contrast, 12, No. I (July 1978), p. 83.
13. Michel Zeraffa, Fictions: The Novel and Social Reality (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 24.
14. J.M. Coetzee, In The Heart Of The Country (Johannesburg: Rowan, 1978), p. 50.
15. W.J. Harvey, p. 26.
16. For a discussion of this, see William Barrett, Irrational Man (London: Heinemann, 1967), pp. 106-248.
17. Lionel Trilling, "Science, Literature and Culture: A Comment

- on the Leavis-Snow Controversy", Commentary, 33, No. 6 (1962), p. 471.
18. ibid., p. 472.
 19. Dan Jacobson, "Liberalism and Literature", New Statesman, 65 (March 1963), pp. 312-13.
 20. ibid., p. 314.
 21. Robert Graves and Laura Riding, A survey of Modernist poetry (Michigan: Scholarly Press, 1972), p. 39.
 22. See Robert Liddell, A Treatise on The Novel (London: Jonathan Cape, 1947), p. 53.
 23. W.J. Harvey, pp. 25-26.
 24. Lionel Trilling, Beyond Culture (London: Secker and Warburg, 1966), pp. 20-21.
 25. ibid., p. 80.
 26. Lewis Nkosi, "Fiction by Black South Africans" African Writers on African Writing, ed. G.D. Killam (London: Heinemann, 1973), pp. 109-10.
 27. R.G. Howarth, "Literary Sisters of the South", Literature in Southern Africa, ed. A.L. McLeod (New York: Modern Language Association, 1970), p. 11.
 28. Bernard Bergonzi, The Situation of The Novel (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), pp. 80-81.
 29. André Brink, "English and the Afrikaans Writer", English in Africa, 3, No. I (March 1976), p. 42.
 30. Guy Butler, "The Language of The Land", English Studies in Africa, 13, No. I (1970), p. 92.
 31. Mario Schiess, "Instrument of Reason", Contrast, 8, No. 2 (April 1973), p. 70.
 32. Stephen Gray regards the pattern of liberal realist fiction in South Africa as one which is based "on the uneasy feeling of the white man's failure to belong to the land, and his guilt at being an interloper, a colonizer." Southern African Literature: An Introduction, p. 158.
 33. Mario Schiess, pp. 64-65.
 34. Terry Eagleton, Criticism and Ideology (London: Verso Editions, 1978), pp. 54-55.
 35. ibid., p. 82.
 36. Michel Zeraffa, p. 25.
 37. Dan Jacobson, The Trap and A Dance in the Sun (Harmondsworth:

Penguin, 1968), p. 83.

38. J.M. Coetzee, In The Heart Of The Country (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1978), p. 45.
39. See above, Introduction.
40. David Rabkin, p. 28.
41. Stephen Gray, pp. 154-5.

Part Two

Chapter 7

Olive Schreiner's The Story of An African Farm

I

Olive Schreiner's The Story of An African Farm is often regarded as the seminal novel in English South African literature. Apart from the fact that it was among the first to be published (albeit in London) and to be internationally acclaimed, the most frequent reason given for its especial significance by later Southern African writers like Dan Jacobson and Doris Lessing was that it was literally the first South African novel to make the drab, uninspiring African landscape exploitable for fiction.¹ But a more important reason, one which is seldom remarked, is that it initiated that liberal tradition which has become the dominant one in English South African fiction; it was the first to lay bare a tragic conflict that has been the dominant one in so many English South African novels which have followed it in time: the unequal battle between liberal impulses and an illiberal historical environment.

The Story of An African Farm would appear to be a confused and confusing book. Artistically it is confused because, as a novel, it is badly structured, its coherence is fragmented by Schreiner's allegorical and rhetorical interpolations and by "the constant intrusion of the author's private personality into descriptions of people and events where it has no place."² One instance of this confusion, and which betrays a curious lack of self-recognition in Schreiner herself, is to be seen in the strange omission of the novel "ever to explore what is very plainly, to the most unsophisticated reader, the principal tragedy of the book - the fact that Waldo does not marry Lyndall."³

Its confusing aspect, however, is a result of the ceaseless clash

in the novel between two mutually exclusive ways of perceiving the world it portrays. It is this clash which forms the structural principle of the novel, dictating its rapid shifts and many contradictions. In her biography of Schreiner, D.L. Hobman speaks of "the rending struggle between a rationalist mind and a mystical temperament" which is to be found in all Schreiner's work, but particularly in The Story of An African Farm.⁴ This is one formulation of those opposite poles which cause the series of confusing contradictions which abound in the book. But Stephen Gray has been the only critic to recognize the extent to which the novel's nature is determined by this clash:

Schreiner's own inner tensions within the novel are complex and even contradictory; one cannot see them resolved unless one arrives at a view of the novel as constructed out of paradoxes which are, on the face of it, baffling and exasperating. The novel's own force is derived from pitting Mill against Darwin, one feels - how does the indivisibility of human freedom apply to evolving African society? - and pitting Emerson's commitment to social change on the part of the artist against Spencer's First Principles which, whatever else it might stand for, offers the novelist the theme that all men aspire from the known towards the unknowable, which is unchangeable. These four writers, who are commonly labelled as Schreiner's sources of inspiration in early reading, set up such antipathies within the fabric of the novel that part of its liveliness is derived from her attempts to resolve them into a total whole. She tries, but it is perhaps her enduring strength that she fails. 5

Given this system of contraries which is everywhere apparent in The Story of An African Farm, it is surprising that no critic of the novel has ever referred to one of the most famous essays on two antagonistic, mutually exclusive ways of perceiving the world, Isaiah Berlin's study of Tolstoy's conception of history, "The Hedgehog And The Fox". For, strange as it may seem, this essay

on a subject so ostensibly remote, casts more light on the method at work in Schreiner's novel, as well as on her own split personality which informs it, than many an essay which is devoted solely to her. Berlin writes of

a great chasm between those, on one side, who relate everything to a single central vision, one system more or less coherent or articulate, in terms of which they understand, think and feel - a single, universal, organizing principle in terms of which alone all that they are and say has significance - and, on the other side, those who pursue many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory, connected, if at all, only in some de facto way, for some psychological or physiological cause, related by no moral or aesthetic principle ... The first kind of intellectual or artistic personality belongs to the hedgehogs, the second to the foxes. 6

And one is unavoidably reminded of Olive Schreiner herself when, in a comparison of Tolstoy and Joseph de Maistre in the same essay, he goes on to say:

they were united by an inability to escape from the same tragic paradox: they were both by nature sharp-eyed foxes, inescapably aware of sheer de facto differences which divide and forces which disrupt the human world, observers utterly incapable of being deceived by the many subtle devices, the unifying systems and faiths and sciences, by which the superficial or the desperate sought to conceal the chaos from themselves and from one another. Both looked for a harmonious universe, but everywhere found war and disorder, which no attempt to cheat, however heavily disguised, could even begin to hide; and so, in a condition of final despair, offered to throw away the terrible weapons of criticism, with which both, but particularly Tolstoy, were over-generously endowed, in favour of the single great vision, something too indivisibly simple and remote from normal intellectual processes to be assailable by the instruments of reason, and therefore, perhaps, offering a path to peace and salvation. 7

For she, too, although perhaps not in as marked a way as Tolstoy, suffered a violent contradiction between the data of her experiences from which she could not liberate herself, and a deeply metaphysical belief in the existence of a system to which they must belong, whether they appear to do so or not. Nowhere is this contradiction more explicit than in The Story of An African Farm; nowhere are the conflicts it generates so irreconcilable. In this novel both Schreiner and her characters oscillate with an almost monotonous logic and the regularity of metronomes between the hedgehog and fox-like ways of perceiving the world, and being incapable of reconciling these ways, not being able to reject either the one or the other, they are torn apart by the conflict between the two just as Tolstoy himself was torn apart in a particularly tragic way.

The especial power and influence which The Story of An African Farm has had over generations of readers, and still retains today, is not so much because, in the words of Doris Lessing, it has the final effect of expressing "an endeavour, a kind of hunger, that passionate desire for growth and understanding, which is the deepest pulse of human beings",⁸ but because of the clash it contains between the monist and pluralist attitudes towards life, a clash which is expressive of one of the deepest tensions in the human psyche. As W.J. Harvey has written: "novelists are usually foxes by nature and the fascination offered us by many modern novelists is the internal conflict displayed in their work between the pluralistic fox and the monistic hedgehog."⁹ That intense questing on the part of Waldo and Lyndall which defines the power of the novel would be considerably less compelling if it were not a consequence of this clash. Waldo's obsessed religious

struggles would not move the reader so much if they were not set against his secular cravings for human knowledge and his anguished perception of nothing more than a "blind chance sporting" after the loss of his faith. Likewise, the gullible German overseer's simple-hearted faith and belief in God, which deludes him into seeing goodness at the very heart of evil, would be flaccid if it were not immediately contrasted with Lyndall's fox-like intellect which, in questioning almost everything, shivers the world into pieces.¹⁰

The opposition between monism and pluralism, which gives the novel its apparently confusing aspect, also operates artistically as a kind of ironic method, a balancing principle through which one form of life, activity, or incident, is set against another and serves to undermine the significance of the other. Thus the idealized image of the African plain under the full moonlight in the famous opening passage of the book is immediately undercut by the image of Tant' Sannie in her sleep, and is supplanted at the very beginning of the next chapter, "The Sacrifice", by the counter-image of an arid, treeless and burnt-out landscape: "The farm by daylight was not as the farm by moonlight. The plain was a weary flat of loose red sand sparsely covered by dry karroo bushes, that cracked beneath the tread like timber, and showed the red earth everywhere."¹¹ Like a later writer in a similar semi-colonial situation, the Australian Patrick White, whose fictional technique so often consists of pitting a fiercely satirical treatment of suburban Australia against a deadly serious portrayal of outcast seers on the borders of society, Schreiner balances opposites by juxtaposing the frequently grotesque comedy of much of the life on the African farm with the deadly serious,

and indeed deadly and deadening, quests of her outsiders, Lyndall and Waldo, with their ardent desires for God, enlightenment or emancipation. Thus the sadistic scene of Waldo's terrible whipping by Bonaparte Blenkins is counterpointed in the immediately following section of the book by the comedy of the latter being drenched by a tub of cold pickle water, heavy with ribs and shoulders. And thus again, when Waldo is once more in a rhapsody of joy over his sense of the nearness of God to him, the sheep turn to look at him with their "senseless eyes" and Bonaparte Blenkins is conducting a farcical and hypocritical church service in the farmhouse in order to win over the affections of Tant' Sannie.

This ironic method which runs through the novel finally cancels out whatever affirmation might be found, whatever assertion might be made. Negative follows positive, positive follows negative until nothing can either be denied or affirmed; everything reveals an essential emptiness. The pessimism which follows from the use of this method is further reflected in Schreiner's despairing recognition that everything has a price and that progress in one direction entails regression in another: "All things on earth have their price; and for truth we pay the dearest. We barter it for love and sympathy. The road to honour is paved with thorns; but on the path to truth, at every step you set your foot down on your heart."¹² This is further emphasized in a following passage: "You never shed a tear or create a beautiful image, or quiver with emotion, but you pay for it at the practical, calculating end of your nature. You have just so much force: when the one channel runs over the other runs dry."¹³ But as will be seen, the pessimism of Schreiner's vision in The Story of An African Farm, a pessimism so deep-rooted that it can prompt her to conclude that

"it was all a play, and no one could tell what it had lived and worked for", that both human and animal endeavour of every sort was "a striving, and a striving, and an ending in nothing",¹⁴ is a consequence of those lacerating oscillations between monist and pluralist imperatives which govern the movement of the novel. Her nihilistic conclusions are by no means universal or eternal; they arise directly out of an experience of life on the African farm.

It is because both Lyndall and Waldo repeatedly fail to realize their pluralist desires for education, knowledge and society in their colonial world that they resort to monist fantasies; the latter provide a means of rationalizing their respective failures. His God having failed him, his attempt to establish himself in the world outside the African farm having shattered him, and with Lyndall finally having abandoned him through her death, Waldo retreats first into a form of nature mysticism which glues together his shattered life under a principle of "Universal Unity", and then into death. Lyndall, having been endlessly frustrated in her desire to achieve the full realization of herself on the earth, and having failed to her attempt to find a life consonant with her ideals, resorts on her death-bed to a form of metaphysics which re-unites her with essentially religious principles. Like the heroine of Patrick White's Voss (1954), Laura Trevelyan, who cries out at the height of her delirium that when "man is truly humbled, when he has learnt that he is not God, then he is nearest to becoming so",¹⁵ Lyndall finally interprets her many trials and sufferings in essentially monist, religious terms and perceives a purification and redemption through pain, a resurrection through a descent:

And she said, in a voice strangely unlike her own, 'I see the vision of a poor weak soul striving after good. It was not cut short; and, in the end, it learnt, through tears and such pain, that holiness is an infinite compassion for others; that greatness is to take the common things of life and walk truly among them; that' - she moved her white hand and laid it on her forehead - 'happiness is great love and much serving. It was not cut short; and it loved what it had learnt - it loved - and -' 16

It is because the liberal, pluralist desires of these characters are defeated by the enormous constraints of the historical context in which they are attempting to realize them, because their various longings bring them nothing but suffering and desolation, that they resort to religious fantasies and their pluralism becomes a monism.

Indeed, Schreiner never fails to introduce the religious or quasi-religious solution at those critical moments in her novel when all secular strivings would appear to have been in vain. In this respect she reminds one of those English Metaphysical poets who never failed to invoke God in order to cement together the cracks which they sensed were widening in their cosmos. It would seem as if the ever-present agony, whether of Schreiner or her principal characters, Waldo and Lyndall (and in many instances it is clearly both; Schreiner and her characters are indivisible), is forever propelling them into the rarefied air of metaphysics, as if through this form of levitation a meaning could be found in their sufferings and a substance could be given to their lives which are so hollowed out by manifold pain - the substance of a faith, a redeeming vision, a certainty and its security.

This rage for transcendence, especially evident in the careers of Lyndall and Waldo, only becomes explicable when it is seen as a reaction against the pain of consciousness which fractures the self, and as an expression of the resultant psychic need to find the security of a permanent calm harbour in the midst of a world of ceaseless flux in which nothing can be permanently possessed, least of all the truth. But the mechanism behind this persistent feat of transcendence, whether it involves a leap towards God, to the unity of nature, or to the comforting, undifferentiated universe of childhood before the corrosive worm of thought has sundered the world with its doubtings, is clearly psychological. In all cases the metaphysics or fantasy functions as a compensatory or consolatory device in order to render the unliveable nature of a present reality bearable. Writing of Schreiner in his introduction to the Penguin edition of The Story of An African Farm, Dan Jacobson has observed:

She invariably took upon herself the pain of speaking up for the humiliated and oppressed - Boers, blacks, women, Jews; and what could be more selfless than that? She always pleaded for tenderness and candour in human relationships; and what could be more generous? She always tried to envisage a future in which man's finest aspirations would be realized; and what could be more helpful and undaunted? But again and again the effect would be to transcend the torments of the present by a feat of moral and rhetorical levitation which ultimately strikes the reader as having an inner meaning or impulsion quite opposite to that intended. It begins to strike him as strangely selfish, uncaring, preoccupied far more with reassuring the speaker than with ministering to the needs of those to whom, or of whom, she is speaking...

The relevance of this mode of lacerated self-exaltation to several passages of The Story of An African Farm should be plain enough to any reader. 17

Yet even though the metaphysical flights of both Schreiner and her protagonists, Waldo and Lyndall, are blatant evidence of the psychological truism that those who are trapped or severely hampered in some way by circumstances will invariably attempt some form of sublimation, that if the earth presents insurmountable barriers people will transcend these through fantasy, what requires attention is not so much the plethora of crude fantasy in The Story of An African Farm but the actual social, historical conditions described by the novel which would seem to inspire it. For a curious paradox is at once apparent when one tries to specify the monists and pluralists in the novel. On first sight, the pluralists would seem to be those characters who seek a richness and variety of life: Lyndall and, to a lesser extent, Waldo. Yet the implacable environmental obstacles which confront them on every side and which prevent them from achieving that 'fineness of life' towards which they aspire, transform them into monists who come to have an especial dread of the plural nature of the world. In the end, their respective failures to find a richness of life lead them to hunger for just one thing: for release from suffering, for peace and serenity, and for an existence subsumed under one heavenly principle rather than many earthly ones. At the close of the book, their hunger is not for a 'liberal' world (that is, a world in which liberal values have some efficacy) but for complete liberation from the world as such. They end up by desiring salvation.

Thus the internal dynamic of the novel, those shifts between monism and pluralism already described, is not solely the reflection of an autonomous psychological process in the mind of Olive Schreiner, or in the minds of her characters. Those confusing swings between

two ways of perceiving the world which characterize the novel and which give to it its great artistic power, those swings between a perception of the world as diverse, secular, plural, and the opposing desire to see its very diversity unified by a single metaphysical principle which would give coherence to the weltering chaos of reality, are determined by the particular conditions of life on a Karroo farm in nineteenth century colonial South Africa. Even more specifically, this flux is caused by the contradictions which result when an ideology, the product of Western European liberal thought and derived by Schreiner from her reading, is imposed on an African colonial setting where it simply has no place. The novel's internal dynamic is in fact determined by its external dynamic, by the conflict-ridden relationship it establishes between an ideology and a certain historical situation.

II

The Story of An African Farm is primarily a tragic drama of the fate of the liberal impulse in a colonial milieu of such cultural deprivation and impoverishment that this impulse never has the possibility of being anything other than frustrated and doomed. Christopher Heywood has written: "In her [Schreiner's] novel, as in many others which handle the double face of colonial society, the tragic view of life derives from despair about the efficacy of the liberal impulse."¹⁸ Though the novel records many sorts of conflict, the major conflict in it is set in motion through an ideology being imposed upon a situation which is radically hostile to it and which does not provide those conditions in which its values could take root and flourish. As in a later South African novel, William Plomer's Turbott Wolfe (1925), Schreiner's novel

is ceaselessly concerned with pitting a European ideology against a certain modus vivendi in Africa. And since the battle between the two takes place on the African soil, it is as if the contest is rigged; Africa always wins.

This conflict issues in both farce and tragedy. The enormous discrepancy between Western European liberal ideals and the inhospitable African terrain creates that radical disjunction and inequality between values and facts which is so often the essential cause of both laughter and death. The liberal ideology which Schreiner utilizes was the product of a highly developed, industrialized European society and an historically advanced bourgeoisie. Since no similar society existed in South Africa in the nineteenth century, the values she adheres to are consigned to a vacuum; they remain utterly alien and inappropriate, and particularly so in the backveld world which her novel describes. And given the extent of this discrepancy, it is no wonder that it should frequently result in comedy; nor is it any wonder that the champion of Schreiner's liberal ideals in the novel, Lyndall, should be literally choked to death as long as she remains the dogmatic advocate of them in the nineteenth century Karroo environment. For, as she says to Waldo, "there is not room to breathe here; one suffocates."¹⁹

The depth of the European influence present in The Story of An African Farm is most immediately apparent on a purely literary level, in the extent to which it is influenced by nineteenth century English fiction. However much it has been admired for its indigenous, "African" quality, this influence is particularly strong:

The setting of Schreiner's novel is, or was in 1883, unique in being an ostrich farm in the semi-desert country of the Karroo. Her intimate knowledge of the terrain and her faithful recreation of its details give to this setting a particular atmosphere and poignancy. But to speak of her novel as if it were a kind of social and political safari 'about' an African farm would be equivalent to speaking of Conrad's stories as about the sea or Wuthering Heights as about the Yorkshire moors ... The archetypal and epic images through which the young Olive Schreiner, instinctively perhaps, mythologised the colonial raw material of her novel should establish her kinship with Bronte, Conrad or even with the poet Emily Dickinson ... Schreiner's emphasis in the opening chapters of the novel is not on the geographical peculiarities of the African landscape but on the spiritual insomnia of the boy Waldo. The repeated evocations of Biblical metaphor place his loss of caste and of faith at the centre of a European literary tradition.

20

Dan Jacobson pinpoints its dependency on English fiction with even greater accuracy:

The Story of An African Farm is in many respects, some of them damaging to it, a very 'literary' piece of work; the fruit in places more of reading than of life. It could hardly be otherwise. Even Bonaparte Blenkins - tramp, rogue, sadist, and comic, one of the liveliest of the novel's inventions - owes much to other books. Sometimes he talks like Mr Jingle of Pickwick Papers; sometimes he preaches like Mr Chadband of Bleak House. As for Lyndall, the doomed, imperious heroine, who goes through the novel complaining that her heart is dead, that she is incapable of feeling, but who is shown to us as never finding anyone worthy of her high emotions - she, too, is not an unfamiliar figure to any reader of Victorian fiction.

21

This European influence is more subtly betrayed by the controlling effect which Europe has on the very fantasy-life of the children on the farm. The child Lyndall's dreams of future wealth and

finery are literally determined by the picture of a woman on a fashion-sheet in Tant' Sannie's bedroom, a picture that clearly comes from a metropolitan, overseas centre. Even her deepest aspirations for a power, a singleness of mind and purpose which would lift her above the limiting constraints of her environment, and which are foreshadowed in the following passage, are inspired by the remote example of Napoleon Bonaparte:

'He was one man, only one,' said her little companion slowly, 'yet all the people in the world feared him. He was not born great, he was common as we are; yet he was master of the world at last ... he had what he said he would have, and that is better than being happy ... He was one man, and they were many, and they were terrified at him. It was glorious!' 22

However, the European influence on the novel, one which is so apparent in the above examples, is most significantly at work in the liberalism which informs the novel.

This liberalism, the central element in Schreiner's European approach to Africa, is not a political liberalism. The latter form of liberalism is expressed most clearly in a number of specifically political and sociological works which she wrote long after The Story of An African Farm, in Thoughts on South Africa, written in 1891 and 1892 but only published after her death by her husband, and in a pamphlet called Closer Union, published in 1908.²³ The apolitical character of the liberalism in the novel is quite understandable; there is no social base for any political programmes of any sort in the world which it depicts. Since that metropolitan, industrialized society from which Lyndall's European liberal ideals stem is scarcely duplicated by her Karroo world, since it contains nothing which might sustain her longing for emancipation, knowledge

and a love of the beautiful, and since a society as such is hardly constituted by the bleak, agrarian environment of the farm, it is not surprising that the specific form or strand of liberalism to be found in The Story of An African Farm, and embodied in the career of Lyndall, is that of "aesthetic individualism", which is defined above all by the pursuit of self-realization.

It is the very absence, if not complete lack, of a civilized society on the African farm which gives rise to an undue emphasis being placed upon the individual. Living in an environment which neither Waldo nor she has the power to transform into a civilized world, Lyndall can find no higher value than herself. Indeed, it is this very factor which stimulates the individualism of other characters in the novel as well, although the self-seeking and self-serving ends of persons like Gregory Rose, Tant' Sannie and Bonaparte Blenkins cannot be described as being liberal in any way.

Michel Zeraffa, writing of a number of European and American novelists, makes the following points which are of the utmost relevance to The Story of An African Farm: "In the novels of Proust, Virginia Woolf, Thomas Mann or Dos Passos one finds that the individuality of the character or of the narrator lies in the very fact that they can no longer be individuals, members of a social group. Their basic attachment to the 'self' as the sole authentic value demonstrates that they are not the creatures of a Balzacian society, where the individual was related to society as a word is to sentence."²⁴ For it is precisely because there is no authentic society in the context of the African farm that Lyndall ends up by choosing self rather than world and becomes so extremely alienated. Her intense liberal individualism, her fervent desire for self-realization and for a quality of life which

would raise her above the levelling effects of her environment is a direct response to an impoverished colonial milieu which can sustain no collective values.

Lyndall herself would seem to embody the precept that the only meaningful life is a life that strives for the individual realization - absolute and unconditional - of its own particular law. The overwhelming predominance in The Story of An African Farm of the desire to fulfill this law is the major indication of the fact that the liberal ideology is the informing one in the book; and it also establishes the book's place in the mainstream of nineteenth century European fiction far more effectively than its literary "borrowings" might ever do.

But as the novel itself shows, the obstacles in the face of achieving the specifically European liberal ideal of self-realization in the context of nineteenth century colonial South Africa are both numerous and enormous. The hegemony of religion and superstition in the colony reduces both Waldo and his father to ignorant slaves of illusion; it contributes to their demise rather than to their personal growth. The reactionary nature of the colonial attitude towards literature and learning, and which is so well illustrated in the book-burning episode in which Bonaparte Blenkins and Tant' Sannie happily indulge their bigotry, is scarcely conducive to that process of education upon which the whole notion of self-realization so much depends. Nor are there great possibilities for the liberal spirit in a world which is so much a prey to colonial adventurers like Bonaparte Blenkins, to people who, in the well-chosen words of Hannah Arendt, felt and found in Southern Africa in the nineteenth century "the impact of a world of infinite

possibilities for crimes committed in the spirit of play, for the combination of horror and laughter, that is for the full realization of their own phantom-like existence."²⁵ The irrational quality of life, which is forever subverting any attempts to rationally comprehend it, is a feature of the world of the African farm which the novel emphasizes time and again. Moreover, this world, whose material, spiritual and cultural poverty is evoked by Schreiner's use of a kind of desert or "wasteland" symbolism, for it, contains no institutions which might promote and safeguard the freedoms which Lyndall and Waldo are struggling to acquire. There is no social basis which might affirm and give a coherence and cohesion to their values.

As a result, what might be described as fairly commonplace liberal intentions in the context of nineteenth century Europe, and which might be fulfilled there without much frustration and anguish, become in the semi-desert of the Karroo a kind of madness. Lyndall grows almost manic in her hunger to achieve self-realization and thereby to transcend her pitiful locale. And this has a number of important consequences.

The Story of An African Farm is most frequently criticized for its cursory and insubstantial treatment of the blacks who appear in it from time to time. Jean Marquard is representative of this characteristic criticism when she writes:

The limitation of Schreiner's vision - obvious to a modern reader but hardly surprising in a Victorian - is in her failure to give any significant role to the blacks in her story. The alienation of the whites - and particularly of the English since the 'Boers' in the novel have put down roots and staked their

claim in the land - is passionately realized. Through Waldo and Lyndall Schreiner's compassion for the oppressed is voiced, but it is directed chiefly against the oppressors of women, children, animals and individuals. She does not recognise racial oppression as such and she never seriously questions the right of the whites to control the land and its people ... The coloured and African servants on the farm are only marginal figures in the novel. 26

But it must be emphasized that this failure of vision is a direct consequence of the primary focus of the novel on self-realization. With its overwhelming, obsessed focus on this, the cursory treatment of the blacks becomes quite understandable and even logical. Since they contribute nothing to Lyndall's sense of self, since they are solely part of the degraded, "fallen" farm world, they literally do not exist. Indeed, in the light of her primary intentions, they literally cannot exist. And hence it might be said that Schreiner's faulty vision is a direct consequence of the inadequacy of her liberal ideology. It is not simply an artistic failure.

A further consequence of this ideology is the farce it creates. One conspicuous example of the liberal, European "sublime" becoming the South African "ridiculous" is to be found in the polemic on the oppression of women which Lyndall delivers to a dumb and uncomprehending Waldo after her return to the farm from some years of schooling. This speech, delivered next to an ostrich camp and not in a lecture hall in Europe, consequently becomes, despite the intrinsic value of many of the ideas she proclaims and arguments she puts forward, nothing less than a farce. The essential import of Lyndall's speech is not to be found in the perhaps remarkable fact that Olive Schreiner could have entertained her feminist convictions so long before feminism itself became

a widespread issue in Europe and America, and that, in the words of Doris Lessing, she was "a suffragette before there were any",²⁷ but in the ludicrous aspect it comes to have in a situation in which Tant' Sannie's passionate religious belief in marriage and childbearing as the most appropriate rôles for women is, in fact, the one which is most consonant with the world the novel depicts.

But a final consequence of Lyndall's liberalism, and one which is most significant in that it reveals the limitations of her ideology, is the human isolation it creates, an isolation which ultimately comes close to causing the disintegration of her personality. For the persistent theme of human solitude in the novel is not only a reflection of the isolation of the African world itself, remote, cut off, and internally divided. It is also a reflection of Lyndall's individualism. The following well-known sentence, which comes just after Lyndall has delivered her feminist lecture to Waldo, is again a reflection of that divorce between human beings which her liberal ideology creates: "Perhaps she thought of the narrowness of the limits within which a human soul may speak and be understood by its nearest of mental kin, of how soon it reaches that solitary land of the individual experience, in which no fellow-footfall is ever heard."²⁸

The consequences of Lyndall's alienating individualism are clearly spelt out in the psychological effect it has upon her. For her scornful rejection of the isolated hell of her colonial world only plunges her into the even more isolating hell and prison of herself: "I am so tired. There is light, there is warmth," she wailed; 'why am I alone, so hard, so cold? I am so weary of myself! It is eating my soul to its core - self, self, self! I cannot bear

this life! I cannot breathe, I cannot live! Will nothing free me from myself?"²⁹ This outburst of hers is not solely the desperate confession of a frustrated Victorian female stereotype. Lyndall is cold, dead, and alone, because she remains passionately attached to an ideal of herself which her particular society cannot possibly affirm. Lacking this affirmation, she cannot escape the constricting dominance of her ego with its impulse to acquire personal power and satisfaction. In the heart of the African world she cannot find a suprapersonal value or object which, accepted as being above personal needs and wishes, would claim a complete and unconditional allegiance, and which would supersede the claims of her biological and personal needs. Her failure to achieve her ideals throws her back onto her self and precipitates the disintegration of her personality. The painful end to her life and her lonely death express most tellingly the limitations of the liberalism which she has pursued.

III

The Story of An African Farm, then, is a remarkable novel not so much because it is the product of Schreiner dipping her brush into the grey South African pigments around her, but because it is the first English South African novel to reveal those conflicts, both comic and tragic, generated by an imported European liberalism being imposed upon South African historical conditions. It is the first to record the harrowing effects of a disjunction between two completely separate worlds, between an historical situation and an ideology which is utterly foreign to it.

Nevertheless, the fact that both Waldo and Lyndall are finally

destroyed by the rending contradictions between their ideals and their immediate environment should not be read simply as Schreiner's implicit comment on the illiberal nature of South African colonial society; their deaths are also an implicit criticism of the liberal ideology itself. However, Schreiner herself does not seem to be sufficiently aware of this even though the contradictions in Lyndall's élitist aspirations are clearly revealed. The essential question which the novel as a whole poses is nothing like the vague and abstract one which Nadine Gordimer considers it to be asking: "What is the life of man?"³⁰ It is far more specific than this. The novel is asking what possibilities exist for the liberal impulse in South Africa. And its answer is that there are none. English South African literature thus begins, in effect, with a dead-end, with a novel which ends up by defeating its own premises and which declares the nullity of that which it wishes to affirm, the liberal approach, in the world with which it is dealing.

But the crucial point is that this defeat leads neither Schreiner nor her characters to question the value of the liberal ideology.

Discussing the images of the world present in the work of Racine, Pascal, Dostoyevsky and Kierkegaard, Michel Zeraffa remarks that these arose in the first place from the realization by these writers that the relationships actually prevailing in society were irreconcilable with the ideas and values to which they, as writers and philosophers, were attached. He goes on to say: "Life, in their eyes, is made up of insoluble conflicts. Yet this view of reality does not make them inclined to question their system of values. On the contrary, for them the split is not between the

concrete and the abstract but between contingent facts and universal ideas - hence the importance of the idea of renunciation, which dominates the work of Pascal and the other three writers."³¹

Schreiner, too, never considers any other system of values; the more her liberalism is thwarted and undermined by circumstances the more tenaciously she clings to it, till a destructive deadlock is finally reached. This deadlock, too, can only be resolved through the idea of renunciation. Thus, all of Lyndall's endeavours evaporate in her final religious humbling, whilst Waldo lapses into resignation and quietism. Although this might provide the novel with an artistically satisfying close, with the catharsis that comes with all passion having been spent, it leaves the central question which the novel poses, that of the possibilities of liberalism in South Africa, completely unanswered. In fact, this question is unanswerable because the novel never considers any alternative system of values. And it is for this reason, as much as for its blatant faults as a novel, that The Story of An African Farm is a radically unsatisfactory work of art.

Despite the visionary, mystical nature of this novel, despite the abundance of dream and allegory which it contains, it would be fair to conclude that it is lacking in vision, and particularly so if by the word "vision" is meant an especially acute perception of the future. Schreiner's vision culminates in a dead-end, in blindness. In the light of this, it perhaps becomes more easy to explain why she turned more and more to sociological analysis in her later work. This might not necessarily have been because, as Ursula Laredo has maintained, her real interest all along "lay in sociological analysis, and in political prediction, not in plot-making or creation of character",³² but because the liberal vision

which she adhered to in The Story of An African Farm presented her with no practical possibilities. Being incapable of conceiving of an alternative vision, an alternative ideology, it may be that she was driven to a type of writing and activity which was geared to more immediate practical and political matters - just as William Plomer may have felt compelled to leave South Africa after having shown the nullity of the liberal ideology in Turbott Wolfe and not being able to conceive of an alternative one himself.³³

Footnotes

1. See Dan Jacobson, "Introduction", The Story of An African Farm (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), pp. 7-23.
2. Dan Jacobson, "The Story of An African Farm", Standpunte, 8, No. I (1953), p. 68.
3. Kevin Margarey, "The South African Novel and Race", Southern Review, 1 (1963), p. 39.
4. D.L. Hobman, Olive Schreiner: Her Friends and Times (London: Watts, 1955), p. 80.
5. Stephen Gray, Southern African Literature: An Introduction (Cape Town: David Philip, 1979), p. 148.
6. Isaiah Berlin, Russian Thinkers (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p. 22.
7. *ibid.*, p. 80.
8. Doris Lessing, A Small Personal Voice (New York: Vintage, 1975), p. 100.
9. W.J. Harvey, Character and the Novel (London: Chatto and Windus, 1965), pp. 24-25.
10. Olive Schreiner, The Story of An African Farm (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 62. All subsequent quotations are from this edition.
11. *ibid.*, p. 38.
12. *ibid.*, p. 148.
13. *ibid.*, p. 151.
14. *ibid.*, p. 107.
15. Patrick White, Voss (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1957), p. 411.
16. Schreiner, p. 280.
17. Dan Jacobson, "Introduction" to The Story of An African Farm p. 17.
18. Christopher Heywood, "Introduction" to Aspects of South African Literature (London: Heinemann, 1976), p. xiii.
19. Schreiner, p. 183.
20. Jean Marquard, "Hagar's Child", Standpunte, 29, No. I (1976), pp. 35-36.
21. Dan Jacobson, "Introduction" to The Story of An African Farm, p. 19.

22. Schreiner, p. 48.
23. See Marie Dyer, "Olive Schreiner's Liberalism", Reality, II, No. 5 (1970), pp. 18-22.
24. Michel Zeraffa, Fictions (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 29.
25. Hannah Arendt, Origins of Totalitarianism (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Javanovich, 1951), p. 190.
26. Jean Marquard, "Hagar's Child", pp. 44-45.
27. Doris Lessing, A Small Personal Voice, p. 102.
28. Schreiner, p. 196.
29. *ibid.*, p. 241.
30. Nadine Gordimer, "The Novel and The Nation in South Africa", African Writers on African Writing, ed. G.D. Killam (London: Heinemann, 1973), p. 50.
31. Michel Zeraffa, Fictions, pp. 45-46.
32. Ursula Laredo, "Olive Schreiner", Journal of Commonwealth Literature, No. 8 (1969), p. 124.
33. For a discussion of Plomer's reaction to South Africa and his reasons for leaving it, see Peter Wilhelm, "The Single Dreamer: The African Poetry of William Plomer", Poetry South Africa, eds. James Polley and Peter Wilhelm (Johannesburg: Ad Donker, 1976), pp. 23-34.

Chapter 8

William Plomer's Turbott Wolfe

I

To a far greater degree than The Story of An African Farm, William Plomer's Turbott Wolfe (1926) is a novel which is disfigured by the sheer incompetence of much of the writing which it contains and by the many flaws in its structure. These are far more pronounced than in Schreiner's novel. All too often the fact that Turbott Wolfe was written by a mind scarcely out of adolescence is clearly evident, and particularly so in the second-rate lyricism of Wolfe's poetic effusions over the black woman Nhliziyombi with whom he falls vainly in love and in his sneering tone of adolescent disillusionment and bitterness which prevails throughout the book. The specifically literary faults of this novel were probably outlined once and for all by Plomer himself in his discussion of his intentions in Turbott Wolfe which he included in his autobiography

Double Lives:

My impulse was to present, in a fictional form, partly satirical, partly lyrical, partly fantastic, some of my own impressions of life in Africa and to externalize the turmoil of feelings they had aroused in me. I had no intention of drawing a self-portrait or of giving a naturalistic account of African life. Somebody called the book 'expressionist', and like many first books it exaggerated the literary faults and excesses of its period. To speak of it as a novel is perhaps a misnomer: it was a violent ejaculation, a protest, a nightmare, a phantasmagoria - which the dictionary defines as 'a shifting scene of real or imagined figures'. Judged as a novel it is very deficient. By realistic standards, the story of the plot is exiguous and somewhat absurd, and it was not even well constructed. The main characters are neither well drawn or convincing, the development is episodic, and the whole proceeding is crude and immature, and disfigured by an unpleasant superficial smartness or vulgar cleverness. Nevertheless, the book is not wholly without merit. If it was crude, it had vitality; some of the minor characters are noted with skill and true

feeling, and there are scenes, passages and phrases which are at least not banal. In my opinion its justification was that of an original sketch book, an outburst of poetic frenzy on the part of a solitary and emotional youth who had not yet reduced his thoughts to order but had reacted convulsively to his surroundings; and also (in the words of, surprisingly, a South African critic writing fifteen years after its appearance) as a picture of a world 'dominated by race fear and race hatred' and 'a revelation of savagery in a vaunted civilization'. 1

Given the many artistic faults of the novel, the ineffectualness of Turbott Wolfe himself as a narrator and the lack of focus in the scattered materials of the novel,² the important place which Turbott Wolfe is usually assigned in English South African literature cannot be due to its literary merits; judged by these alone it would scarcely warrant any place at all. Rather, the significance attributed to it is a result of the unique vision which it is claimed to contain. Nadine Gordimer gave the reason for the high estimation of Turbott Wolfe when she wrote in a review of the novel on its republication in 1965 that it was "the only novel of poetic vision to come out of our country since Olive Schreiner's Story of An African Farm".³ And this "vision" is to be found not only in the trenchant criticisms which the novel makes of the white colonial ethos in South Africa and the perceptive way in which it uncovers many of the hypocrisies implicit in white colonial attitudes, but also in its pioneering treatment of racism. In short, its importance might be said to be historical rather than literary. The advance it makes on previous English South African novels, and particularly on The Story of An African Farm, is in its cognizance of the importance of racism, something which Schreiner ignored or passed by almost completely in her novel. Laurens van der Post was surely referring to just this feature of the novel when he wrote in his introduction to the 1965

edition that for "the first time in our literature, with Turbott Wolfe, a writer takes on the whole of South African life.

Suddenly the barriers are down and imagination at last keeps open house in a divided land."⁴

The racial theme is in fact introduced almost at the very beginning of the novel, in Turbott Wolfe's realization after his visit to the missionary Nordalsgaard:

There would be conflict between myself and the white; there would be conflict between myself and the black. There would be the unavoidable question of colour. It is a question to which every man in Africa, black, white or yellow, must provide his own answer. 5

Nevertheless, if this novel was the first to establish a theme which was to become an obsession with later South African writers, it is also exemplary in that, in the words of Martin Tucker, it "may be said to be the prototype of the modern liberal protest in fiction against apartheid."⁶ Indeed, it is the novel's liberalism which is its most significant feature since it determines both the nature of the protest which is made against racism in the novel and is also responsible (more than any other factor) for the fateful course of events which it records, for the fatal careers of Turbott Wolfe and the Reverend Rupert Friston, the two major characters in the book. With one exception, however, previous criticism of Turbott Wolfe has never failed to ignore or to gloss over the absolutely central rôle which liberalism plays in it.⁷ To a very great degree, Plomer's first novel reiterates the sorts of conflicts which were to be seen in The Story of An African Farm. And, as in the latter book, it is primarily the liberalism which informs it which is responsible for the emergence of these conflicts.

II

Before specifying the way in which liberalism is at work in Turbott Wolfe, it is essential to take into account the particular historical background to the novel. Turbott Wolfe, it must be stressed, is simultaneously a novel which concerns a colonial milieu and it is also itself a colonial novel.

It is not difficult to establish the former aspect of it; the novel abounds in descriptions of and attacks against a colonial South Africa. As Wolfe says on one occasion:

I could see plainly that Tyler-Harries was in the same category as the Schwordts, whose beastliness had been turned against them by witchcraft: as the Fotheringays, who had been drugged with Africa, so that their brains could not cope with it, caressing only the ghosts of memory and tradition: as Flesher and Bloodfield and their kind, whose vulgarity only emphasized the colossal disastrous significance of their background: as Nordalsgaard, whose conquests were like land reclaimed for a time, and afterwards choked with weed. 8

More specifically, the colonialism of the situation with which the novel deals is signified not only by the depravity and the inhuman attitudes of white characters like Bloodfield and Flesher towards black people, but by the phenomenon of cultural schizophrenia which is exemplified by the lives of the English priest and his wife, the Fotheringays, who are so frequently the target for Wolfe's satire:

They were kindness itself, these two beautiful Fotheringays, these charming innocuous anachronisms. I reflected, driving home to Ovuzane, that although they had spent nearly all their lives in Africa, they had never begun to think of Africa. The rector himself must have noticed where he was, and I suppose he concluded that they must put up with it.

But as for Mrs. Fotheringay, she had clung tenaciously to the past: the older she got, it was plain, the more vivid it became. For her there was nothing so real in the world as the warm sweet savour of the wallflowers that had been growing under the drawing-room windows in Surrey in the early 'seventies: the scent was in her nostrils still. It was still in her small white nostrils. Nothing in Africa could match the inviolable memory of the heavy intoxicating clusters of lilac, wet with rain and honey, bowed down and odorous on a vanished English lawn ... She had lived, incredible Englishwoman, for fifteen years in Ancampstroom without noticing that Ancampstroom existed. It only belonged for her to that shadowy subconscious dream-world that is peopled with the ghosts of what we feel deep down in our hearts, and not of what we think we feel. 9

Nevertheless, to the extent that Africa does not really exist at all for the Fotheringays, to the extent that they, like the missionary Nordalsgaard, are examples, in the words of Nadine Gordimer, "of white consciousness fossilized within its own skin outside Europe",¹⁰ they themselves are not prey to some of the destructive consequences of cultural schizophrenia; their very lack of awareness of the contradiction between their European mentality and their immediate African surroundings renders them immune to all threats. Thus, whilst they are typical examples of one type of colonial and contribute substantially to the characterization of the colonial milieu with which Turbott Wolfe is concerned, they do not make the novel itself a colonial one.

This latter and more important aspect of it is built up quite unconsciously by Plomer through the attitudes of his hero Turbott Wolfe to the black woman to whom he is attracted: "She was an ambadress of all the beauty (it might be called holiness), that intensity of the old wonderful unknown primitive African life - outside history, outside time, outside science."¹¹ Absurd romantic

projections of this sort - projections which are never criticized in the course of the novel itself - are one index of that cultural schizophrenia which establishes the colonial nature of the book. But this nature is even more apparent in another feature of it.

In many respects, Turbott Wolfe is a South African Heart of Darkness. One connection or similarity between the two novels is to be seen in the cry of horror which is so central to the meaning of both of them. Just as Kurtz sums up his African experience through his death-bed utterance, "The horror! The horror!",¹² so Friston cries out at the extremity of the insane nightmare which his African experience has provoked that "Fear has withered swiftly since/ HORROR was written on the sun".¹³ As Michael Wade has written: "In some ways Plomer's venture into the interior of South African reality is little more than a foray by an essentially European sensibility, which, moreover, is forced to withdraw in horror from what it encounters."¹⁴ In this respect as well, Turbott Wolfe is very similar to Heart of Darkness; Europe is being imposed upon Africa once again. And it is this imposition which defines the novel as a colonial one.

There are further similarities in the two novels. Both Turbott Wolfe and, perhaps to a lesser extent, Friston, are examples of "hollow men" from Europe and both of them use Africa as a means for "a descent into the Central Station of [their] existence, a look at [their] own heart of darkness";¹⁵ they attempt to use Africa in order to compensate for their psychic hollowness.¹⁶ Wolfe confesses his essential hollowness at the very start of the novel:

- There came to me a time - he said - not very long after I left school, when I found myself as lonely as it is possible to be. I was ill, and hardly recovered from the aftermath of adolescence. I came to feel as though circumstances had driven me with cunning deliberation and relentless activity to a point of complete isolation. I found myself with no friend, no passion, no anchor whatever. 17

And his expression at the end of the book of his final disillusionment only makes manifest his unbudgeable emptiness and his motives for his venture to South Africa:

"My life, Caleb, is like a bucket with no bottom. Nothing can fill it. Once I thought Africa could fill it, but I doubted. Now the lady is married, and has children. Once I thought fame could fill it, but Mr Tyler-Harries, who was going to get it for me, went down to the bottom of the sea - very unreasonably. With Young Africa I allowed myself to be cheated into the idea that politics would give me what I sought. Now, under the barren pear-tree, I see that Young Africa was a monstrous farce. Caleb, I have looked at everything. Perhaps the only thing that satisfies me is my own image in a looking-glass: but even that, perhaps, is not what I want ... Caleb, I am an egoist." ...

"You will marry and settle down in your own country, among your own people, Caleb. You will propagate the species, which any fool can do. I shall make you a present of money before I go, and you will name your first-born after me. You will find happiness and I shall find emptiness, because I have reached a point where life offers nothing but a few sensations, more or less indecent, which I know are only illusions." 18

Setting aside the disastrously puerile tone of the above passage, it becomes clear that Turbott Wolfe is a rootless individual.

Although next to nothing is said in the novel about his particular background in England (the fact that he is eminently middle-class can be easily inferred), it is made clear that he feels no allegiance to anyone or anything in his mother-country; and despite the fact

that he is "ordered to Africa by some fool of a doctor", it is equally clear that his arrival in South Africa is motivated as much by his anomie as by his illness. In this sense, Africa represents for him a kind of playground in which the lost ones of Europe, the black-sheep and misfits, can find themselves again or at least cure themselves of their various ills, psychic and otherwise. Friston, the missionary, is in a somewhat similar position. At his first meeting with Wolfe, he announces: "I don't think Europe would hold me. That's why I'm here. I happened to overhear my father being advised to 'send him out for a bit to the missionfield: that'll tame him down'. But it won't. O no, don't you believe it."¹⁹

Like the colonial adventurer Bonaparte Blenkins in The Story of An African Farm, there is a suggestion that many of the whites who appear in the pages of Turbott Wolfe, and amongst whom Wolfe himself and Friston are conspicuous, are the rejects of Europe. In this sense, what Hannah Arendt has written about an earlier generation of colonial adventurers in late nineteenth century South Africa is, in many respects, applicable to these characters as well:

The superfluous men, the Bohemians of the four continents who came rushing down to the Cape still had much in common with the old adventurers ... The difference was not their morality or immorality, but rather that the decision to join this crowd 'of all nations and colours' was no longer up to them; that they had not stepped out of society but had been spat out by it; that they were not enterprising beyond the permitted limits of civilization but simply victims without use or function. Their only choice had been a negative one, a decision against the worker's movements, in which the best of the superfluous men or of those who were threatened with superfluity established a kind of counter-society through which men could find a way back into a human world of fellowship and purpose.

They were nothing of their own making, they were like living symbols of what had happened to them, living abstractions and witnesses of the absurdity of human institutions. They were not individuals like the old adventurers, they were the shadows of events with which they had nothing to do. 20.

Wolfe and Friston, too, are "superfluous" men who, whilst striving to realize their European ideals in South Africa, are nevertheless hollow at the core of their respective existences; they themselves are "living symbols" - as much as the despised and despicable whites in the novel like Bloodfield, Flesher and Soper - of the European decadence which they repeatedly deplore, and of that Western civilization of whose decline and imminent fall they are so convinced. Both Wolfe and Friston are, in modern parlance, colonizers: which is to say, their natures are firmly rooted in the decadent colonialist tradition of Western culture. As Laurens van der Post has written: "Turbott Wolfe, in his self-defeated love of this woman [the black woman, Nhliziyombi] through whose beauty not only the past but also the future of Africa beckons, is a moving symbol of the civilization he calls "obscene". He can recognize what is sterile and destructive in his civilized values, he can be stirred by the beauty of Africa, yet he is just as incapable of rejecting the one as committing himself to the other."²¹

It is alien outsiders like Wolfe and Friston who suffer the most acute form of cultural schizophrenia in Africa and who are most rapidly torn apart and destroyed as a result. This schizophrenia is bound up with their liberalism or liberal ideals; it is in fact this liberalism which creates that schizophrenia which so quickly succeeds in destroying them. In Turbott Wolfe, the liberal ideology is more fully articulated than in The Story of An African

Farm since the former novel includes a specifically political liberalism as well as containing that "aesthetic individualism" which is so prominent in the latter. In fact, it is the very hopelessness of "aesthetic individualism" which prompts that movement into political liberalism which is the "Young Africa" society.

From the start of Plomer's novel the "aesthetic individualism" of Wolfe is stressed. In the words of Michael Wade, "Turbott Wolfe himself is depicted as a brilliantly versatile and talented young man, equally gifted in painting, musical composition and performance, the writing of poetry, and sculpture. He embodies the experience of Europe."²² In his many and diverse activities, he may be taken as a prime example of that many-sided personality which liberalism advocates:

I turned [Wolfe tells William Plomer] with immense enthusiasm to an immense number of different activities. I went from one to another, how restlessly you cannot imagine. You know that once I had ideas about a co-ordination of all the arts. I have always been pointed at as versatile...

At Ovuzane I passed my time between trade and folk-lore and painting and writing and music, between sculpture and religion and handicrafts. I even got down to landscape-gardening. 23

But his aesthetic concerns and his desire to accord an equal status to the blacks soon meet with hostility. One afternoon, whilst he is working on some music in his "studio" with four blacks, he is visited by a particularly vicious white neighbour:

As for the man, his face took on the sort of expression that you might look for on a charwoman's face if you asked her to enter a night-club. Bloodfield was a lean

ungainly man with a hen's head, with small bright black mean eyes in his thin red face.

We went in, and I turned aside to order tea. But Bloodfield's face was set in malicious violence: his pig's hair seemed almost to bristle. He was looking at the natives, who were sitting quiet and beautiful in the quiet gloom under the high windows.

"Surely you don't have these blooming niggers in here?" he shouted.

"You see that I do."

"But what on earth are they doing?"

"We have given the afternoon to music," I said.

He grunted, looking at me as if I was a dangerous lunatic. 24

The weak preciosity of Wolfe's reply to Bloodfield's outraged question is one index of the difficulties confronting his liberalism. These are made more explicit in his realization immediately after this visit: "I began to learn the hard lesson that in Lembuland [Zululand] it is considered a crime to regard the native as anything even so high as a mad wild animal."²⁵ Once again, and as in The Story of An African Farm, the obstacles barring the fulfillment of such liberal impulses as the desire to grant respect and equal status to human beings regardless of colour are presented as enormous in the context of Turbott Wolfe's African world. The world of the novel has nothing to do with that refinement of sensibility which is so dear to him; on the contrary, it is stressed throughout the novel that this world is utterly dominated by meanness, bigotry, coarseness and brutality.

There is little need to elaborate upon those specifically anti-liberal forces which are ranged against liberal characters like Wolfe - white racist attitudes, officialdom (in the person of Colonel Valdarno particularly), and the savage torpor of life in

Lembuland in general. All of the latter serve to reduce him to a profoundly isolated, profoundly impotent figure, and this in addition to his spiritual emptiness and suggested sexual impotence. In the light of the manifest futility of his solitary "aesthetic individualism", his actual attempt along with a few other people to found a liberal political organization is of some importance; this endeavour at least registers a practical advance upon the futile ends in which he has been engaged. However, the "Young Africa" society, which he founds with Friston and Mabel van der Horst, defines itself through the following set of beliefs:

To put it in a Nutshell, WE BELIEVE:

1. That Africa is not the white man's country.
2. That miscegenation is the only way for Africa to be secured to the Africans.
3. That it is inevitable, right and proper.
4. That if it can be shown to be so, we shall have laid true foundations for the future Coloured World.
5. That we are pioneers. 26

The astonishing naïveté of the form and content of these beliefs and their obvious lack of efficacy either in the fictional context of the novel or in the actual historical context of South Africa scarcely needs mentioning. As far as can be ascertained, the membership of the short-lived, ill-fated "Young Africa" society is restricted to Wolfe, Friston, Mabel van der Horst, Caleb and Zachary Msomi; hardly an adequate power base. Moreover, no concrete plan of action is ever elaborated or specified; as such, the society remains little more than a monstrous farce. It puts one strangely in mind of the secret society of a group of adolescents.

The hollowness of the above code or set of beliefs and the unintentionally hollow way in which Plomer presents them²⁷ is only

magnified by the sole practical consequence which this liberal society has: the liaison of the white woman Mabel van der Horst with the black priest Zachary Msomi. Turbott Wolfe responds to their growing attraction for each other by fearing the possibility of miscegenation between them, and miscegenation is at the core of the liberal doctrine of his political society:

I had seen from their first meeting that Friston was more than a little taken by Mabel, while she seemed to have in her manner towards him no more than friendliness. But now a certain truth came upon me with the suddenness of revelation. I did not seem so much to be seized with a mental realization of a plain fact as with a cold physical terror. I was intestinally sick, as at a catastrophe. It was clear that Mabel van der Horst was attracted, how slightly it was hard to measure, towards Zachary Msomi. It was one thing to talk glibly about miscegenation, to fool about with an idea, and another to find oneself face to face with the actual happening: it was the difference between a box of matches and a house on fire. #28

Wolfe's cowardice and bad faith are clearly revealed in such passages as the above. Yet his anticipatory dread at the real prospect of miscegenation has far less disastrous consequences for him than it has for Friston who succumbs to drugs and derangement after Zachary and Mabel consummate their love:

"O, you black swine! Black, black, black; but my heart is blacker. I am a Satanist. Look out for Friston the Satanist! By God, or Baal, or Moloch, you listener-at-keyholes, if he gets hold of you, if I get hold of you, I'll bite your brains out. Oho, Young Africa, indeed!"

Friston staggered away from the door, and started laughing hideously. He slapped his thighs.

"Young Africa! Aha, ha, ha! You fools, you think you can deceive me. Let me tell you

Fear has withered swiftly since
HORROR was written on the sun - "

He clutched at a table.

"As for you, Wolfe, you ought to be called Sheep. You don't believe one thing you think. I don't believe one word you say. O, you slimy coward! Your god's Fear. So is mine. But wait till you see 'HORROR', my child, written on the sun. Written, I tell you, in Roman capitals, right across the flaming sun. O, you coward! You take the cork out of the bottle, you twopenny fisherman, and out comes the genie. Or did I do it myself? Anyway, he won't go back. O no, don't you believe it! Not he. Pandora's box, you fool. D'you think the Devil's blind? Not he, not he!" 29

Friston never really recovers from the insanity into which he lapses when the feared union between Mabel and Zachary becomes a reality and his fears are thereby transformed into horror. All his liberal principles collapse with his psychological disintegration. In the light of his own decline and ultimate death his liberal belief in "the slow birth of the individual" as being one of the most significant features of his time is distinctly ironical.

However, his convulsive reaction to the reality of miscegenation is only a more extreme form of that experience of cultural schizophrenia which Turbott Wolfe himself has undergone before him in ostensibly different circumstances. The latter, isolated and caught between the conflicting pressures of different cultures, remarks:

I was becoming ecstatic over the bright-eyed ingenuousness of every [black] child; over the patriarchal grace of each old man, over the youthful grace of every young one; over the aged women, large-eyed tender women who were mothers, warm-handed tender daughters who were lovers. I was losing my balance. I remembered that every civilised white man, who considers himself sensitive, in touch with native peoples in his daily life should hold in his heart an image of the failure of Gauguin. Was it a failure? I asked myself: and in the question itself thought I suspected danger. I found myself

all at once overwhelmed with a suffocating sensation of universal black darkness. Blackness. I was being sacrificed, a white lamb, to black Africa. 30

The theme of a clash between cultures and, more specifically, between a sterile, superficial white culture and a dynamic black one and the very violence of Africa itself, recurs in all of William Plomer's African writings. It is particularly conspicuous in many of his poems and in short stories like "The Child of Queen Victoria". This clash, as it is formulated in his various writings, is invariably the product of a superficial European sensibility and rationality being imposed upon various irrational and alien forms of life which cannot be contained through these means.

Earlier on in this thesis it was argued that liberalism tended to be a superficial ideology in that it failed to take into account the irrational (in whatever form) and that, since the latter was an inescapable part of life, it must be forever irrupting through the superficial rationalism of liberalism and causing various sorts of destruction.³¹ In Turbott Wolfe, the liberalism of characters like Wolfe and Friston is implicitly revealed as inadequate through the fact that the irrational is forever breaking through their rationality and subverting the control which they have over their respective lives. And, above all, it is through sexuality that this irrationality so frequently expresses itself.

Turbott Wolfe is an interesting novel at least in the sense that there is an unusual amount of sexual terror and horror running right through it. Indeed, the greatest terrors it expresses are the result of sexuality in the relations between Wolfe and Nhliziyombi and in those between Friston, Mabel and Zachary. This exaggerated

sense of sexual terror cannot be explained away through reference to the frequently suggested sexual impotence and void of love in a character like Wolfe. Its source becomes clearer in the latter's account of his relationship with Nhliziyombi:

You can imagine, anybody can imagine, the tortures that a man suffers when he is in love against his conscience. O yes, my dear man, I had a conscience then: I have now, and I am not ashamed by it. I was in love with Nhliziyombi not only against my conscience, but against my reason; against my intellect; against my plans; against myself. I hope you will have gathered from what I have said that the vital thing was that to abandon myself to being in love with this so lovable woman would be to run counter to my vanity. That is where I want you to be quite clear. I saw that I should be sacrificing my own opinion of myself.

I suppose you think I mean that I was white and the girl was black. My good William Plomer, pray accept my assurance that that had nothing whatever to do with it. I am too much the humanitarian to be colour-blind. There was no question of pigment (I was in love, remember) but there appeared to be a great forbidding law, like all great forbidding laws, subcutaneous.

32

Clearly, it is not simply Wolfe's cowardly chastity which is the source of his fear and timidity. Rather it is a profound ideological split within his own mind which makes the possibility of sexual love between a black woman and himself so terrifying. Whilst he can entertain the idea of miscegenation in the abstract, the actual reality produces something like a convulsive withdrawal in him, as if he were transgressing a sort of incest taboo. He cannot make the necessary cultural leap; he cannot overcome what he calls "the steely intangible barrier that had been between me and Nhliziyombi."³³ Not only does that irrational element associated with sexual impulses overwhelm the superficial nature of his liberal beliefs, but he is also terrorized by that cultural

transgression which interracial love signifies for him.

The same applies to Friston. The latter is himself the initial proponent of miscegenation, yet he too is shown not to have the courage of his convictions. When interracial love truly occurs between Mabel and Zachary his response is to retreat into madness. He, too, cannot overcome his deeply engrained fears of love between black and white; he is incapable of transcending his European cultural conditioning and the barriers which it has erected within his own imagination. It is because of the strength of these that his horror is so great.

Perhaps significantly, after the marriage of Mabel to Zachary he says:

You see, the fact is that I am obsessed (I admit that I am obsessed) with dreams and visions, mostly of the future of Africa. I do not tell you what I think: I tell you what I feel, which is what I dream, which is what I know. I have reached the pitch of understanding with the nerves. I look forward to the great compromise between white and black; between civilization and barbarism; between the past and the future; between brains and bodies; and, as I like to say, between habit and instinct. 34

Friston is totally incapable of realizing any of these compromises in his own life. Since he cannot control either himself or his world through his rationality, he retreats into spurious, confused thinking such as the above in which, perhaps significantly again, he talks of reintegrating that body and mind which is so radically divorced in himself and in Wolfe as well.

In the final account, the liberals in the novel, Wolfe and Friston, can only be accused of massive bad faith and of making a mockery

of their liberal creed. It is presumably because of the former's stand against racism, his protest against it, and his realization that in many respects the colonized (the blacks) are superior to the colonizers (the whites), that Plomer begins his novel with the statement that "I think Turbott Wolfe may have been a man of genius."³⁵ The assumption is that Wolfe, and perhaps Friston as well, are, in the words of the Hermann Hesse epigraph to the novel, those "prophetic dreamers" and "singing-teachers" who have made poetry of the unconscious of the African continent in their nightmare. In purely aesthetic terms, however, it emerges quite clearly that Wolfe draws poetry out of nothing; the sheer ineptness of Plomer's treatment of him assures this failure. Furthermore, he and his creed are, at the start of the book, hollow; and they end it with this hollowness merely confirmed. Wolfe was lost before he began. Consequently, the reader feels nothing of the tragedy which Plomer is so obviously seeking to inject into his final failure, in his retreat from Africa to England in order to die; his end remains one of ignominy. The cynical dejection which takes over at the end of the book has been foreshadowed all along; Wolfe's admission of defeat to his servant Caleb has a predetermined ring about it.

III

In conclusion, Turbott Wolfe is far more remarkable for its failures than for its successes. On the one hand, the novel has been praised for its prescience, a prescience which is revealed in well known passages like the following:

"native question! What the hell is the native question? You take away the black

man's country, and, shirking the future consequences of your action, you blindly affix a label to what you know (and fear) the black man is thinking of you - 'the native question'. Native question, indeed! My good man, there is no native question. It isn't a question. It's an answer. I don't know whether people are wilfully blind, that they can't see what's coming. The white man's as dead as a doornail in this country. You gain nothing by not looking facts in the face. All this Empire-building's a blooming blind alley.
36

But if the novel does include perceptions like these which were undeniably advanced for their time (and which are also the obvious reason for the high esteem in which it has been held), it must be stressed that Turbott Wolfe is primarily a badly written novel about the failure of the liberal impulse in South Africa. If it is "advanced" because of the political vision which it contains at certain points, it is equally conspicuous for the utter poverty of its liberal vision - a vision which belongs to Plomer as much as to his protagonists. As Michael Wade has written: "Turbott Wolfe's supposition is that to seek honestly for a solution only leads to the unfortunate discovery that the liberal code is hollow at the core, at least in the unsympathetic South African environment. There is nothing left for the liberal to do but to withdraw (if he survives) licking his wounds."³⁷

However, having shown the hollowness of the liberal code in South Africa, Plomer is unable to suggest an alternative intellectual mode or ideology. Once again, and as in The Story of An African Farm, the failure of liberalism is graphically portrayed; yet no other ideology is entertained. Although it might have been significant that Friston resorts to Communism (or "Bolshevism", as it is called in the book) at the end of the novel, his ideas are

never fully developed and Friston himself is too confused to make his conversion a serious matter and a critique, implicit or otherwise, of that liberalism to which he formerly adhered. Thus Turbott Wolfe, too, ends in a blind alley; it says far more about the uselessness of liberalism than anything else. But it can say no more; it knows no more.

Shortly after the publication of this novel William Plomer left South Africa for good. The liberalism to which he himself adhered being incapable of coping with that African horror which he had perceived and written about, and its having been shown to be hollow in the South African context, perhaps made this departure inevitable. Since he could not adopt any other ideology, he had to leave for a country in which his liberalism was acceptable and possessed some efficacy. In a conversation with Peter Wilhelm, Laurens van der Post has said:

If you read Turbott Wolfe ... you will see that when Turbott Wolfe dies - and don't forget that this is a book about a dying man - it is the African part of William Plomer that dies. He has to go, he's made his choice; although he calls civilization obscene, although he calls it corrupt, he chooses to identify himself with the forces of civilization, and particularly civilization as it is expressed in Great Britain ... He felt he could command the situation here in England; that if he went back to Africa he would be called upon to do things that were not really, as he saw it, the business of a Man of Letters, and which would provoke reactions in him ... He could cope with fear, but he didn't want to have to cope with the horror. 38

Footnotes

1. William Plomer, Double Lives (London: Jonathan Cape, 1943), pp. 160-1.
2. There is a useful discussion of these formal failures in John Robert Doyle, William Plomer (New York: Twayne, 1969), pp. 61-68. He writes, for instance: "one might suggest that between the ages of nineteen and twenty-one perhaps William Plomer was without the knowledge and technical skill, to say nothing of the wisdom, to handle one of the most complex and snarled racial problems the world has ever known. This was no simple situation to be disposed of in a few pages of prose, naturalistic, realistic, impressionistic, or whatever." p. 63.
3. Nadine Gordimer, "A Wilder Fowl", The London Magazine, V (May 1965), p. 92.
4. Laurens van der Post, "Introduction", Turbott Wolfe (London: Hogarth Press, 1965), pp. 32-33. His assertion that Plomer "takes on the whole of South African life" only makes sense, however, if racism is regarded as encompassing all South African life.
5. William Plomer, Turbott Wolfe (London: Hogarth Press, 1965), p. 68. All page references to Turbott Wolfe are to this 1965 edition, not to the first edition of 1926.
6. Martin Tucker, Africa In Modern Literature (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1967), p. 209.
7. The exception is a recent article by Michael Wade, "William Plomer, English Liberalism and the South African Novel", Journal of Commonwealth Literature, VIII, No. I (June 1973), pp. 20-32.
8. William Plomer, Turbott Wolfe, p. 117.
9. *ibid.*, pp. 114-5.
10. Nadine Gordimer, "Wilder Fowl", p. 90.
11. William Plomer, Turbott Wolfe, p. 89.
12. Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness (New York: Norton, 1971), p. 71.
13. William Plomer, Turbott Wolfe, p. 168.
14. Michael Wade, "William Plomer, English Liberalism and the South African Novel", Journal of Commonwealth Literature, VIII, No. I (June 1973), p. 26.
15. Martin Tucker, Africa In Modern Literature, p. 10.
16. Richard Wright in Black Power (New York, 1954) attacked this white man's psychic need of Africa: "Those few Europeans who do manage to become serious about Africa are more often prompted by psychological reasons than anything else. The

greatest millstone about the neck of Africa for the past three hundred years has been the psychologically crippled white seeking his own perverse personal salvation." Quoted by Martin Tucker, *ibid.*, p. 15.

17. William Plomer, Turbott Wolfe, p. 58.
18. *ibid.*, pp. 199-200.
19. *ibid.*, pp. 122-3.
20. Hannah Arendt, Origins of Totalitarianism (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Javanovich, 1951), p. 189.
21. Laurens van der Post, "Introduction", Turbott Wolfe, p. 47.
22. Michael Wade, "William Plomer, English Liberalism and the South African Novel", pp. 22-23.
23. William Plomer, Turbott Wolfe, p. 60.
24. *ibid.*, pp. 69-70.
25. *ibid.*, p. 71.
26. *ibid.*, p. 144.
27. As Nadine Gordimer has said: "the inauguration and collapse of the 'Young Africa' movement is too scamped." "Wilder Fowl", p. 91.
28. William Plomer, Turbott Wolfe, p. 142. Later on in the novel, he says: "Then this idea of miscegenation. How can I believe in it? It is a nightmare. This girl could not really mean to give herself to an African. She would be cutting herself clean off from her own world." p. 165.
29. *ibid.*, pp. 168-9.
30. *ibid.*, p. 73.
31. See above, Chapter 4.
32. William Plomer, Turbott Wolfe, pp. 92-93.
33. *ibid.*, p. 105.
34. *ibid.*, p. 188.
35. *ibid.*, p. 57.
36. *ibid.*, p. 137.
37. Michael Wade, "William Plomer, English Liberalism and the South African Novel", p. 26.
38. Peter Wilhelm, "The Single Dreamer: The African Poetry of William Plomer", Poetry South Africa, eds. Peter Wilhelm and James Polley (Johannesburg: Ad Donker, 1976), p. 32.

Chapter 9

Alan Paton's Cry, the Beloved Country

I

In any discussion of Alan Paton's Cry, the Beloved Country (1948) it is important to note that the writer himself grew up in an era before South African racial politics had hardened into their present intransigence. As J.F. Cronin has written:

Paton was born in 1903. He was, thus, already in his mid-forties when the Nationalist Party under Malan ousted Smuts in the General Election of 1948 to establish the first Afrikaner government of South Africa and inaugurate the present régime. It helps toward an understanding of his career to know that he grew up at a time when South Africa's racial issues were not yet as violent and clear-cut as they are today. True, it has often been pointed out that much racially oppressive legislation had found its way onto the statute book in South Africa even before Afrikaner Nationalism came to power, and it may be true that Smuts' United Party was essentially as illiberal in this respect as Verwoerd's National Party came to be, but it was only from 1948 on that apartheid began to be applied at all points as a deliberate governmental policy. Paton was by then already in middle life. Growing up as he did in an earlier South Africa than that which saw the youth of Dan Jacobson or Nadine Gordimer, he would be less likely than they to see the country's problems as susceptible only of extreme solutions. 1

The important point is that Paton wrote his first and most famous novel at a time when liberalism still seemed to provide an answer to South Africa's problems. In a sense, it represents the culmination of that liberal optimism and confidence of whites which had its heyday in the two or three decades preceding its publication and it is deeply informed by the thinking of famous South African liberal intellectuals like Hoernlé, Rheinalt-Jones and J.H. Hofmeyer:

This "Story of Comfort in Desolation" was written when the English United Party was still in power in 1948; and it presents a picture of optimism, together with an assumed confidence in the European's ability to lead

and guide Africans to a better condition. Today it is regarded by many who would have praised it then as an old-fashioned paternalist book, which portrays Africans in a sentimental and unrealistic light; and it is probable that Mr. Paton himself, who has since become much more deeply involved in politics (in common with other liberal writers) would agree. Soon after Cry was written the Afrikaner Nationalist Party came into power, and liberals have been forced into a more militant and committed posture. 2

This was written in 1957 by an anonymous reviewer in The Times Literary Supplement. Yet even when the novel was written, roughly ten years earlier, the liberal vision which finds frequent didactic expression in it was completely inadequate. The very problems which Cry, the Beloved Country first formulates and then endeavours to solve do not admit of a solution in the terms which the liberal ideology provides.

II

If Paton's intentions in Cry, the Beloved Country are carefully examined, it will emerge that his primary concern in this novel is to expose a certain state of affairs in South Africa; namely, the social consequences of the destruction of the tribal system by the whites and the general disintegration, both moral and otherwise, which characterizes South African society as a whole. Through the personal sagas of the Reverend Stephen Kumalo, James Jarvis, and their respective sons, he wishes to reveal some of the tragic consequences of this societal disintegration and, at the same time, he clearly wishes to provide an example of moral and spiritual growth through suffering, a Christian message of comfort and hope despite the prevailing desolation, and to make an appeal to the liberal consciences of his readers.

In order to achieve these purposes, Paton makes use of the literary mode of tragedy. But this is not only because the novel abounds in those fateful contradictions which make tragedy the most appropriate mode for it. As J.M. Coetzee has said:

A favoured mode among White South African writers has been tragedy (though Afrikaans writers have given much time to a mythographic revision of history). Tragedy is typically the tragedy of inter-racial love: a White man and a Black woman, or vice versa, fall foul of the laws against miscegenation, or simply of White prejudice, and are destroyed or driven into exile. The overt content of the fable here is that love conquers evil through tragic suffering when such suffering is borne witness to in art; its covert content is the apolitical doctrine that defeat can turn itself, by the twist of tragedy, into victory. The tragic hero is a scapegoat who takes our punishment. By his suffering we undergo a ritual of expiation, and as we watch in sympathy our emotions are purged, as Aristotle noted, through the operations of pity and terror. 3

Tragedy affords a solution, both artistic and otherwise, to that which in reality has not been solved at all. Coetzee goes on to say:

Religious tragedy reconciles us to the inscrutable dispensation by giving a meaning to suffering and defeat... The predominant example of religious tragedy in South Africa is Alan Paton's Cry, the Beloved Country. A young African comes to the city, falls among bad companions, and in a moment of confusion kills a White. He is hanged. The fathers of the dead men console and learn to respect each other. The hero who bears the blows of fate is here doubled in the persons of the two fathers; we share their suffering as they share each other's suffering, in pity and terror. The gods are secularized as the pitiless justice of the law. Nevertheless, Paton's fable bears the invariant content of religious tragedy: that the dispensation under which man suffers is unshakeable, but that our pity for the hero-victim and our terror at his fate can be purged by the ritual of re-enactment. 4

But it is not only because of its apolitical nature that tragedy becomes a mode which results in mystification rather than revelation. In the final essay of Language And Silence (1967), George Steiner, discussing whether revolutionary art will succeed in producing 'high' revolutionary tragedy, remarks:

no less than a tragedy with God, with a compensating mechanism of final justice and retribution, a tragedy without God, a tragedy of pure immanence, is a self-contradiction. Genuine tragedy is inseparable from the mystery of injustice, from the conviction that man is a precarious guest in a world where forces of unreason have dark governance. Lacking this belief, a drama of conflict will hardly be distinguishable from serious comedy, with its pattern of intrigue and mundane resolution (the equations of tragedy cannot be solved, there are in them too many unknowns). 5

Sophoclean tragedy, for instance, draws much of its mystery and strength, its power to evoke feelings of pity and terror, from its characteristic emphasis on the gap between human and divine judgments. Sophocles writes throughout in the conviction that the laws of the gods are not the same as the laws of men, and what may seem right enough to men may be utterly wrong for the gods. His tragic world is one in which men, acting according to their human nature, are countered and corrected, for evil or for good, by powers outside themselves, and although they may try to work against these, in the end they are at their mercy. The ways of the gods remain a secret and it is not for men to criticize them or even to hope to understand them. What is required is a mood of unquestioning awe and respect. The discrepancy between a divine order and the order of the world is what creates genuine tragedy.

Now it would seem that Paton, in order to make a powerful emotional

appeal to the consciences and liberal sentiments of his readers, is concerned to make the causes for the tragic unfolding of events which his novel records ultimately inexplicable, the function of some Fate or divinity whose ways cannot be fathomed by man. For only through this strategy will injustice become mysterious and produce that sense of ultimate mystery which is one of the defining features of genuine tragedy. Consequently, he is continually harping on mystery and the mysteriousness of human existence. The novel abounds in expressions of this sort:

Who indeed knows the secret of the earthly pilgrimage? Who indeed knows why there can be comfort in a world of desolation. 6

His son had gone astray in the great city, where so many had gone astray before him, and where many others would go astray after him, until there was found some great secret that as yet no man had discovered. 7

I believe, he said, but I have learned that is a secret. Pain and suffering, they are a secret. Kindness and love, they are a secret. 8

Why was it given to one man to have his pain transmuted into gladness? Why was it given to one man to have such an awareness of God? ... But his mind would contain it no longer. It was not for man's knowing. He put it from his mind, for it was a secret. 9

And just as many aspects of human existence are surrounded by a nimbus of mystery, so the law is deified, is put into a position where it cannot be questioned; it is treated as a divine institution which requires unquestioning awe and respect as an utterly objective arbiter over the subjective follies and anarchies of men:

You may not smoke in this Court, you may not whisper or speak or laugh. You must dress decently, and if you are a man, you may not wear your hat unless such is your religion. This is in honour of the Judge and in honour of the King whose officer he is; and in

honour of the Law behind the Judge, and in honour of the People behind the Law. When the Judge enters you will stand, and you will not sit till he is seated. When the Judge leaves you will stand, and you will not move till he has left you. This is in honour of the Judge, and of the things behind the Judge. 10

Yet in attempting to re-create the mystery of injustice and Fate which has such potent emotional effects, Paton stumbles into the contradiction which Steiner has pointed out. For the series of misfortunes which his novel relates are definitely not the result of the obscure workings of gods (or of God) whose ways and whims cannot be discovered by man. Like the law which has been formulated as an expression and defence of the interests of white South Africa alone, and which therefore has no credibility whatsoever as an impersonal god, these misfortunes are quite explicable in terms of the man-made reality and historical conditions of South Africa in the first half of this century. Cry, the Beloved Country is thus a tragedy of "pure immanence" on top of which a mystifying Christian concern with suffering and joy has been imposed. In short, it is not genuine tragedy at all.

Part of Paton's technique of mystification is to portray a succession of unfortunate events and then to dwell on the deep, passive grief which these cause in various persons. Thus, in the section which dramatizes a housing shortage in the townships outside Johannesburg and which refers to the death of a black woman's child and to her subsequent grief over this, we find generalizations of the following sort: "Such is the lot of women, to carry, to bear, to watch, and to lose."¹¹ Thus we repeatedly find Stephen Kumalo with his "tragic eyes" and "his face in the mould of its suffering."¹² The description of the misfortune is invariably converted into a drawn

out characterization of the almost insuperable sorrow and mourning which it arouses. And although Paton could be said to follow this strategy in order to convey the very real helplessness and justifiable bewilderment of the simple-hearted, largely uneducated black in the face of a cruel and alien white world whose domination is ubiquitous and so unfathomable that, like a Kafkaesque one, it takes on all the mysteriousness and arbitrariness of an unknown god, the function of his interminable emphases on blind, grief-stricken reactions is both to obscure the real reasons (and hence possible solutions) for the tragic incidents and to elicit from the reader a purely emotional identification with the suffering hero so that, again, the real reasons for a predicament are smothered under the flow of sympathy which the reader feels for him or her. Brecht's "estrangement" effects, whereby the emotional responses of his dramatic characters are deliberately muted in order that the audience might better perceive that a particular bereavement has specific societal causes and thus can be prevented through specifically social solutions (which perception might make possible a rejection of the fatalities and eternal recurrences of tragedy), might have had a salutary effect on Cry, the Beloved Country. For the emotionalism of the novel time and again results in mystification.

But there is another type of mystification at work in this novel, one which has equally serious consequences. As a rule, a novel opens by depicting a problematic situation which the rest of the text then seeks to solve. Another way of putting this would be to say that the text (whether it be novel, poem, or drama) is internally dissonant. In the words of Terry Eagleton, it is "never at one with itself, for it were it would have absolutely nothing to say. It is, rather, a process of becoming at one with itself - an attempt

to overcome the problem of itself."¹³

In its simplest, most conventional expression, this problem usually takes the form of a conflict between the dreams and idealism of an individual and a society whose materialism and determinism prevents the fulfillment of individual ideals. The internal dissonance of the text is produced by a conflict between material, historical conditions and the various forms of necessity which these impose, and an ideology which enshrines values opposed to those dictated and determined by these conditions.

Cry, the Beloved Country provides a particularly clear example of this process which is characteristic of almost all literature. The problem that it initially poses and presents is that of the detribalization of the blacks by the whites and the lawlessness and moral corruption which this type of enforced social disintegration has caused. The novel describes quite accurately and also explains a certain historical phenomenon which is now a commonplace in the analyses which one finds in South African criminology textbooks.¹⁴ Msimangu formulates the central problem of the novel as follows:

The tragedy is not that things are broken.
The tragedy is that they are not mended
again. The white man has broken the tribe.
And it is my belief - and again I ask your
pardon - that it cannot be mended again.
But the house that is broken, and the man
that falls apart when the house is broken,
these are the tragic things. That is why
children break the law, and old white people
are robbed and beaten. 15

And this is set out more formally in the papers of the murdered Arthur Jarvis:

The old tribal system was, for all its

violence and savagery, for all its superstition and witchcraft, a moral system. Our natives today produce criminals and prostitutes and drunkards, not because it is their nature to do so, but because their simple system of order and tradition and convention has been destroyed. It was destroyed by the impact of our own civilization. Our civilization has therefore an inescapable duty to set up another system of order and tradition and convention. 16

It is this form of social disintegration which constitutes the central problem to which the novel addresses itself.

At the same time, however, a certain ideology, which is an amalgam of liberalism and Christianity, is brought to bear upon this material, sociological problem. And it is through this that the internal dissonance of the novel becomes most apparent; it is through this, too, that the major mystification of Cry, the Beloved Country is perpetrated. For through the mouth-pieces of Stephen Kumalo and Msimangu, Paton attempts to solve what is clearly and statedly a material, sociological problem by means of metaphysics; against the multiple problems caused by detribalization and urbanization he advances the solution of love. Thus Msimangu maintains that "there is only one thing that has power completely, and that is love. Because when a man loves, he seeks no power, and therefore he has power."¹⁷ Of course this is useless; the problem has not been caused by a lack of love in South Africa and therefore to prescribe an antidote of love for it is simply naïve and completely beside the point.¹⁸ The actual problem and his solution for it are two completely separate, independent spheres which have no real practical relation to each other. And since there is no possibility of the one really acting upon the other, since crime cannot be solved through love, and also because Paton can see no other solution (his ideology prevents this), throughout Cry, the Beloved

Country there is a steady displacement of or shift away from the major problem of the book, the sociological one, and an increasing focus on a single consequence of it: the personal sufferings of Stephen Kumalo and, to a lesser extent, those of James Jarvis. The focus steadily shifts away from the question of what has caused a certain state of affairs and what is to be done about it and increasingly revolves around the efforts of single individuals to survive and to transcend the personal suffering it has caused. And since the problem cannot be solved by the Christian love of Msimangu or Kumalo, nor by the liberal change of heart which James Jarvis undergoes and which expresses itself through a paternalistic handout to a "boy's club" and his financial assistance in the restoration of the valley, it is simply collapsed and subsumed under the religious trials of Kumalo and the symphonic finale to the novel.

When there is an irreconcilable clash between certain historical conditions and an ideology, the invariable result is tragedy. But the mode of tragedy itself is often also a means of transcending this clash. Just as Jarvis and Kumalo are finally united by a mutual sympathy caused by their common loss of a son and, in a microcosmic, symbolic way effect a reconciliation between black and white races in South Africa, tragedy finally collapses the poles of the conflict and finds a solution in the restoration of an ultimate order and meaning which serves to create a calm of mind. The societal failure and defeat which is signified by the murder of Arthur Jarvis and the execution of Absalom Kumalo is transformed, by the twist of tragedy, into the moral victory of James Jarvis and the religious exultation of Stephen Kumalo who is re-united with an intimation of ultimate order and meaning through his final

sense of the nearness of God. Even so, the evidence that this is not a genuine restoration (as in Sophoclean tragedy, for instance) but only an instance of two men who have each, as it were, made their separate peace, is to be found in the fact that Paton quite literally cannot finish his novel. Although, in the final scene, the sun rises in the east and Stephen Kumalo rises in thanksgiving from his mountain vigil, the essential question remains unanswered, the "mystery" of freedom and injustice remains to be solved: "But when that dawn will come, of our emancipation, from the fear of bondage and the bondage of fear, why, that is a secret."¹⁹

Nevertheless, something of a practical answer to this question is at least suggested in an ideological conflict which the novel promises to elaborate, but which is also collapsed and then abandoned. This conflict is the one feature of Cry, the Beloved Country that promises to redeem the novel from its persistent naïveté of tone, its extraordinary lack of political vision, and the sheer stupidity of that vision which it contains. However, the fact that the novel is not redeemed by a development of this conflict is itself a reflection of the fact that Paton himself is committed to an ideology which cannot allow for certain forms of conflict and which simply cannot countenance them if its credibility is to survive.

As has already been suggested, Paton's ideology is an amalgam of Christianity and liberalism. In a fundamental respect these two ideologies are by no means incompatible. For, as Leo Marquard has written, "liberals believe in the integrity and worth of every single individual. Religious people would express this by saying that every individual is a child of God; and liberals who are not religious may derive their belief from humanism. But whatever its

origin, the belief is fundamental to liberalism and from it flow many of the demands of liberals, such as the rights of the individual and the equality of all in the eyes of the law."²⁰ In their common concern for and emphasis upon the worth of each and every human individual liberalism and Christianity go hand in hand. Now it was argued in Chapter 3 of this thesis that a belief in the primacy of the individual was at the very basis of the liberal ideology;²¹ and that with this belief it was inevitable that those virtues which would enhance the life of the individual would be emphasized and valued above all others, that there would be a heavy stress in this ideology on private virtues such as inner strength and integrity, and that there would be a marked suspicion of any political ideas and programmes which make demands of absolute commitment upon men and women since these are perceived as threatening to the essential autonomy of the individual.

It is Paton's deep-seated belief in this fundamental liberal tenet which is the obvious reason why he would seem to refuse to explore the political implications of the clash of ideologies found in the altercations between John and Stephen Kumalo - a clash which promises much, but is never developed. Perhaps Ezekiel Mphahlele is getting close to this when he expresses the following dissatisfaction: "The priest's brother, John Kumalo, pretends to a roundness and one is tantalized into hoping that the interplay of opposite personalities such as his and the priest's is going to grow into something memorable. John Kumalo is a political speech-maker; he always seems to be addressing a crowd even when he speaks to one person; he does not like Christian convention; he is sensible of the insecurity around him. He will do anything to avoid more pain than is already being inflicted upon him and his people."²² Yet

Mphahlele never fully articulates this failure. In a very real sense these two characters embody the distinction that Arthur Koestler draws in his essay, "The Yogi and the Commissar". Stephen is an advocate of "Change from Within", of spiritual purification, and is in favour of passivity, submission, meekness and guidance; John is a proponent of "Change from Without" and of the activism, domination and calculation which this programme for social change demands. On the one hand John Kumalo believes "that what God has not done for South Africa, man must do."²³ On the other, Stephen's faith is "that power corrupts, that a man who fights for justice must himself be cleansed and purified, that love is greater than force."²⁴

Now it is all too clear that throughout Cry, the Beloved Country Paton is preaching for a revolution of hearts ("Change from Within") rather than for a revolution in a social and economic structure ("Change from Without"). Because of his liberal Christian vision and the limits it automatically imposes on the nature and range of political beliefs and practises available to him, he never really questions the power of humility, respect for persons, compassion and the quest for personal salvation to achieve a significant restructuring of society. He himself does not seem to realize (though John Kumalo makes this clear) that although Christianity might offer profound spiritual strength to people at bay (the novel itself is a good illustration of just this), it also imparts a political weakness which dictates, however necessarily and realistically, an acceptance of the hegemony of the oppressor.²⁵ Nor does Paton ever really question the applicability of the Sermon on the Mount to a political programme. For though it may be possible to establish just relations between individuals purely by moral and rational suasion and accommodation, in inter-group relations

this is practically an impossibility. The relations between groups are always predominantly political rather than ethical; they are determined by the proportion of power each group possesses as much as by any rational and moral appraisal of the comparative needs and claims of each group. But Paton, with an ideology which commits him to the individual rather than to the group, does not understand this.

Nevertheless, scattered through the novel are a number of passages which either implicitly or explicitly call into question his ultimate faith in a change of heart (an increase in love and the rooting out of fear and hatred) to cure various ills. These passages are usually given to John Kumalo. For example, the following words come from him during a public speech:

Is it wrong to ask more money? John Kumalo asks. We get little enough. It is only our share that we ask, enough to keep our wives and our families from starvation. For we do not get enough ... We know that we do not get enough, Kumalo says. We ask only for those things that labouring men fight for in every country in the world, the right to sell our labour for what it is worth ... They say that higher wages will cause the mines to close down. Then what is it worth, this mining industry? And why should it be kept alive, if it is only our poverty that keeps it alive? They say it makes the country rich, but what do we see of these riches? Is it we that must be kept poor so that others may stay rich? ... All we ask is justice, says Kumalo ... We are asking only for more money from the richest industry in the world. This industry is powerless without our labour. Let us cease to work and this industry will die. And I say, it is better to cease to work than to work for such wages. 26

In so far as Cry, the Beloved Country records an antagonism between a basically materialist view of South Africa's conflicts (which is reflected in John Kumalo's attitudes and ideas) and an idealist

attempt to solve them (reflected in the ideas of Stephen and Msimangu), it can be regarded as a rudimentary novel of ideas. But Paton never develops this antagonism to the point where it would become truly meaningful. Indeed, he cannot; his ideology prevents him from doing so. Through his liberalism and Christianity which demand that people be judged as ends in themselves and not as means, and according to their moral worth and integrity rather than their practical political usefulness, he can conveniently dispose of this antagonism. Thus John Kumalo's moral corruption is emphasized to the extent that his actual political worth, the substantial accuracy of his many brief analyses, is ultimately ignored and glossed over:

" - Perhaps we should thank God he is corrupt, said Msimangu solemnly. For if he were not corrupt, he could plunge this country into bloodshed. He is corrupted by his possessions, and he fears their loss, and the loss of the power he already has."²⁷ In short, because John Kumalo is not a good man, his politics are not good. Yet, ironically, he is the one person in the novel who displays something of a real political understanding.

The immediate result of this ideological clash being dissolved and disposed of through moral condemnation is that the final political vision which emerges from Cry, the Beloved Country is naïve in the extreme. As Ezekiel Mphahlele has written: "Because the message keeps imposing itself on us in Cry, the Beloved Country, we cannot but feel how thickly laid on the writer's liberalism is: let the boys be kept busy by means of club activities and they will be less inclined to delinquency; work for a change of heart in the white ruling class (Jarvis's final philanthropic gesture and his son's practical interest in club activities together with his plea to South Africa indicate this)."²⁸ These practical "solutions" scarcely

solve or even begin to suggest a way of solving the problematic historical situation with which the novel deals; and they hardly set a precedent.

A still further result of this failure to develop the implications of this clash of ideologies²⁹ is an artistic failure; the novel becomes badly weighted, lop-sided; it becomes a tear-jerker - which is only another way of saying that it is lacking in reality. Its sentimentality is, of course, in accord with one of its express intentions; significantly, Cry, the Beloved Country is subtitled "A Story Of Comfort In Desolation". Like a good liberal and Christian, Paton is always concerned to console, to lessen any potential conflict, and to appeal to the moral consciences and emotions of his readers. Depictions of pain are always the best means for this latter purpose since they provoke pity and sentimentality. And his liberal desire to reduce conflict perhaps explains his almost obsessive presentations of the good white man, of characters like the advocate who takes on Absalom Kumalo's case pro deo, Father Vincent, and those helping blacks at a school for the blind: "It was white men who did this work of mercy, and some of them spoke English and some spoke Afrikaans. Yes, those who spoke English and those who spoke Afrikaans came together to open the eyes of black men that were blind."³⁰ Furthermore, he uses this figure of the good white man, the liberal hero (Arthur Jarvis), who is destroyed by the harsh South African reality, as a representative figure who atones through his death for the collective guilt of the whites. For the purposes of conciliation he also uses the figure of the good black man, the "Uncle Tom" character, who will allay the suspicions and the hostility of whites towards blacks. But the paternalism implicit (and, more often than not, quite

explicit) in his treatment of the blacks and all the emotional effects aroused by his attempted reconciliations do not have the final effect of providing comfort in desolation; they merely serve as an incomplete disguise for the limitations in the ideology which informs the novel. In the final analysis, Cry, the Beloved Country does not so much display the iniquities of various aspects of South African life; rather, it reveals the poverty of Paton's ideology.

Footnotes

1. J.F. Cronin, "Writer Versus Situation: Three South African Novelists", Studies (Dublin), 56 (1967), pp. 74-75.
2. "South African Conflicts", Times Literary Supplement, 16 August 1957, p. xxxvi.
3. J.M. Coetzee, "Man's Fate In The Novels Of Alex La Guma", Studies In Black Literature, 5, 1 (Spring 1974), p. 17.
4. *ibid.*, p. 17.
5. George Steiner, Language And Silence (London: Faber, 1967), pp. 423-24.
6. Alan Paton, Cry, the Beloved Country (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 56. All subsequent references are to this edition, and not to the first edition of 1948.
7. *ibid.*, p. 78.
8. *ibid.*, p. 193.
9. *ibid.*, p. 234.
10. *ibid.*, p. 136. It would seem that Paton never fails to fall into contradiction when it comes to a discussion of the Law and of jurisprudence in general. On the one hand, the whole force of Cry, the Beloved Country is to prove that there is a species of social determinism at work in South Africa; the breaking of the tribal system by the whites has led to a good deal of criminal activity on the part of dispossessed blacks. The one is responsible for the other. On the other hand, Paton continues to attribute free-will to his characters and in terms of this they are then totally responsible for their transgressions and particular crimes. Thus, the jurisprudence which is contained in the Court scene in the novel (see p. 171) is completely confused and false. At this point one could easily imagine Cry, the Beloved Country turning into a polemic on unjust justice in South Africa. But, in accordance with his desire to create tragedy, Paton has to attempt to legitimize the law. That he fails to do so, is quite clear in this section of the novel. And this only serves to increase its obfuscations.
11. *ibid.*, p. 54.
12. *ibid.*, p. 105.
13. Terry Eagleton, Criticism and Ideology (London: Verso, 1978), p. 89.
14. See, for example, G.M. Retief, "Social Disorganization, Crime and The Urban Bantu People of South Africa", Crime and Punishment in South Africa, eds. J. Midgley, J.H. Steyn, R. Graser (Johannesburg: McGraw-Hill, 1975), pp. 47-55. Paton himself has also written articles on the reasons for crime in South Africa. See, for example, "Who is Really to Blame for the

Crime Wave in South Africa", The Forum, VIII, No. 37 (December, 1945), pp. 7-8. He is being quite accurate when he says in his "Author's Note" to Cry, the Beloved Country that the book "considered as a social record ... is the plain and simple truth."

15. Paton, p. 25.
16. *ibid.*, p. 127.
17. *ibid.*, p. 37.
18. Paton creates exactly the same form of mystification in his later novel, Too Late The Phalarope (1953). Apart from the fact that it also uses a spurious form of tragedy (the Immorality Act is no substitute for the gods), Paton also sees the problem here as being a tyranny of fear and a lack of love. He does not seem to realize that the rigid Afrikaner Calvinist mentality that he portrays in this novel (and which is exemplified by Pieter Van Vlaanderen's father), its lack of warmth and spontaneity, its many obsessional traits (such as love of discipline and order, which manifests itself in strict parents and, particularly, in authoritarian fathers) operates as a defense mechanism among the ruling whites, especially the Afrikaners, against a basic national anxiety, arising from a basic national insecurity. In other words, the Calvinist gives evidence of an obsessional and authoritarian national character in an attempt to compensate for an abnormally high level of anxiety originating in a deep sense of national insecurity. His rigid nature, therefore, is due as much to his political position in South Africa as to any supposedly inherent traits. But in Too Late The Phalarope Paton, through the mouth-piece of Tante Sophie, suggests that the tragedy might have been avoided if sufficient love had been forthcoming. This might, of course, have been true. But in so far as this novel is a study of Afrikaner Calvinism in general, it is to be doubted whether the love, the true love as opposed to the twisted, which he advocates is any solution at all. Once again Paton is attempting to solve what is at root a political problem through personal love; once again this is a mystification.
19. Paton, p. 236.
20. Leo Marquard, Liberalism in South Africa (Johannesburg: Institute of Race Relations, 1965), p. 8.
21. See above, pp. 49-50.
22. Ezekiel Mphahlele, The African Image (London: Faber, 1962), p. 132.
23. Paton, p. 25.
24. *ibid.*, p. 182.
25. This, incidentally, was one of the reasons for Nietzsche's polemics against Christianity. "The Christian faith, from the beginning," he insists, "is sacrifice: the sacrifice of all freedom, all pride, all self-confidence of spirit; it is at

the same time subjection, self-derision, and self-mutilation. This cruel religion of painful subjection softened the slaves by drawing the hatred from their souls, and without hatred there could be no revolt." Beyond Good And Evil (London: Foulis, 1909), p. 67.

26. Paton, pp. 258-9.
27. *ibid.*, p. 161.
28. Ezekiel Mphahlele, The African Image, p. 133.
29. Isaiah Berlin, particularly in his essay "The Originality of Machiavelli" in Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas (New York: Viking, 1979), has developed the implications of the idea that inner change can result in outer change. Following upon Machiavelli, he believes that this is a complete fallacy, that one can save one's soul or save one's country but not do both at the same time since each endeavour requires a different set of values which are utterly incompatible in both theory and practise.
30. Paton, p. 80.

Chapter 10

Dan Jacobson's A Dance In The Sun and The Beginners

I

It is in the novels of Nadine Gordimer and Dan Jacobson that the poverty of the liberal ideology is most fully displayed; in their work it also receives the fullest criticism. These novelists both began publishing their first work in the Fifties, in a period in which it would seem there was still a residual faith in the possibilities for liberalism in South Africa. Their writings are informed by a specifically urban English consciousness. Beyond these immediate similarities, however, there is a marked divergence between these two writers, and this is a result of their individual development as writers. Jacobson is a self-confessed liberal and he has never ceased from professing his liberalism. Since all his novels point quite conclusively to the failure of this ideology, at least in the South African context, and since he has never interpreted this as a sign that he ought to modify if not change his faith and approach, he has been driven to that form of renunciation which is self-exile in England (as are many of his characters) where he has been able to continue writing from almost exactly the same standpoint. In short, he has not really developed at all.¹ On the other hand, Gordimer's work attests to a long and continuing development, and central to this development is her changing attitude to liberalism and its particular fate in this country. And this is one of the reasons why she is the finest novelist yet produced by South Africa.

II

In The Evidence of Love (1959) Dan Jacobson himself speaks through the following passage:

Almost all white South African liberals begin very early: that is their trouble, or their glory, if you so prefer. Tiny little children, they can be, when they begin to 'feel sorry' for all the African and Coloured children ... and though, like any well-brought-up white child, our little liberal is horrified by the snot that hangs from the noses of the black children, at the grime that is encrusted on the back of their hands, at the very blackness of their skins - still, in a way he does not understand and does not even desire, he feels a large, unwelcome and inexplicable responsibility for their cold, their hunger, their misery. It is a burden to him; a double burden, a treble burden, for he is burdened not only by his pity, and by his impotence to relieve the misery that arouses his pity; but also by his loneliness. 2

Many of the dilemmas of liberalism which have already been outlined in this thesis appear in this passage: the unbridgeable divide between a relatively liberal white world and that of the black; the horrified helplessness of the white in the face of anything outside the pale of the ordered affluence of the white world; and the impotence and loneliness of a minority which has no power to bring about change. But since these dilemmas and limitations are all worked out within the framework of Jacobson's own liberalism he can never transcend them. Whilst he is particularly critical of would-be, self-congratulatory liberals, his own liberalism undercuts this criticism. And this self-defeating contradiction is particularly apparent in his earlier novella, A Dance In The Sun (1956).

The powerlessness and bad faith of the liberal stance is carefully delineated in this work in which two white English South African students, hitch-hiking down to the Cape for their summer holidays, are forced to spend a night in an isolated Karroo village where, much against their will, they are drawn into an interracial

entanglement. They find a bed for the night in the home of the Fletchers; Mrs. Fletcher's brother has seduced the sister of Joseph, a black servant, and we witness the discomfiture of the well-meaning students when Joseph refuses their offer of help and exposes their liberal pretensions.

The powerlessness of the students, Frank and the nameless narrator, is not only reflected in the number of dilemmas with which they are faced and which they fail to solve, but also in their characteristic tone of voice, the liberal tone of voice. It is one which is timid, sceptical and hesitant, and it is often reduced to silence both because of and in spite of its rationality and sense of superiority. When confronted by the crude passions and dogmatic certitudes of Mr. Fletcher (whose every opinion is a stereotype of white racist attitudes), the narrator can only comment: "We had both lived long enough in the country of our birth to know that to attempt to argue with people who talk the way that man did is a waste of time and temper, but for all that we weren't going to tell him yes, we thought all the educated kaffirs should be shot."³ No matter how crass and vehement Fletcher is, he cannot be openly repudiated; he can be answered only by that silence which is a sign of helplessness. In the face of a single-minded passion and bigotry, the liberal, accustomed to a more reasoned and reasonable approach to things, has to withdraw into a defensive muteness. All his arguments are powerless against passion; his reason has no strength when it is confronted by the unreasonable.

However, this helplessness is not simply confined to a tone of voice which runs right through the novella, a voice which has the final effect of weakening whatever intensity the book might contain and

establishing its persistent tone of dullness and flatness. This voice is only one reflection of the weakness of liberal rationality. For, more particularly, much of the helplessness of the liberal stance lies in its charitable impulse, in that desire to do good which is so much a part of it. Paradoxically, it is this moral impulse which liberalism advocates which weakens the liberal. In A Dance In The Sun the two students are faced with a specific moral problem - whether help should be given and fidelity should be shown to a wronged black rather than to a white. But since they do not understand that this problem is ultimately not open to an individual solution since it is merely a specific instance of a system of injustice which reigns over a whole country and which cannot be solved through a merely individual effort, they are defeated and end up with their sense of guilt and pity, which they were trying to expiate, only increased. (Remembering his reactions to the tales of hardship told to him by black servants in his childhood, the narrator comments: "And already there stirred within us the first uneasy strivings towards guilt and pity - the guilt and pity that were later to hunt us and shame us in our own country."⁴) What begins as a charitable desire on the part of the individual to be of assistance to another individual is condemned to failure since the actual problem, its real causes and real solutions, are quite beyond the scope of the individual solution. Thus the liberal desire of the students to help on a man to man basis is fated to degenerate into guilt and pity because of the ultimate lack of efficacy in their charity.

Once again liberal values are revealed as useless in the context of the Karroo world which the novella depicts; they are readily defeated and rendered powerless by the passions and divisions which

pervade this uncultivated locale. Thus the students are condemned to remain outsiders, mere voyeurs, people who can look on but never participate. Despite the moral awareness and increased consciousness they might have gained through Joseph's ability to reveal the limitations of their liberal stance, they reach an impasse which can only be overcome through escape, by their passing on to the gentler world of the Cape for their holidays.

Their eventual defeat is once again a result of their liberalism with its specific focus on the individual. Frank and the narrator become enmeshed in what is ostensibly an individual moral problem; and yet the societal conditions which give rise to this problem are not individual; they are the result of a complex system of racial divisiveness which has been imprinted on the consciousness of both blacks and whites through a long history of exploitation and subservience. Because of the depth and pervasiveness of this system, any moral act on the part of the liberal cannot hope to alter it; it can only really be an attempt to mitigate the guilt of an individual conscience.

It scarcely needs saying that guilt and pity are emotional complexes which tend to be crippling, and can all but destroy a person if forgiveness of some sort is not forthcoming. In A Dance In The Sun it is made clear that forgiveness can only come from the black-servant, Joseph, and, by extension, from all the blacks who have suffered under white oppression. And yet this is not given.

At the end of the book a deadlock has been reached. Both Frank and the narrator have been shamed by their liberal assumptions, ignoring the barriers between races, which have led them to believe that they

can be of genuine and lasting assistance to Joseph: "he [Joseph] had exposed the tenacity and duplicity of my own feelings of white baasskap - my own 'liberal' intolerances, my own assertion of where his place should be, and where mine."⁵ Fletcher is left a broken man, a symbol of white isolation, duplicity and futility, performing his enraged, symbolic dance in an empty, abandoned world, under a pitiless sun:

We turned to look at Fletcher. Fletcher was dancing. Alone in the veld, in the middle of his dusty piece of ground, Fletcher was dancing with humiliation and rage and despair. He stamped his feet into the dust, and gnawed his knuckles, and twisted his ears, and pulled at his chin, and brandished his fists. He was still lifting his knees, he was still raising the dust about his ankles when we turned our backs on him. We left him dancing there, solitary in the veld, a grotesque little figure, capering under a blazing sun. 6

And Joseph remains inextricably linked to him; the black remains as a kind of nemesis, a thorn in the flesh, a living reminder of the guilt from which the white cannot escape, whilst the two students, unable to act effectively from their liberal base, have to forsake the scene of the conflict. Effectively, there is no forgiveness; the guilt of the whites has simply grown.

The dubious motives behind the liberal's desire to act and help are also revealed in A Dance In The Sun:

We knew whose side we were on, without reflection. And though we shrank from the prospect of further scenes with Mr Fletcher, of police actions, court cases, explanations and the general exposure of ourselves to public gaze which we could not but foresee, we were determined, nevertheless, not to betray the trust which Joseph, we felt, had placed upon us by telling us his story and

by calling upon us as his witnesses. In the normal course of events there were a great many duties which we, like any other citizens, were prepared to waive; but the duty we had towards Joseph was a limitless one. Guilt and pity, I have said, were hunting us out of country: here was an opportunity to expiate both. 7

But when the narrator reflects in this manner, he is expressing no more than a forlorn hope. The alienation that obtains between races prevents any capacity the students might have to be of any assistance; and their lack of an intimate experience and understanding of the situation in which they are involved makes their guilt and pity unreal emotions. The narrator realizes this in a passage which follows closely the one which has just been quoted: "We were adults now, and ready and determined to act, but, insuperably, strangeness and distance from the story Joseph had told remained. I was as white as I had been as a child and now, as then, the barriers in my imagination protected me from a realization of our task as intimate as it might have been had Joseph been white."⁸

In The Origins of Totalitarianism, Hannah Arendt has written: "In times of growing misery and individual helplessness, it seems as difficult to resist pity when it grows into an all-devouring passion as it is not to resent its very boundlessness, which seems to kill human dignity with a more deadly certainty than misery itself."⁹ She sees a connection between helplessness, pity, and a loss of human dignity. Pity, the emotional response of the helpless individual (in this case, the liberal), would seem to be a mechanism which effects an identification with others (the pitied) which thereby reduces the helplessness of the pitier. But it frequently happens that pity serves to distort a situation; as a character in Sartre's Altona remarks: "When one does nothing, one believes

oneself responsible for everything."¹⁰ Frank and the narrator, acting from a basis of guilt and pity, fail to appreciate Joseph's autonomy; perceiving him in the light of their own helplessness, they assume that he is helpless too. As it happens, and to their shame, they are proved to be utterly wrong.

Nevertheless, the two liberal students do not, in fact, show much in the way of pity itself, of an instinctive flow of sympathy for the suffering and down-trodden. Their instinctive reaction to the situation which they have walked into is non-involvement: "We don't want to get involved in anything illegal."¹¹ Through withdrawal and a strained objectivity they attempt to placate their own fears of becoming involved in something which they might not be able to control. The distance, suspicion and estrangement between races makes even their pity and guilt somewhat abstract gestures completely lacking in spontaneity. This distance and "objectivity" to which they cling also goes hand in hand with the rationality dictated by their liberalism. It is also one of the bases for a number of important contrasts in A Dance In The Sun.

The consciously taken decision of the students to stand by Joseph stands in stark contradiction to the spontaneous fidelity which the latter feels for his family, for his sister and her child. In essence, Joseph is the only character in the book to whom fidelity is natural, whose morality is a natural component of his life:

The profundity of this family feeling of his did not arise, it seemed to me, out of pride, or dynastic ambitions, or a desire to protect a self-regard extended in an unwarranted manner to the members of his family. Nor was it merely an obedience to an imperative from an almost forgotten tribal past, whose commands were to be grudgingly heard and grudgingly

carried out. It was not even a matter of love - the protean emotion that excuses as many evasions as it encourages selflessness. The precepts that he was obeying were those of his own morality - a morality that acted on its own level, almost wordlessly, without fuss. In its closeness and unquestioned necessity it presented itself simply as a part of life: what he was doing was the act of living. 12

His attitude, in turn, contrasts even more deeply with the internecine infidelities which characterize the Fletcher household. Nasie considers himself betrayed by his sister's rejection of him after he made Joseph's sister pregnant; his sister, Fletcher's wife, is broken by her guilt at having rejected him and by his final rejection of her; and Fletcher himself is finally spurned by everyone - he becomes a figure who symbolizes the destructive effects of white isolation and racism:

He was abandoned: he had been cast aside by everyone: even his wife had wanted to leave him, and offered him now no support at all in his anguish. He had been jeered at and cursed and a kaffir had worsted him, no one had come to his defence, attempted to deflect the accusations and insults that had been flung at him, no one had shown any pity for him. He was alone, in a monstrous loneliness that was great enough to warrant threats and promises and flattery and appeals to white civilization to the two young men who were in his house but implicated in none of the other miserable relationships with which he was surrounded. 13

There is a further contrast in the brother-sister relationships; the unquestioned fidelity of Joseph towards his sister is set off against the sterility of Mrs. Fletcher and Nasie's indifference to her; his refusal to forgive and to atone for his past. There is the contrast between Mrs. Fletcher's shame at her brother's "fall" and the consuming nature of her guilt for having consented to his expulsion from her home, and the guilt of the two students who never

seem to feel their own shame with much intensity.

All these contrasts serve to underline the essential lifelessness and isolation of the whites, however frantic and feuding their various activities might be, and however rationally the liberals amongst them attempt to comprehend their violence. This isolation, which is only increased by the students' inability to act effectively and to understand the real nature of their situation, is also reflected in another repeatedly stressed element in the novella which contributes to their general sense of estrangement: namely, the country itself.

The South African landscape is an important feature in all Dan Jacobson's South African writings. Something of its importance for him is expressed in an essay he once wrote, "South Africa: Explanations and Speculations":

my single overwhelming impression of South Africa, when I look back now is not political. What I chiefly remember of the country are its spaces, simply; all the empty unused landscapes of a country that seems to lie bereft of any human past, untouched by its own history. Blue sky, brown earth, and people who live unaccommodated between: that is the abiding image of South Africa. There is something remote, far-sunken about the country, dwarfing the people who live in it, and making them, in turn, seem remote from one another. 14

His characteristic image of the landscape is an image of emptiness and isolation, of a desert or semi-desert dominated by the sun and hostile to human existence. It is presented at the very beginning of A Dance In The Sun: "the veld was enormous and empty, and the sun seemed to have seized the land, sucking all strength from the thorn trees, and the earth, and our own bodies, leaving husks

behind, husks of earth, husks of koppies, the vast empty husk of a desert."¹⁵ And this same image of barrenness recurs throughout the book; it becomes almost an archetype. Just as Schreiner's desert symbolism in The Story of An African Farm represents an extremity of spiritual and cultural isolation and deprivation, so Jacobson's Karroo deserts suggest a lack of civilization, culture and society. The landscape is used as an objective correlative for the lack of texture in the culture of a society; the image of the landscape would seem to be dependent upon the image of the human culture which it contains. The landscape is null and void because the fabric of society is null and void. And amidst this barrenness, stranded in a kind of no-man's-land between an inhospitable natural world and an inhospitable society, the liberal is reduced to a particular kind of nostalgia, a nostalgia for an absent civilization. After one of his encounters with Fletcher, the narrator remarks:

It was a kind of homesickness, I felt then, but it was a sickness for a home I had never had, for a single cultivated scene, for a country less empty and violent, for people whose manners and skins and languages were fitted peaceably together. The lorry on which we had hitched a lift from that young couple, whose little history I had just heard, had hurled us towards the man next to whom I stood, and whom I had never seen before, across endless countrysides of heat-seized, silent veld; now we stood together for a moment before the next day would hurl us apart again. And so Louw himself had come, and Frank who was sleeping, and the African outside who had been to Johannesburg - a multi-tongued nation of nomads we seemed to be, across a country too big and silent for us, too dry for cultivation, about which we went on roads like chains. We were caught within it, within this wide, sad land we mined but did not cultivate. 16

There are few passages in English South African literature which crystallize in so economical a manner the loneliness of the liberal in a land in which the societal texture is threadbare and is

conducive to anything but the realization of liberal values.

Nevertheless, if it is one of Jacobson's intentions to reveal the inadequacy of the liberalism of his students, and if he does do this quite clearly and successfully by pinpointing the impure motives which lie behind their actions and their failure to understand the real nature of the family feud into which they are drawn, in his critique he himself fails to realize that his liberals are blameworthy not simply because they act in order to relieve themselves of their own burden of guilt. As has already been mentioned, they are blameworthy because neither they nor their author seem to understand that the wrongs they are trying to redress cannot be righted through an individual act. Presumably Jacobson uses the two students and their liberalism as a kind of diagnostic tool. They give him a perspective on events which might not be easy to control artistically; whilst the black (symbolized by Joseph) and the white (symbolized by the Fletcher family who, significantly, include both English and Afrikaans members) remain locked together because of the injustices done to the former by the latter, the liberals remain outsiders who possess the advantage of an overview because of their estrangement. All the same, and as A Dance In The Sun shows both consciously and unconsciously, South Africa cannot be understood from a liberal perspective; and this lack of understanding applies both to the liberal characters and to Dan Jacobson himself. The latter, like the other novelists who have already been discussed, whilst he is intent upon exploring the limitations of liberalism and some of the conundrums it creates in South Africa, nevertheless does this from the vantage-point of his own liberalism. However, one cannot fully criticize liberalism from a liberal standpoint; one needs another ideological platform. But he does not possess this.

alternative platform. Consequently, he cannot see beyond his own limited perspective as well. And hence the arid, fruitless and ultimately uninformative deadlock which has been reached at the end of A Dance In The Sun is a foregone conclusion. The novel ends flatly and weakly.

Jacobson's own inadequate perspective is reflected in his characteristic style. In almost no other English South African novel is there such an intimate relation between ideology and language; the cool, relaxed, reasonable and "objective" tone of his language goes hand in hand with the values which the liberal ideology enshrines.¹⁷ And although Jacobson has clearly adopted his pedestrian, prosaic style in order that it should form a significant contrast with the dramatic events which his narrative records, it is finally unconvincing; it has the final effect of deadening rather than illuminating. His style itself mirrors that detachment of the liberal stance which proves to be so sterile. It cannot fully explore those unconscious and irrational aspects of behaviour which are so dominant in the novella. It reaches no great heights of evocation, nor great depths of suggestion. In the end, it is as thin as the thinness of the landscape around Mirredal; and it is also as limiting as the liberal ideology which lies behind it.

III

If one consequence of the liberal stance in a situation like South Africa is impotence and bewilderment, then another is the death of the self. With the breakdown of that liberal view of the world in which the notion of the stable, coherent self is such an important element, inevitably the old confidence in the self will start

breaking down as well. In The Beginners (1966) this process of dissolution finds repeated expression. The novel itself is a family saga which traces the careers of a Jewish family in South Africa after the Second World War. It charts the attempts of various of its members, and particularly those of Joel Glickman, to find some certainty, a faith and a belief, in a world which is forever defeating those attempts and which no longer allows for any certainty. The final lesson of the novel is contained in one of Joel's realizations towards the end of it:

Once it had been his ambition to learn from the world rules, reasons, meanings; he had wanted to know from scratch how he should live; to know why he should live in one way rather than another. He had failed. Having failed he had consciously and deliberately decided to try and remain modest, cautious, demanding little for himself and expecting little from everyone else, living as quietly as he could, trying to do a job of work without asking of it that it should either change the world, or explain it. But even that, it seemed, was too much for him to manage. 18

He has finally to accept a world and a life which is inconclusive, muddled, wide in range, limited in certitude and utterly lacking in meanings, intellectual assuagements and moral commensurations.

The theme of the death of the self, or at least the loss of any former certainty in it, is established at the very beginning of the novel in a conversation which takes place between Sarah, who will later become Joel's mother, and her cousin Manny Rosing who, significantly, is about to leave South Africa in order to study psychoanalysis in Europe. Having unsettled her by maintaining that his task as a psychologist is to spread doubt, he goes on to say:

'What we want them [people in general] to

do is to accept their lack of confidence, to know they'll never be confident again.' It seemed that he was going to go on, but he did not.

Heavily, almost obstinately, unwilling to be put off, she asked, 'What do you mean? What do you mean when you say people will never be confident again?'

'Well ...' He drew the word out, then, with a slightly mocking obedient tilt of his head, he answered her. 'Well, as we imagine people might have been confident when they believed in God, for example. Or when they believed that the world was a place which changed slowly, if it changed at all. Or when everybody thought he'd been given a self or a soul which he could learn to know and could struggle to improve.' He looked up: she was listening earnestly to him. 'We know that the old self no longer exists. It's dead. It's been killed - not by us, you understand. Or not just by us. We're simply the first, among the first, to recognize what has happened. And the first to say that if it's dead then you must throw it away as you would throw away any other old rubbish. It has to be done.' ... 'Modern writing, modern art, the political revolutions, the psycho-analytic movement, they're all parts of the same transformation. You see it at work everywhere. You see it inside, deep inside, everyone you meet. It's in you, in me, even in my father. It's a breaking-down, not a building-up, you understand, that's begun. 19

Nevertheless, despite this process of disintegration which is so frequently stressed, the novel's main character, Joel Glickman, never ceases to strive for that coherent self which has been lost because the world which might substantiate it has vanished as well. And he strives in vain. After his return from the Second World War, he finds himself at a loose end, afflicted by a sense of purposelessness which is similar to that which Krebs experiences in Hemingway's short story, "Soldier's Home":

Throughout his time in the army - he had gone into it straight from school, shortly after his seventeenth birthday, and had

served in it for two years - Joel had been hoping to come upon a strength and certitude in himself which would be inalienable. Always it had seemed to him that he would find it just one stage ahead from where he was. Before enlistment he had thought he would put on strength with his uniform; during his training he had expected to find it when he was posted abroad; in the reserves, when he had seen action; after the war, when he would come home. Now he was home; and where was the confidence, the certainty, the inward security he had been promising himself? What was he to be? Where was he to live? How was he to live? Who was there to guide him? 20

In essence, the rest of The Beginners records Joel's frustrated attempts to answer these questions. But it is his particular fate, and it is also the fate of most of the other characters in the novel, that whilst he comes to know any number of beginnings, a wide variety of starting-points and varying experiences in different countries, he never finds any definite ends, any single thing to which he could definitely commit himself and which would command his unquestioned allegiance.

Part of his inability to commit himself or to find a commitment which would fully claim his attention stems from his liberalism, his prior commitment to himself and to the individual. All through The Beginners there is a defence of the individual and his or her private life against the claims of history, and particularly the claims which the South African historical situation, with its manifold injustices, makes upon the individual life. This is in accord with Jacobson's liberalism, his concern for personal relationships; he makes no attempt to remove them from the central position which they occupy in the novel of liberal humanism even though his novel depicts a world in which liberal humanism has broken down. When Joel, in speaking to the girl whom he will one day marry in

London, makes the following points in defence of himself, we are partly receiving Jacobson's own defence of the individual and of liberalism:

'And that's not the worst of it,' he said. 'The worst is that I simply can't imagine anything being on any other scale. Do you know what I mean? And this is where I fall out with the politicals, the radicals and Communists at any rate - I mean, quite apart from what Stalin is actually doing in Russia, which I just start swearing about whenever I argue with them. No, I mean when they talk generally, when they start coming with their ideas as such, when they talk about moulding the future, changing the world, making history. Then I ask myself what I will be, what will my life be like when they're finished with their moulding and making. And the answer is that I'll still be me; I can't become anyone else; I may be richer or poorer, or I may be in a concentration camp, or I may be dead. But if I'm alive I'll still be bound by the things that bind me now, because they're not just out there in society or the economic system; they're right in me, they're part of me ... everybody is a self to himself, if you get what I mean. And the radicals hate that, really; they can't stand it; they want everybody to be agglomerated with every one else in one big thing which they can call history or the future. That's their way out. But I had enough of being agglomerated in the army, thank you very much. 21

Given his individualism, it is not surprising that Joel should be overcome so frequently by self-doubt, and a lacerating sense of his own puniness and isolation, his estrangement and powerlessness: "he felt himself to be a mere disconnected, irritated pinpoint of consciousness; nothing but a speck, a dot, a superfluity."²² Nor is it surprising that he should expend so much effort in trying to relate his own isolated consciousness to something outside himself, to a life in which inner and outer worlds, private and public, could meet.

His membership of a South African Zionist movement which eventually takes him to Israel where he works on a kibbutz for a period of time before once again succumbing to a sense of futility, is partly motivated by his isolation. As he says to another character whilst trying to explain his membership of this movement:

'We are trying to cure ourselves of all the false, negative ways of being set apart that we suffer from, the wrong kinds of specialness. Or loneliness.'

'Loneliness?'

'Loneliness, marginality - I don't know what the word is. But I know what the state is: to be a kind of demi-European at the bottom of Africa; to be a demi-Jew among Gentiles. Other people have other ways of suffering from it.'

'And if you're a Jew among Jews - then you'll be able to think cheerfully of being snuffed out.'

'I don't know. Perhaps. Perhaps one would be able to reconcile oneself more easily to dying if one felt one really did belong to a living society, instead of just being part of a - of a mad machine. 23

But, even more, his departure from South Africa is prompted by his inability, as a liberal, to come to terms with the demands it imposes on him and the threat which it represents to his personal liberty. Just before he departs for Israel he learns of the Afrikaner Nationalist victory at the polls in 1948:

Joel's reaction to the news of the Nationalist victory was a selfish one; it was almost one of relief. Now he knew he had been right to want to sever himself from this country; the country, in coming into the hands of the Afrikaner Nationalists had severed itself from him. Everything that was least welcoming in it, everything that was most provincial, most bigoted, backward, barren, cramped, divisive and suspicious, had been given power. He could hardly be bothered to grieve for it. He had turned elsewhere. Back to Europe (for

he thought of Palestine as a part of Europe); back to the Jews; away from the haphazard disorder and fortuitousness of the country of his birth, which, he told himself, had never uttered a single, clear word he could understand and attend to with an undivided soul. Instead, he felt, there had merely been estrangement, pity, guilt, fear, contempt, roused at one time or another by every group in it - the blacks, the Coloureds, the Indians, the Afrikaners, the English, the anxious prospering Jews, all brought by chance together, and held together only by their needs and greeds, with no other shared ties of history, culture, kinship, loyalty, or even ordinary human sympathy. 24

Clearly, his liberalism makes him an especial kind of stranger in a country of strangers. Consequently, he has to leave South Africa for another land in which he can pursue his private life.

Yet even living in the anonymity, the privacy and indifference of England does not solve his problems. He still remains troubled by his lack of commitment and by the lack of a centre to his life, the old centre which a stable self in a stable society might have given in a former time. He is condemned to a sterile freedom and all its uncertainties and erosions of self.

Now Jacobson's narrative of Joel Glickman, a liberal individual perpetually lost in a world without certainties and afflicted as a result by a sense of the attenuation of his self, would be all very well if it were not for the fact that, as in A Dance In The Sun, he continues to use the traditional realist novel with all its assumptions about a coherent self in order to portray this breakdown. In The Beginners, a novel in which the liberal ideology is shown to be even more untenable, and in which the very class which might underpin it is seen as totally disintegrated, nomadic and existential, the central character inevitably suffers from a sense

of anomie and a loss of the self. But Jacobson nevertheless persists in using the liberal novel for a depiction of this and therefore an extraordinary flatness of tone and characterization results. For if there is no character, or if the whole notion of character has been undermined, one cannot go on blithely using the novel of liberal humanism, the novel of character, to portray this loss. One needs another method. And it is Jacobson's continued use of a form of the novel which an historical reality has rendered anachronistic and obsolete which is the major reason for the artistic failure of almost all his novels. Whilst he is concerned to depict the inadequacy of liberalism or its breakdown, he nevertheless does this through a form of the novel which implicitly declares liberalism still to be a going concern. Lionel Abrahams, in a review of The Beginners, shows some understanding of this debilitating contradiction when he writes:

Jacobson appears to me to have miscalculated at some point. Perhaps his error lies in his choice of a realistic picture of the world as a means of conveying his comment upon the real world today. The literalism defeats the life of the novel - because life has to be shown refusing to complete its stories. Perhaps some sort of allegory, or a surrealist approach, might have set the novelist free to remain a novelist, a creator of that completeness that we call a story ... Or perhaps the death of 'that old self', if one believes in it, also carries with it the death of such personal forms of art as the novel ... Born into an ever more rapidly changing world in which life is increasingly dominated by 'process of process', Joel is burdened with the death of selfhood. This is why, from the novel's point of view, he is an anti-character, and no doubt it is also why he has to move through an anti-story ... The trouble is that it doesn't make for interest, urgency, involvement. 25

There is a direct correlation between the form which The Beginners takes and Jacobson's own liberalism. The two go hand in hand.

But the fact that both of these do not go hand in hand with the historical process which he is exploring is reflected in the lack of intensity and fictional thinness of the novel; the means, the form, through which he is trying to master his material, cannot properly come to grips with it. In all English South African literature there are a few clearer examples than this book of the way in which liberalism emasculates a novel and determines its artistic failure.

Footnotes

1. It is only with his most recently published novel The Confessions of Joseph Baisz (1977) that he has written from anything other than a liberal standpoint. Significantly perhaps, it has been widely regarded as his best novel.
2. Dan Jacobson, The Evidence of Love (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1959), p. 42.
3. Dan Jacobson, A Dance In The Sun (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), pp. 77-78. All subsequent references are to this edition and not to the first edition of 1956.
4. *ibid.*, p. 158.
5. *ibid.*, pp. 155-6.
6. *ibid.*, p. 205.
7. *ibid.*, pp. 193-4.
8. *ibid.*, p. 195.
9. Hannah Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Javanovich, 1951), p. 283.
10. Jean-Paul Satre, Altona, Men Without Shadows, The Flies (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), p. 113.
11. Dan Jacobson, A Dance In The Sun, p. 133.
12. *ibid.*, p. 170.
13. *ibid.*, p. 190.
14. Dan Jacobson, Time of Arrival and Other Essays (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1953), p. 79.
15. Dan Jacobson, A Dance In The Sun, p. 63.
16. *ibid.*, pp. 140-1.
17. See above, pp. 127-9.
18. Dan Jacobson, The Beginners (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 441. All subsequent references are to this edition, and not to the first edition of 1966.
19. *ibid.*, p. 24.
20. *ibid.*, p. 55.
21. *ibid.*, p. 123.
22. *ibid.*, p. 128.
23. *ibid.*, p. 194.
24. *ibid.*, p. 237.

25. Lionel Abrahams, "The Beginners", The Classic, II, No. 2, pp. 79-80.

Chapter 11

Nadine Gordimer's The Late Bourgeois World

I

Among English South African writers, Nadine Gordimer and J.M. Coetzee alone have developed literary techniques which are able to deal effectively with the implications of the demise of liberalism in South Africa, a demise which culminated in the assassination of the Liberal Party in 1968. And one of the most interesting features of their work is the appearance of modernist techniques in it. For modernism is clearly the literary form which is both an index and expression of the death of that stable ego which is so important to the bourgeois world view; and the use of modernism implies the death of the liberal ideology as well. Coetzee has been a modernist writer from the start; with Gordimer there has been a distinct evolution from a fairly commonplace traditional realism in her early novels to the modernism of her more recent work. She herself has spoken of the manner in which her writing has followed a distinct historical development, the collapse of white liberalism being the crucial event behind this development. In 1972, clearly referring to The Late Bourgeois World (1966), she wrote: "I think I am the sole example of a South African who has chosen that other new theme - the decline of liberalism, black-and-white, that has proved itself hopelessly inadequate to an historical situation."¹

Indeed, Nadine Gordimer's development as a novelist cannot be divorced from the changing historical circumstances in Southern Africa over the last three decades. Her acute sense of these changes, along with her awareness of the historical significance of various events, has been the main factor behind her development, behind that steady movement to a more radical position which can be traced chronologically in her work. As historical circumstances in South Africa have changed, as conditions in South Africa have become more

and more repressive, both Gordimer and her white heroes or heroines have been forced to adopt a more radical stance as the only viable one. Her three early novels can now be seen as clearly dramatizing the failure of white liberalism in South Africa - and this failure finds its deepest expression in The Late Bourgeois World (1966); latterly, in A Guest of Honour (1971), The Conservationist (1974), and especially so in her latest novel, Burger's Daughter (1979), a Marxist influence has become increasingly apparent. Unfortunately, Gordimer's development on the level of ideology (from a sceptical liberalism to a more committed radicalism) has not been accompanied by an increasing skill as a novelist. Unlike her short stories which are remarkable for their concision, her novels, almost without exception, are marred by a fulsome clutter of sensuous detail which, instead of contributing to a rich fictional texture, merely succeeds in choking and obscuring the tensions and intentions of her narratives. This is particularly ironical as more and more she has become a novelist of ideas; and yet more and more the clash of ideas which she is seeking to articulate has been lost under the fulsomeness of her descriptive prose. And her inability to discriminate between what is essential and what is irrelevant to the progression of a novel, along with an often unnecessarily clumsy syntax and pretentious symbolism,² is the major reason why, despite her extraordinary ability to fictionalize the dilemmas raised by historical circumstances, her novels are all relative artistic failures.

But there is another sort of failure which weakens much of her early work: liberalism. The hopeless inadequacy of this ideology is already prefigured in her first three novels, The Lying Days (1953), A World of Strangers (1958), and Occasion for Loving (1963). All of these are concerned, within the conventional framework of the

novel of character, with working out a liberal hero or heroine's relationship to the contradictions in the South African reality, the major ones, of course, being those which are a result of the enforced separation between black and white worlds. The endings of these early novels are instructive. The Lying Days closes with the flight of its white heroine to Europe, and although this heroine has made the commitment to return to South Africa, her commitment remains unformulated and unconvincing; it does nothing to solve those South African problems which have ultimately led to her departure from the country. A World of Strangers ends in precisely the same way; the hero, a disengaged liberal publisher from England, finally commits himself to remaining in South Africa. Nevertheless Kevin Margarey is quite correct when he writes:

The theme [of A World of Strangers] is a paradox - that of a non-ideological ideology, almost an uncommitted commitment. Paradoxes are nearly contradictions. One is not quite clear, at the end of the novel, just how committed Toby is. If he were going to actually work for freedom in South Africa, his friendship with Steven and indeed most of the novel would lose its significance. But if he is simply going to stay in South Africa having African friends, his decision is mildly interesting but not important or dramatic. Lack of drama, indeed of strenuous experience of any kind, is certainly a felt quality of the novel. Miss Gordimer's view of commitment as personal and passive rather than ideological and strenuous leads her to capture in the novel a certain casual, 'cool' effect which is as likely to disguise a theme as to evoke it. 3

Occasion for Loving deals with the prominent liberal theme of personal relationships and their ability to transcend an historical period; it uses an interracial love affair to explore this and comes to the despairing conclusion that "so long as the law remained unchanged, nothing could bring integrity to personal relationships." Once again liberalism proves itself to be useless against the

Apartheid forces which are mustered against it. In fact, none of these novels succeeds in working out a viable rôle or a satisfactory relationship which a white liberal might sustain in the face of the South African reality; the note of commitment upon which all of them end is without substance; it merely rounds them off into artistic wholes, but without ever really exploring the practical consequences or possibilities for the committed white man or woman. In a sense, all of Gordimer's characters follow a trajectory from a lack of involvement to commitment. They find themselves in one of the classic existentialist positions, abandoned and forced to choose between the attractions of individualism and the commitments demanded by collectivism. In an early essay, Sartre writes that "we remind man that there is no legislator but himself; that he himself, thus abandoned, must decide for himself; also ... we show that it is not by turning back upon himself, but always by seeking, beyond himself, an aim which is one of liberation or of some particular realization, that man can realize himself as truly human."⁴ In abstract, this accurately describes the course which most of Gordimer's characters follow. But since, in the early novels, their commitment is unspecified it remains an inauthentic one; their liberalism is never transcended and the novels end with vacuous gestures designed to make up for the revealed shortcomings of the ideology which informs them.

The inconclusive nature of the personal relationships which the liberal establishes in these first three novels reaches a crisis point in Gordimer's next novel, The Late Bourgeois World, which is based on the sabotage efforts of the African Resistance Movement, a group of young white men connected to the Liberal Party who resorted to violence in 1964 and whose actions not only served to

discredit the Liberal Party once and for all in the eyes of white South Africa, but also may be read as an indication of the sterility of liberalism itself at that historical juncture in South Africa. The necessity for violent action, and the implicit rejection of the constitutional programme for change in this movement, may be seen as a comment upon the political sterility of liberalism.

Alan Lomborg has written: "There is a devolution from confidence and affirmation to uncertainty and near-despair in Gordimer's novels [down to The Late Bourgeois World]. As that sense of assurance in the possibilities for the realization of liberal ideals decreases, artistic assurance and control increases."⁵ The Late Bourgeois World is the one novel by Nadine Gordimer which is not marred by a diffuse lyricism. In the words of Ursula Laredo, it "depends for its effectiveness almost entirely on repeated images of despair, emptiness, and sterility."⁶ And this is appropriate; it depicts the nadir of liberalism in South Africa, in the political doldrums of the Sixties after Sharpeville, Rivonia, and the banning of black political organizations. Lyricism or a sensuous realism is no longer possible.

II

There are two quotations prefacing The Late Bourgeois World which form the dialectical poles between which its central consciousness, Elizabeth Van Den Sandt, oscillates. Significantly, the one is from Franz Kafka: "there are possibilities for me, certainly: but under what stone do they lie?" The other is from Maxim Gorky: "The madness of the brave is the wisdom of life." The significance of these two quotations is to be found in the fact that whilst the

former, in Kafka's usual interior vein, registers a doubt about choice and action and is emblematic of European sterility and angst, the latter, from the arch-protagonist of socialist realism, points to a way of resolving these doubts and insecurities. In effect The Late Bourgeois World is a short novel centred around the difficulty of choice and action when the polarization between races and the isolation of the white liberal from blacks as well as other whites has made any choice and any action extremely problematic. The inappropriateness of Elizabeth's liberal values entails a crisis of values which, in turn, entails a crisis of action - for the two go hand in hand. Her explicit realization that liberalism is no longer viable, that its values are useless, causes her long series of uncertainties and confusions as to what to do next, as to what can be done at all. And in accordance with her violent oscillations and uncertainties, it is no mere chance occurrence that her voice should become increasingly interior, that it should, in short, become increasingly modernist. For with the seeming impossibility of any effective political action, with its apparent futility and the breakdown of almost all social relationships other than the most mechanical and manipulative (and the isolation and loneliness of the liberal is emphasized in this novel as never before), it is inevitable that a loss of the self should result and that this should be reflected in the drift of the narrator's voice toward the interior monologue. The novel itself ends with her continuing oscillation; its final sentence, "afraid, alive, afraid, alive, afraid, alive ...",⁷ is merely her expression of that oscillation between fear and bravery which is contained in the two prefacing quotations to the book. And if nothing is finally resolved, if no satisfactory resolution has been attained by Elizabeth Van Den Sandt by the end of the book, then at least an essential dilemma has been

laid bare: that is, given the sterility of the liberal ideology, the necessity for another ideology, for choice, commitment, and action.

In all of Gordimer's novels the relation between the fictional world she constructs and a certain historical reality and period in South Africa is fairly explicit. This is particularly true of The Late Bourgeois World. The socio-historical background to the novel is clearly that period in the late Fifties and early Sixties when the measure of collaboration and close political alliance between liberal and leftist elements among whites and blacks was breaking down and a general estrangement and polarization between the two races was becoming more and more pronounced. This is expressed quite clearly in Elizabeth Van Den Sandt's comment: "There was a move among politically active Africans to keep out of white houses, no matter whose they were, and to reject friendship and even intimacy with whites as part of white privilege."⁸ Although many of the political references and episodes which are recalled by Elizabeth through a series of deftly contrived flashbacks have a distinctly journalistic ring and contribute to the artistic failure of this novel, they make clear the intentions behind The Late Bourgeois World. Through the depiction of a day in the life of Elizabeth Van Den Sandt (a day in which she learns of the suicide of her former husband, Max; pays a visit to her son at his exclusive boarding-school and to her senile grandmother at an equally exclusive old age home; receives a visit from her lover, a liberal lawyer with whom she is having a particularly tepid affair; and later entertains a black activist), it attempts to delineate the breakdown of white liberalism and to illustrate, particularly through the life of Max, some of the consequences of this breakdown and the

ensuing estrangement between blacks and whites. There is a further intention, and this is expressed in the very title of the novel: The Late Bourgeois World. Clearly, Nadine Gordimer has set out to give a portrait, or at least some cameos, of what she considers to be characteristic of the historical period in South Africa on which she is focussing her attention - a world characterized above all by the death-throes of the white world. When Elizabeth asks her lover, Graham Mills, "what could one say this is, the age of?", "what on earth do you think they'll call it in history?", he replies: "I've just read a book that refers to ours as the Late Bourgeois World. How does that appeal to you?"⁹

In his chapter on The Late Bourgeois World in his study of Nadine Gordimer, Robert F. Haugh has two basic, related criticisms of the novel. First, he maintains that "we have in this novel a particularly embarrassing failure - again a point-of-view problem - in the woman protagonist. Elizabeth, the woman in her thirties telling the story, has the swaggering bravado of a teenage rebel. How she could have supposedly lived through the events of her life and remained the tiresome adolescent she is, boggles the mind."¹⁰ Having cited some examples of her malicious, vindictive nature and of the falseness at the heart of her professed candour, he goes on to ask: "How can I believe the narrator upon any of the subjects in the novel: racial justice, white liberalism, revolutionary resistance, or any other endeavour, be it personal, social, or political?"¹¹ And his second criticism, which follows from Elizabeth Van Den Sandt's bigoted, uncertain point-of-view, is as follows: "When we peer more closely at Max Van Den Sandt, whose suicide we discover early in the first chapter, we find a potentially fascinating character whose qualities are not illuminated by the

manner of viewing; they are in fact hidden from us by the disdain and vindictiveness of the viewing character."¹²

Although these criticisms are just, Haugh is ultimately missing the real reason why Gordimer should have made her protagonist so blatantly repulsive and manifestly unjust in her attitudes towards most of those with whom she has some contact. The latter, along with the other whites in the novel, is obviously meant to be representative of that sterility and aridity which Gordimer sees as a defining feature of her Late Bourgeois World. It is finally Elizabeth Van Den Sandt herself, just as much as the mother-in-law and father-in-law for whom she has such scorn, who is the representative figure in this desolate and dying world. The lack of development of the "potentially fascinating character", Max, the manner in which he is so readily dismissed and forgotten by his former wife, and the readiness with which she glosses over his obvious agonies, is a reflection of Elizabeth's own aridity, her fear and consequent inability to feel and display warmth, fidelity, and grief. The callousness of her reaction to the news of Max's suicide is exemplified by the way she crumples and drops the telegram which informs her of his death onto the breakfast tray; presumably it is no more than another piece of debris among the debris of her breakfast. Later, she weeps "not for Max's death but for the pain and terror of the physical facts of it."¹³ But these instances of brutality are surely Gordimer's strategies to get the reader to focus more attentively on the character of Elizabeth herself.

In the first part of The Rebel, in which he distinguishes between rebellion and revenge or resentment, Albert Camus writes:

Actually, rebellion is more than an act of revenge, in the strongest sense of the word. Resentment is very well defined by Scheler as an auto-intoxication - the evil secretion, in a sealed vessel, of prolonged impotence. Rebellion, on the other hand, removes the seal and allows the whole being to come into play. It liberates stagnant waters and turns them into a raging torrent. Scheler himself emphasizes the passive aspect of resentment, and remarks on the prominent position it occupies in the psychology of women whose main preoccupations are desire and possession ... Scheler is also right in saying that resentment is always highly flavoured with envy ... According to Scheler, resentment always turns into either unscrupulous ambition or bitterness, depending on whether it flourishes in a weak mind or a strong one. But in both cases it is always a question of wanting to be something other than what one is. Resentment is always resentment against oneself... Finally, it would seem that resentment takes a delight, in advance, in the pain that it would like the object of its envy to feel. 14

Although the relevance of the whole of this quotation to The Late Bourgeois World should be immediately apparent, the part which speaks of resentment as being the product of "prolonged impotence" is particularly applicable to Elizabeth Van Den Sandt. For there is no doubt that she suffers from resentment and its syndrome, and that her general scorn and sneering tone is a direct result of her impotence, the impotence of her liberalism in a society in which her own liberal values would seem to have become obsolete.

As in the case of her ex-husband Max, her impotence is a result of her attempt to reject the great white lie, a refusal to identify with white South Africa and thereby to reap all the benefits and privileges which this identification automatically entails. The nature of her impotence is to be found in her refusal to be a colonizer. Yet this refusal is only a nominal one on her part. However much she might identify with the blacks and their struggle,

she herself cannot escape from her own position as a white. During an early episode in the novel when she is pouring scorn on whites busy with their weekend shopping and "the plain evidence of the superior living standards of white civilization", she herself has to admit: "I too have my package of pork fillets and my chair in the sun; you would not know me from the others" [the other bourgeois whites].¹⁵ Thus, however much she is estranged from the unthinking allegiances of her own kind, however much she might keep her hands clean as far as her own work is concerned, she cannot really escape her own class position, nor refrain from "living white". In one important sense, then, The Late Bourgeois World is about the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of crossing class and racial barriers in the rigidly stratified South African social formation; and in which those who do not respect the demands for allegiance and complicity required of them by the white ruling-class establishment are fated to suffer isolation and impotence. But it is Gordimer's failure to elaborate upon Elizabeth's futile hatreds, her failure to delineate the connection between her impotence and her resentment which makes the reader all too ready to attribute her malice to the author herself.

Above all, Elizabeth's life would seem to have been based upon rejection. The code upon which she had been raised as a child, and which was also foisted upon Max, was radically inadequate and false. As she says:

But I don't think that the code of decent family life, kindness to dogs and neighbours, handouts to grateful servants, has brought us much more than bewilderment. What about all those strangers the code didn't provide for, the men who didn't feel themselves to be our servants and had nothing to be grateful for in being fobbed off with handouts,

the people who weren't neighbours and crowded in on us with hurts and hungers kindness couldn't appease? I don't know what will be asked of Bobo by the time he grows up, but I do know that the sort of background I was told a child should expect would leave him pretty helpless. I can only try to see to it that he looks for his kind of security elsewhere than in the white suburbs. 16

In her own family life, the "shoddy" was her "sickening secret" and this led her to expect that Max would give her "Truth and beauty", something which, it turns out, he is quite incapable of providing. His parents and their thoughtless, affluent life-style are also unacceptable to both of them, as are almost all the whites who come into the narrative as part of its background. Her rejection of this past - and her scorn is the instrument through which she rejects and distances herself from the object of her scorn - is no doubt justified considering the emptiness and inadequacy of the values which it has provided. Yet the scorn only succeeds in caricaturing the objects of it, which caricatures only serve to reinforce and justify the scorn in a cyclical way. Moreover, the desire to reject which is implicit in the scorn only serves to isolate her from her class and it makes no impression on this class anyway. The result is an impotence whose pain and frustration she seeks to mitigate through resentment.

Max Van Den Sandt provides a much clearer instance of both the difficulty of breaking out of the white laager and away from its ideology, and also of the dilemmas attendant upon this. But if Gordimer fails to make sufficiently clear the reasons for Elizabeth's resentments, masquerading as honesty, then she also fails to account in sufficient detail for Max's particular make-up.

The solitary nature of Max's childhood, the refusal of his parents to pay sufficient attention to him when he was troubled by a certain problem, only grows into a deeper solitude with time when he rejects his family and all that they represent. Referring to his relationship with a Black activist who was once a close associate, Elizabeth says of Max:

he hovered irresistably towards what could never be got down, what Spears didn't need to get down because it was his - an identity with millions like him, an abundance chartered by the deprivation of all that Max had had heaped upon himself. Some of the white people I know want the black's innocence; that innocence, even in corruption, of the status of victims; but not Max. And everyone knows those whites who want to be allowed to "love" the blacks out of guilt; and those who want to be allowed to "love" them as an aberration, a distinction. Max wasn't any of those. He wanted to come close; and in this country the people - with all the huddled warmth of the phrase - are black. Set aside with whites, even his own chosen kind, he was still left out, he experienced the isolation of his childhood become the isolation of his colour. 17

And with his isolation, the possibilities that are open to him grow less and less. Running through what he might have become, Elizabeth suggests: "He might have been a lawyer; but all the professions were part of the white club, whose life membership ticket, his only birthright, he had torn up."¹⁸ Having rejected the white bourgeois world, its privileges and the herd identity it offers, Max is condemned to loneliness. And when his work along with black activists is disrupted by police action, that loneliness can only have increased. The last news of his activities before he resorts to sabotage is that "he had associated himself for a while with people who wanted to organize a new underground white revolutionary group."¹⁹ The word "white" in the last phrase is significant; it

indicates the loss of contact with blacks.

Max is repeatedly described by Elizabeth as a failure, and he ends up by being universally despised for having turned State witness and betraying his revolutionary comrades. As she says: "He didn't die for them - the people, but perhaps he did more than that. In his attempts to love he lost even his self-respect, in betrayal. He risked everything for them and lost everything. He gave his life in every way there is; and going down to the bed of the sea is the last."²⁰ But Elizabeth's greatest resentment for Max is inspired by the fact that he wanted her approval and admiration for whatever he did, that "he retained the revengeful need to be acknowledged." Her recollection of his humiliation of a friend, Felicity Howe, seems specifically designed to show that "there was only one reason why Max made love to her. He knew it and I knew it. He needed approval and admiration so much that he was prepared to throw in a good fuck as payment."²¹ According to his ex-wife, Max's greatest crime is that he is selfish and does not love; but her accusation is ironic considering her own inability to love as well.

Now it seems nothing less than a failure of imagination on Gordimer's part that she reveals no relationship between Max's isolation and his exaggerated need for admiration. For it seems quite plausible that having made the difficult decision not to play along with the white world, and having forfeited the assurance that comes from belonging to a race of people with an assured sense of their own identity (however false this assurance might be), Max would require a more than normal appreciation of what he was doing, of the course which he had chosen. Elizabeth's acute sense of embarrassment and the rage she still feels for Max's speech on "moral sclerosis" at

his sister's wedding is a case in point. The speech itself is utterly sincere; what she cannot bear is its lack of efficacy, its impotence, the readiness with which it is absorbed and forgotten by the guests. And if the incident of the wedding speech is designed to show the difficulty of a black-sheep among his own kind trying to get through to them, then it is obscured by the false insight which Elizabeth has into it. Ultimately her reactions speak more of her own failures than those of her husband. Ultimately she is the truly isolated and impotent one.

Her sterility is further reflected in the nature of the relationships which she has. One of the ways in which Nadine Gordimer frequently attempts to illuminate the quality of life in a particular society (usually that white English South African society which is her especial fictional province) is by revealing the nature of the sexual relationships conducted within it. No doubt she recognizes that there is an intimate connection between the condition or state of a civilization and its erotic life. Only a cursory glance at Elizabeth Van Den Sandt's relationship with the lawyer, Graham Mills, reveals that it is an extremely casual arrangement in which there is a good deal of duplicity, in which large portions of their respective lives are unknown to each other and in which no natural dependency has been established so that, presumably, nothing is owed and nothing can be lost. In a word, their relationship is a convenient habit which can be characterized both by Elizabeth's description of Graham's erection inside her ("warm, thick, dead"²²) and by her later comment that "everything was slack and somehow absent-minded, between us."²³ If this relationship is an index to anything, it surely points to Elizabeth's general lack of involvement and her fear of both giving and taking for fear of involvement.

It is analagous to her political position.

This passionless alliance stands in stark contrast to her evening with Luke Fokase, a black activist, whom she had known briefly in former times. Unlike the other whites in her story, he "is immediately there";²⁴ he is like "a young black bull in a white china shop."²⁵ He exemplifies black vitality and sensuality as opposed to the stasis and sterility of the whites.²⁶ It is in this episode that something like a little sensuality enters into Elizabeth Van Den Sandt's bleak and arid narrative. There are moments of flirtation and laughter before the subject of a bank account for some foreign money required by the black activists is broached. Then, after Luke has left her, she reflects:

A sympathetic white woman hasn't got anything to offer him - except the footing she keeps in the good old white Reserve of banks and privileges. And in return he comes with the smell of the smoke of braziers in his clothes. Oh yes, and it's quite possible he'll make love to me, next time or some time. That's part of the bargain. It's honest, too, like his vanity, his lies, the loans he doesn't pay back: it's all he's got to offer me. It would be better if I accepted gratefully, because then we shan't owe each other anything, each will have given what he has, and neither is to blame if one has more to give than the other. And in my case, perhaps I want it. I don't know. Perhaps it would be better than what I've had - or got. Suit me better, now. Who's to say it shouldn't be called love? You can't do more than give what you have. 27

This passage, coming after she had woken up in some hour of the night and supposedly thought out in a moment of lucidity, nevertheless contains nothing of the resolution it is meant to imply. Whereas she has only a bank account to offer Luke, he has only sex to give in return. If there is any honesty in this exchange, if through political circumstances and the predicament of her own isolation

she has nothing more to give, then this honesty will scarcely form the basis of a genuine relationship; it is no more than an exchange of goods. As in her affair with Graham, almost her last thought in The Late Bourgeois World is that she should gratefully accept Luke's sexual advances since then neither will owe anything to the other. To the end she remains uninvolved, dishonest, and afraid.

She will presumably give a bank account and her body to Luke; Max gives his life. Earlier on in the book, however, she reflects: "You cannot hope to unseat the great alabaster backside with a tin-pot bomb. Why risk your life? The madness of the brave is the wisdom of life. I didn't understand till then. Madness, God, yes, it was; but why should the brave ones among us be forced to be mad?"²⁸ In this comment on Max's life, on the way in which he risked and lost it, she is also implicitly referring to a progression in it, which, although the novel itself fails to illuminate it fully, is tantamount to a progression from the world of the Kafka quote to that of the Gorky quote. Max, having estranged himself from the white ethos and having suffered all the diminished possibilities that this must have entailed, and no doubt having been driven to desperation by this frustration, commits the mad act of making a bomb. He has become an activist; he has truly rebelled. That he failed, both personally and politically, and that he payed with his life for his failure, is not that important. For the suggestion is that, driven to an act of madness by his frustrations, he has left behind the uselessness of liberalism. Elizabeth's question as to why "the brave ones among us should be mad?" fairly points out the tragedy of the South African late bourgeois world: that those who are mad and brave are struck down. Yet although Elizabeth herself is certainly not among the mad or brave (and it

may be that her animosity is also inspired by the guilt she feels at not being one of this company), there is the suggestion at the end of the novel that she herself might be willing to involve herself in political action again, that she herself might become one of the mad and the brave.

In conclusion, what can be said about The Late Bourgeois World is that it is an ultimate expression of the impasse of liberal values and the impotence of liberals in South Africa in the Sixties. This impotence leads the impotent into perversities of response (i.e. resentment) in order to compensate for their manifold frustrated possibilities. Elizabeth Van Den Sandt exemplifies this. With these frustrations, with the inability to act being oppressively real, and with the white individual becoming increasingly aware that whatever contact he might maintain with black activists is of negligible significance, two courses of action seem to present themselves. The one is an apolitical resignation; the other is an act of violent rebellion which is consequent upon the madness induced by so many frustrated possibilities. Max exemplifies this latter option. It necessarily signifies the refutation of liberalism. And it is largely because The Late Bourgeois World reveals the inadequacy of liberalism in the historical circumstances of South Africa, and because it also reveals the consequences of the death of this ideology, that it is such a significant landmark in English South African fiction. More than any other novel in this literature it marks a kind of turning-point; more conclusively than any novel by any other novelist it begins to break away from that liberal tradition which had been the dominant one in white English South African literature up to that point in time.

III

The Late Bourgeois World also marks a turning-point in Gordimer's development as a novelist. Given the impasse of liberalism which she expressed so effectively in this novel, it is perhaps no surprise that in her next novel, A Guest Of Honour (1971), she should focus on a liberal character who is called by a particular situation - a newly independent African state - and who does consciously choose to align himself and to act, whatever the consequences of that action might be. As it happens, it results in his accidental death. Nevertheless, the meaning of the central protagonist's career is summed up in a journal article which is quoted at the very end of the book: "In a number devoted to "The Decline of Liberalism" in an English monthly journal he was discussed as an interesting case in point: a man who had "passed over from the scepticism and resignation of empirical liberalism to become one of those who are so haunted by the stupidities and evils in human affairs that they are prepared to accept apocalyptic solutions, wade through blood if need be, to bring real change."²⁹

In a later novel, The Conservationist (1974), Gordimer moves even further away from that liberal ideology which was the nerve-centre of her early fiction. It deals with a white land-owning capitalist for whom possessions are everything, and whose relationships with the world read like a catalogue of alienations. He is an anti-hero estranged from any sort of community, and this is reflected in the fact that a large part of the novel consists of his interior monologues. Indeed, with the absence of any authentic relationships with other people, his monologues are inescapable; he has literally got no-one to talk to. In contrast to him is the small community of blacks who work his farm and who ultimately become a kind of

collective hero because they are the true caretakers of the land, and their living is characterized by a fidelity to relationships, both to the living and to the dead. The final paragraph of the novel, after an unknown black has been buried, expresses this: "The one whom the farm received had no name. He had no family but their women wept a little for him. There was no child of his present but their children were there to live after him. They had put him away to rest, at last; he had come back. He took possession of this earth, theirs; one of them."³⁰ This novel conforms fairly closely to what Lucien Goldmann has called the novel of collective aspirations. By its very nature, its class position and social organization, white English South Africa, particularly the English, could not possibly be the group hero of such a novel. Effectively, it would seem that in The Conservationist Gordimer has written off the whites.

Finally, in her most recent novel, Burger's Daughter (1979), Gordimer moves even further away from the liberal ideology. The deep Marxist influence on this book signifies this movement. In this novel, by attempting to integrate the fictional and the historical, she is doing something similar to that which Solzhenitsyn has achieved in his historical novels of Russian life under Stalinism; dealing with a history which has been consigned to oblivion. And although her attempts are awkward and clumsy in comparison with Solzhenitsyn's, Burger's Daughter does, in effect, reclaim that tradition of Marxism as formulated by the ANC and SACP which has long been forced underground in South Africa. Just as the central character, Rosa Burger, is concerned through much of the novel to literally "re-collect" her dead parents' Communist past, so Burger's Daughter is an act of remembrance, a recollection of what has been temporarily smothered

by the present white régime. And by dealing with this Marxist tradition, Gordimer implicitly declares the nullity of the liberal tradition and revives another which, it would seem, will become increasingly prominent in both life and literature in South Africa in this era after the Soweto revolt of 1976.

Footnotes

1. Nadine Gordimer, "The Novel and the Nation in South Africa", African Writers on African Writing, ed. G.D. Killam (London: Heinemann, 1973), p. 51.
2. For an acute discussion of the way Gordimer's diffuse lyricism quite frequently masks an essential vulgarity or emptiness, see Anthony Woodward, "Nadine Gordimer", Theoria, No. 16 (1961), pp. 1-12.
3. Kevin Margarey, "The South African Novel and Race", Southern Review, No. I (1963), p. 36.
4. Jean-Paul Sartre, Existentialism and Humanism (London: Methuen, 1948), pp. 55-56.
5. Alan Lomborg, "Withering into the Truth: The Romantic Realism of Nadine Gordimer", English in Africa, 3, No. 1 (March 1976), p. 3.
6. Ursula Laredo, "African Mosaic: The Novels of Nadine Gordimer", Journal of Commonwealth Literature, VIII, No. 1 (June 1973), p. 42.
7. Nadine Gordimer, The Late Bourgeois World (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976), p. 160. All subsequent references are to this edition, and not to the first edition of 1966.
8. *ibid.*, p. 89.
9. *ibid.*, p. 114.
10. Robert F. Haugh, Nadine Gordimer (New York: Twayne, 1974), p. 136.
11. *ibid.*, p. 137.
12. *ibid.*, p. 138.
13. Nadine Gordimer, The Late Bourgeois World, p. 64.
14. Albert Camus, The Rebel (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 23.
15. Nadine Gordimer, The Late Bourgeois World, p. 43.
16. *ibid.*, pp. 15-16.
17. *ibid.*, pp. 80-81.
18. *ibid.*, p. 74.
19. *ibid.*, p. 91.
20. *ibid.*, p. 93.
21. *ibid.*, p. 87.
22. *ibid.*, p. 62.

23. *ibid.*, pp. 117-18.
24. *ibid.*, p. 126.
25. *ibid.*, p. 141.
26. This contrast between vital, sensual blacks and sterile whites frequently appears in all of Gordimer's fiction.
27. Nadine Gordimer, The Late Bourgeois World, pp. 159-161.
28. *ibid.*, p. 92.
29. Nadine Gordimer, A Guest of Honour (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971), p. 503.
30. Nadine Gordimer, The Conservationist (London: Jonathan Cape, 1974), p. 252.

Conclusion

In this thesis it has been my concern to examine the deep influence which the liberal ideology has had on almost a century of white English South African fiction and to specify some of the ways in which it has determined the failure of this literature, both artistically and politically. At the time of writing, with the death of liberalism in South Africa, it would seem that Gordimer and J.M. Coetzee respectively represent two ways out of the cul-de-sac which has come about with this death. I have noted the increasing Marxist influence on Gordimer's later fiction. This is one way. Clearly, Coetzee has taken the other. For, in essence his novels are novels of the absence of the subject, of characters disembodied in a colonial milieu by a freedom so lawless that it is tantamount to imprisonment. All his characters, or ciphers, are engaged in a desperate endeavour to forge a stable ego, a coherent self of certain reality, in a violent world in which nothing exists, in which there are no authentic relationships, to substantiate a self. Hence their existentialism. Coetzee's modernism may itself be regarded as implying the death of liberalism. What is clear from his work (and also from Gordimer's) is that it is no longer possible to write the traditional liberal novel in contemporary South Africa and, at the same time, to write a meaningful work of art. Whatever course future South African literature in English might take, it is clear that it cannot be informed by the ideology of liberalism. If writers continue writing within this dead tradition which I have outlined, their work will be possessed by a corresponding deadness; it will be a still-born literature.

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