

TRUTH IN A HOT CLIMATE

by David Welsh

To what extent do writers and scholars working in South Africa have to 'bend' their material to conform to society's pressures? I write primarily as an academic, but I suspect that our problems are similar to those which many writers experience. Scholars and writers are, after all, trying to discover the truth, to portray reality in their different ways; both seek to plumb the depth of human experience. The trouble is that the truth may be disquieting, or even downright painful. Pressures are therefore applied, directly or indirectly, either to suppress it or to ensure that future seekers after truth will present it in a light which is at least palatable to those groups who wield power of influence.

In his introduction to the Hogarth edition of William Plomer's *Turbott Wolfe* Laurens van der Post gives a vivid description of white South African reaction to the novel which, in an unprecedented way, had explored the theme of sexual attraction across the colour line. It caused an 'intellectual riot'. Van der Post uses the vivid analogy of the way in which baboons reacted to seeing their reflections in a mirror – they looked frantically at the back but always from the front there was 'an authentic baboon-person staring back at them'. They could never accept reality and finally they would smash the mirror to pieces. This, says van der Post, was a precise rendering of white reaction to *Turbott Wolfe*.

In his autobiography *Double Lives* Plomer says that his novel 'had particularly stung the whites in that part of their psychological being where guilt and fear and self-deception in regard to the natives . . . had been wrapped away from the light of reason'. There is no doubt that similar factors led, partly at least, to the premature demise of *Voorslag* which, Plomer says, was intended 'to sting with satire the mental hindquarters . . . of the bovine citizenry of the Union'.

Reactions of this kind can still be evoked. Perhaps they are not so crude in some respects – we have become more 'sophisticated' – but the institutional apparatus for direct suppression has become much more substantial. The precise effect of censorship on the minds of creative writers is difficult to determine. Different authors react in different ways. Some deny that censorship worries them at all; others complain that it saps their creativity like a blight. As a *Sestiger* put it to me, 'I have a policeman in my head'.

Formal and informal censorship operates differently for each group. The Afrikaans writer, for example, has to contend with the inherited incubus of conservatism and tradition. If he violates tradition the wrath of God, channelled perhaps through the Public Morals Commission of the NGK, will descend upon his head. Publishers will



William Plomer

be nervous of accepting manuscripts; booksellers may refuse to stock the book; and schools may not use it. The Afrikaans writer writes for a small market. It may be important to him financially and in terms of his own morale and self-esteem to have his work published and read by his fellow-Afrikaners. The temptation to violate intellectual integrity and tone down one's writing must be considerable.

To their credit the *Sestigers* pioneered new paths in Afrikaans literature. The storm which their work raises seems to me to derive from a fundamental ambivalence in Afrikaner society which is being modernized in spite of the entrenched forces of conservatism in powerful places. The *Sestigers* seek after universalistic values but the society of which they are part continues to espouse the particularistic values of traditionalism. This same conflict of values is being played out in many areas of Afrikaner society. It turns basically on the perception of truth – for the traditionalist proper the truth is already known and needs only to be maintained and expounded. The 'modernist' views truth as something open-ended, to be experimented with.

Writers in English are both white and black, what is most imposing and depressing is the list of names who now write in exile. For most blacks exile has not been voluntary; for at least some white writers the reason for exile must surely have been their inability to work in the South African climate.

But this is facile. Works of genius have emerged from the most censor-ridden and authoritarian societies, as Solzhenitsyn shows. A more complex reason seems to operate for many English-speaking intellectuals. In an interview with the *Guardian* this year Dan Jacobson said that he left South Africa because he wished to be nearer the cultural metropolis of English culture. Although he didn't say it the implication was that South Africa, in cultural terms, was a colonial outpost, a society, in Olive Schreiner's terms, of lower-middle class tastes.

This tension between metropolis and outpost has been a powerful factor in the make-up of white English-speaking intellectuals. It is separate from (though it may be combined with) pressure from society. It operates especially among writers and scholars. They feel that their development is being stunted by South African conditions.

The academics' reaction to these pressures I have been describing is similar. There are many cases of lecturers who do not tell the truth as they see it because to do so would land them in serious trouble. There are all kinds of subterfuges to which one can resort: veiled analogies, dark hints and unspoken comparisons. More serious, however, is the effect which these pressures have had on the lines of scholarly research pursued in South Africa. There is a marked tendency to avoid research into contentious aspects of society. To produce even a scholarly exposé may result in retribution, either formal or informal. Even those

hardy souls who plunge into the thorniest of thickets may be deterred by bureaucratic requirements (for example, the need to obtain permits before entering Africa) surveillance and secrecy.

Many scholars have opted out. If not out of the country then out of the thorns and into the more tranquil reaches of pure theory which is far removed from the tensions and pressures of society. According to J.A. Hobson, writing in 1926, 'religion, group loyalty or patriotism, patriotism, the family, and certain concepts of personal morality, not merely surround themselves with taboos, but emit passionate fumes to blind the sight and confuse the brain of timorous scrutineers.'

This is even more true of South Africa, where the problem is compounded by the fragmented and authoritarian nature of society. The basic difficulty with research in the social sciences in South Africa seems to be this: fragmentation leads to the hardening of group loyalties; groups become resistant to being examined by scholars through fear that their probings will uncover some dark secret or prove some of their dearest truths to be mere shibboleths. In our hierarchic society a group may extend a similar 'protection' to groups which it dominates, because the dangerous truths uncovered may be used against them. All of this must be seen in the context of the authoritarian climate in which individuals and institutions are fearful of giving information, especially to strangers.

These random thoughts have been inspired by many conversations with intellectuals in all parts of the country in the course of a book I am writing about South African universities. I would be most grateful to any readers of *Reality* who would be kind enough to let me have comments, based upon their own experiences or reflections on the problems I have tried to analyse. □

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