

Aesthetics and Ideology

Negotiating Poetry

Colin Gardner

Aesthetics, Ideology and the Critic

Anton van der Hoven

Eagleton's Political Journey

Jean-Philippe Wade

Leavis: Intelligence and Ideology

P.J.H. Titlestad

Writers and Discourse Producers

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Afrikaans and Identity

Johan van Wyk

May 1991

77

THE FORA



THEORIA

A Journal of Studies in the Arts,
Humanities and Social Sciences

Number 77

May 1991

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Published by the University of Natal Press
for the Faculties of Arts, Humanities and Social Science

ISSN 0040-5817

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Theoria, a scholarly, non-disciplinary journal in the humanities, arts and social sciences, is intended primarily to serve the purpose of encouraging reflection on, and engagement with, the more important intellectual currents and social, artistic and political events by which the contemporary world is configured. The compass of the journal is wide, and the editors believe that this purpose can be served in a variety of ways – ranging from recondite scholarly meditations on the early historical forces that gave shape to our world to sharp critical interventions in contemporary public debate. Thus, any matter of moment – whether it be the epistemological implications of new research in the neurosciences, the impact of post-modernist styles in architecture, new departures in philosophy or literary criticism or exploration of development strategies in southern Africa – will, in principle, be able to be addressed in the pages of *Theoria*.

The editors have, however, decided that although each issue may carry contributions in a diversity of fields, the contents of each issue will be largely dictated by one or more governing themes. In order to secure contributions in good time, these themes will be announced well in advance of publication.

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Editorial

The relation between art and the world of politics remains uneasy, contentious, often suggestive of fundamental antagonism. Yeats in his great poem, *Lapis Lazuli*, defends art against the impatient reactions typical in times of crisis when the claims of political debate seem most urgent. Yeats refers to a kind of nervous revulsion which leads people to exclaim:

They are sick of the palette and fiddle-bow . . .

It is not difficult to understand how for those involved in war or revolution the idea of art may seem little better than an impertinence, and yet for later-comers it is often the palette which most surely conveys the actuality of great events. There can be no more vivid comment on the Napoleonic Wars than Goya's companion paintings, *The Second of May* (1808), and *The Third of May* (1808). The first of these portrays the spontaneous energy of popular rebellion against the mamelukes of Murat; the second portrays the horror of the reprisals that followed – Murat's firing squads were busy for a day and a night. To gain a fuller sense of the time one would need to consider Beethoven's *Eroica* symphony, and the hopes and aspirations, associated with Napoleon's early career, that it reflects.

Colin Gardner's essay, which introduces our symposium, traces the responsiveness of poetry in South Africa to the stages of political evolution. However the pattern he discerns rather than culminating in bitter indictment, like that in Goya's *The Third of May*, suggests instead a relaxing of tension in which the art which reflects politics and the art which reflects common human concerns begin to converge. Anton van der Hoven, in his essay, addresses himself not so much to a specific body of literature as to the general problem posed by the relation between aesthetics and ideology. He identifies two apparently contradictory impulses in the discussion of art: one seeks to interpret art as a restricted discourse, accessible only within its own aesthetic terms; the other interprets art as open to all people, and hence open to ideological or political criticism. He argues that those impulses are finally complementary to one another. Philippe Wade approaches the topic of this issue in the light of Eagleton's recent *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. He suggests that a beneficial effect of Eagleton's book is to dissolve the opposition between ideology and

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aesthetics. Johan van Wyk explores the close relation between the Afrikaans language and Afrikaner identity and the problem this poses for the writer in Afrikaans. On the other hand it is the freedom of the artist that Peter Knox-Shaw and Peter Titlestad are concerned with: each in his different way constructs a timely defence of that freedom.

Our other articles are not so directly relevant to our main topic but Tony Fluxman's discussion of Bob Dylan and Serge Ménéger's discussion of Proust in Africa must be seen as part of the debate. Serge Ménéger deals with the question of how a writer like Proust may be approached in the South African context where decades of apartheid have produced famished and therefore cannibalistic students and readers generally. Eugenie Freed's account of the significance of the pentangle in *Sir Gawain* indicates once more that our interests go beyond the local and the topical.

* * *

Theoria 78, will deal with 'Ethical Aspects of Economic Growth'. *Theoria* 79 will deal with approaches to the Arts and Literature in South Africa. We propose two main themes:

- (a) The tasks and challenges facing indigenous literatures in South Africa.
- (b) The role of European and North American literature in South Africa.

Contributions should be sent before January 31, 1992 to: The Editors, *Theoria*, University of Natal Press, P.O. Box 375, Pietermaritzburg 3200.

THE EDITORS

Negotiating Poetry

A New Poetry for a New South Africa?*

Colin Gardner

My title ends with a question-mark and I want to speak tentatively. My subject is of course an obvious one – perhaps an awkwardly obvious one. We are all, in one way or another, interested in and concerned about contemporary South African literature; and we are all, in one way or another, concerned about and involved in contemporary South African socio-political change. But how are these two phenomena, and these two concerns, related? How are they related; or how should they be, or could they be? How might they be seen as being related?

Immediately queries, issues, problems swarm within the mind. A pressing concern is this: fascinating as the question posed may be, can one in fact bundle literature and socio-political realities together in this abrupt way? Is not there something rather crude about the juxtaposition?

Well yes, to some extent there is. The relationship between life and literature – however one chooses to define those two elusive concepts – is on the whole a complex and indirect one. Life tends to feed into literature in a subtle and slow way, and literature seems to feed back into life with a similar circumspection.

And yet that is not always wholly so. The one genre that is generally and traditionally recognised as being capable of a certain immediacy of contact with specific emotions and events is poetry. Many poets have written poems based on recent experiences or happenings; to attempt to erect a play or a novel on such a basis is far less common and less easy – and no doubt less sensible. Moreover Wordsworth, who has provided what is still (in the English-speaking world) one of the best known and most lucid accounts of the genesis of lyric poetry, in emphasising the complexity of the process of transformation at the same time suggests the relative directness of the link between life and art. It is perhaps worth remembering, too, that in Britain there is a poet laureate, one of whose tasks is to attempt to write about events of a certain type – though it is only fair to add that the notable failure of

* This paper was read at a conference of the Association of University English Teachers in Southern Africa held at the University of Stellenbosch in July 1990.

most incumbents of that office to produce anything of any value while labouring at their official calling gives a clear indication that turning events into literature is never a simple matter.

What poet laureates have tended to lack, of course, is a true emotional involvement in the happenings that they try to make poetry out of. We know that involvement of this sort is not a sufficient condition for the production of successful poetry, but it does seem to be a necessary condition. If we look back into the history of poetry in English, into that tradition which to some extent lurks in the background for much contemporary South African poetry, we find that the most significant poems about happenings of socio-political importance have all grown from profound feeling: Marvell's 'Horatian Ode', Milton's sonnets, Dryden's satires, Blake's, Wordsworth's and Shelley's poems about the political events of their time, Whitman's poem on the death of Lincoln, Yeats's 'Easter 1916', the finest poems of the First World War.

There are two further things that we can learn from poems of this sort. The first is that the magnitude of the event seems often to be almost as important as the commitment of the author. Clearly large events, socio-politically speaking, are likely to call forth a larger response in poets; and of course the poet's awareness of the historical importance of the event in question is likely to add a further resonance to the poetry. The second thing that we learn is that, for all the ways in which art can be said to transform experience, successful poetry is sometimes responsive to the minute particularities of historical events and of temporal development. Marvell's 'Horatian Ode' catches the mood of a very specific moment in Cromwell's career. Wordsworth's sonnets of 1802 and Shelley's poems of 1819 belong in a very precise manner to the happenings and to the atmospheres of those two years. And as for the First World War, in the unfolding poetry as in the unfolding events the differences between 1914 and 1915 and 1916 are crucial.

II

The step from 1914–1918 in Europe to 1970–1990 in South Africa is not, I think, a strange or surprising one. But before I take that step, and go on to discuss a few of the ways in which South African poets have responded and might respond to contemporary events, I should like to make it quite clear that I do not believe that, even at times of socio-political momentousness, all poetry does or could or should concern itself with public themes. In fact there is an important poetic strand which explicitly resists such an imperative. One finds it

expressed simply and memorably in Hardy's short poem 'In Time of "the Breaking of Nations"', written in 1915:

Only a man harrowing clods
In a slow silent walk
With an old horse that stumbles and nods
Half asleep as they stalk.

Only thin smoke without flame
From the heaps of couch-grass;
Yet this will go onward the same
Though Dynasties pass.

Yonder a maid and her wight
Come whispering by:
War's annals will cloud into night
Ere their story die.

(Hardy, p.511)

Here the drama lies precisely in the seeming unmomentousness of what is evoked: 'Only a man . . .'; 'Only thin smoke . . .'; 'Yonder a maid and her wight.' In other poems Hardy shows that this seeming unmomentousness can, properly understood, be profoundly momentous. One of his finest poems, 'At Castle Boterel', focuses upon a magical remembered moment, as he and the woman he loved walked up a hill together:

It filled but a minute. But was there ever
A time of such quality, since or before,
In that hill's story? To one mind never,
Though it has been climbed, foot-swift, foot-sore,
By thousands more.

Primaeval rocks form the road's steep border,
And much have they faced there, first and last,
Of the transitory in Earth's long order;
But what they record in colour and cast
Is – that we two passed.

(Hardy, p.331)

Here Hardy finds words for the subtlest and most inward of recognitions, for one of those deeply felt, deeply shared emotions which can be said to lie at the very centre of human life and hope. Yet Hardy was a poet who was acutely aware of socio-political realities,

and wrote a number of poems on such themes. Even more obviously caught up in political events was Yeats, the author of 'Easter 1916' and of 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen.' But in April 1938, in response to anxious talk about a possible new World War, we find him writing the short poem, 'Politics'. It has an epigraph from Thomas Mann, thrown in ironically: 'In our time the destiny of man presents its meaning in political terms.'

How can I, that girl standing there,
 My attention fix
 On Roman or on Russian
 Or on Spanish politics?
 Yet here's a travelled man that knows
 What he talks about,
 And there's a politician
 That has read and thought,
 And maybe what they say is true
 Of war and war's alarms,
 But O that I were young again
 And held her in my arms!

(Yeats, p. 392)

It is a beautifully constructed piece, which enacts its own meaning. The girl mentioned in the first line haunts the poem, with its serious political discussion, and then in the last two lines she emerges, almost as if from the unconscious. Yeats's main thrust is similar to Hardy's: there is a current of human life and apprehension which runs on strongly, like a half-hidden stream, beneath the level of socio-political pressures and circumstances.

The assertion of the significance of the personal as against the more obviously historical represents one of the classic themes of all poetry. Yet it is a theme that has not received very much open expression in recent poetry written in South Africa. Most black poets have felt that it is too early to pursue that theme. Poets of other hues have written about many other matters besides the socio-political, but few of them have felt inclined to make bold claims of the kind that Hardy and Yeats made. The British Isles were rather less impassioned, embittered and guilt-ridden than South Africa has been. Besides, Hardy's Dorchester and Yeats's Ireland were geographically on the periphery of the great European conflicts, whereas the trenches of apartheid have crisscrossed the whole of South African society, both physically and spiritually.

Perhaps the closest we get to statements somewhat akin to the one Yeats makes in 'Politics' is what we find in some of Douglas

Livingstone's Giovanni Jacopo poems. It is significant that for some of his more wry and unorthodox perceptions Livingstone uses the voice of a persona who appears to come from a distance in space and in time.

In a truly new South Africa, of course, any poet would feel free and easy about writing on any subject. What South Africa needs is not just a redistribution of wealth and resources: it needs a redistribution of normality.

III

After what may seem merely an inset into the main pattern of my argument, I feel able to proceed without a fear of being misunderstood and without the need to introduce too many qualifications.

Some of the liveliest poetry written in South Africa in the last twenty years or so has been a response not only to the socio-political situation in general but to specific moments and phases in an ongoing struggle. To take an example: in 1972 we find James Matthews, writing with the energy and confidence that one associates with the early stages of the black consciousness movement, making stark statements about South Africa and about the poetry that he regards as appropriate for it:

It is said
that poets write of beauty
of form, of flowers and of love
but the words I write
are of pain and of rage

I am no minstrel
who sings songs of joy
mine a lament

I wail of a land
hideous with open graves
waiting for the slaughtered ones

Balladeers strum their lutes and sing tunes of happy times
I cannot join in their merriment
my heart drowned in bitterness
with the agony of what white man's law has done

(Matthews and Thomas, p. 1)

The passion and the compactness of the poem give it power. As in some of Wilfred Owen's poems, conventional notions of beauty are forced aside by a new and greater urgency; and this urgency, with its ugly images and its rhythm that breaks the metrical pattern, produces (almost against the author's will) a new sort of beauty – a beauty made out of a jagged and desperate honesty. But nine years later, in 1981, many things have changed; the Soweto uprising, various modes of defiance and boycott, and the beginnings of the trade union movement have put the oppressed on to the offensive. And Matthews finds himself writing a very different kind of poem. Again he is discussing the political situation and a poetry appropriate for it. The first line of this poem is fascinatingly similar to the first line of the earlier poem, which was 'It is said':

they say
 writing poetry at
 this stage of
 our struggle is
 absurd, and writing
 black protest poetry
 is even worse
 people need direction
 and not words
 relating the situation
 as it is
 things that everyone
 knows all about
 poets, black poets,
 have written themselves
 into a dead-end

they say
 my neighbours do
 not even read
 what i've written
 and that poetry
 will not bring
 about any changes
 in our situation
 a revolution can
 do without poets
 poets should switch to
 things more constructive
 furthering a revolution
 offer a solution

to the problem
their contempt
is acid eating
the flesh of
my poetical work

(Chapman. p. 162)

Before he was speaking mainly to white oppressors; now he is implicitly in debate with others committed to the liberation struggle. Before he was angrily confident; now he is unsure and self-critical. Before he proclaimed a new type of poetry for the situation he was in; now he has been forced to ask whether in the current situation there is any value in poetry at all. The broken, seemingly structureless lines dramatize this last point; and yet the inherent interest and significance of the debate pull in the other direction, as does the startling final image. We are given a vivid picture of the destruction of his poetry, yet – paradoxically – this image represents the triumph of the poetic mode of apprehension. The 1981 poem is more complex than the poem of 1972, but each defines issues and problems peculiar to its moment of composition.

And in the same sort of way many of the South African poems written in the last twenty years or so have belonged fairly precisely to the time which brought them forth. In the 1970s it was above all poems by black writers which recorded, in reaction or in solidarity, the latest developments of oppression and of resistance. But in the 1980s, with the quickening of the movement towards a major crisis in South African society, more and more white poets have joined what one might call the mainstream of socio-political poetry, of poetry that takes its charge from the electric currents, from the cosmic yet intimate lightning of the ever-unfolding South African situation.

IV

So at last I arrive at the core of my topic. What now? How could or should or might poets, or some poets, respond to the situation in which the country finds itself? What I say must of course be tentative. There would be no point in trying to engage in prophecy, or prediction: in the realm of artistic production weather forecasting is a rather uncreative exercise. It would be still less sensible to attempt to be prescriptive: even if one believed that poets were in the habit of taking instructions from critics, an AUETSA conference can hardly be thought of as a special meeting-place for poets, a sort of South African Mount

Parnassus. All that one can do, humbly, with a full recognition of the vulnerability of one's vantage-point, is to suggest possibilities – a terrain to be explored.

In South Africa, as in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, many things have begun to change far more quickly than most people expected. There is nothing mysterious about what has happened here; everything has been explicable, logical, largely inevitable. All that has been surprising is the 'fast forward' effect. (This was brought about partly, of course, by the sudden and wholly untraditional introduction of a certain amount of real intelligence into governmental decision-making.) At the same time, as many people have stressed, the process of change has not yet progressed very far; in this respect South Africa is very different from Czechoslovakia or Hungary. Most elements of apartheid society remain intact.

Everything in South Africa has had to adjust to a new situation, or the beginnings of a new situation; and clearly literature is bound to do so too, but particularly poetry, or at least that strand of poetry that encompasses the important area of socio-political reality. But what might 'adjustment' mean in this context?

Fairly clearly it cannot mean anything simple. As we proceed from a time of angry confrontation towards one of chastened negotiation, some poets may well focus in new ways on themes of self-analysis and social analysis, of understanding, compassion and reconciliation. And this tendency must surely be welcomed. (One of the poets who has already tried to move in that direction is Chris Mann.) But the contemporary situation is complex, and in fact even the notion of negotiation is complex. A wise and skilful negotiator (I am thinking of this from the point of view of the oppressed, but what I say may apply to some extent to negotiators on both sides) – a wise negotiator will take up an attitude that is appropriate to the present state of affairs, and will keep the past alive in ways that are relevant to the issues that are to be dealt with. Indeed the whole weight of the past needs to be remembered and to be spoken for – the past with its injustices, its suffering, its indignation, its anguish, its fierce resoluteness – but this needs to be done in a way that is not conservative or retrogressive but creative and forward-looking.

Now obviously a negotiator is usually a rather different sort of person from a poet – political workers, let us say, tend to have rather different agendas from cultural workers – but it is obvious that there are likely to be parallels. Both negotiators and poets attempt to make progress though imaginative acts.

But the poetry of negotiation represents but a part of the overall process of intellectual and cultural change and renewal. There are

many other areas in which poets may work. Here is a list of suggestions made by Andries Oliphant, the editor, in a recent issue of *Staffrider*. (His manner is rather more prescriptive than mine is, but his list is helpful.)

From the point of view of the cultural forces aligned to the national democratic struggle a number of tasks remain to be accomplished. The most important of these are the expansion of the cultural struggles of workers; the strengthening of the role of women in the production of culture; the advancement of the conceptualization and creation of a national people's culture and the establishment of informed, supportive and rigorous forms of cultural criticism. These daunting challenges and the organizational work they imply hardly represent the full range of cultural tasks that will confront South Africans in the years ahead. (*Staffrider*, Vol. 9 No. 1, p. 2)

And he is right: further possibilities present themselves. Most of the challenges that Oliphant enumerates have already begun to be taken up, in various ways by various people or groups of people; but there are many significant things to be done.

How exactly, though, is the present situation different from that of the past? In one important respect: the moment of negotiation, or of pre-negotiation, allows a certain opening-up, a slackening of tension, a broadening of what often had to be intense and narrow. Oliphant (again in a slightly too prescriptive way) makes the point crisply:

In this regard it will be important to broaden the scope, themes and content of South African culture to include the full range of human experiences. It is increasingly becoming clear that narrow sectarian and dogmatic notions in literature and culture will have to make way for the actualization of freedom in creativity. It is by asserting the full complexity of human life that the value of freedom acquires its cogency. (*Staffrider*, Vol. 9 No. 1, p. 3)

What he is suggesting is that there may well be something of a merging of the two poetic traditions that I have sketched – the tradition of socio-political involvement, represented in this paper by James Matthews, and the tradition of detachment in the interests of personal fulfilment, represented by Hardy and Yeats. If that can be achieved, we may be on the way to a really new South Africa, a South Africa in which we shall not need such a sharp division, such an apartheid, between commitment and enjoyment, between doing what one must and doing what seems most human.

But let us not forget that there is a long long way to go – as the poor and the oppressed know very well. It is always the privileged who are

in danger of imagining that utopia has almost arrived – business people, and politicians of a certain sort, and maybe even a few of those who attend AUETSA conferences. And perhaps that is a subject for poetry too.

V

I want to conclude by reading and making some comments on two pieces of poetry. These pieces are several years old and are quite well known; to many of you they will not come as a surprise. But I want to look at them in the context of some of the issues that I have raised in this paper.

The first poem is by Ingrid de Kok. It begins with an ironical epigraph, as did Yeats's 'Politics', and it has certain features in common with Yeats's poem. And yet it does not renounce politics; it brings politics and human feeling together. It shows that the feelings that are apt to run through and behind socio-political happenings are deeply human, especially for women. For it is also a profoundly and creatively feminist poem: perhaps women understand and can point the way towards that thorough integration of feelings and of people that would bring a new South Africa to birth.

Small Passing

For a woman whose baby died stillborn, and who was told by a man to stop mourning, 'for the trials and horrors suffered daily by the black women in this country are more significant than the loss of one white child.'

I

In this country you may not
 suffer the death of your stillborn,
 remember the last push into shadow and silence,
 the useless wires and cords upon your stomach,
 the nurse's face, the walls, the afterbirth in a basin.
 Do not touch your breasts
 still full of purpose.
 Do not circle the house,
 pack, unpack the small clothes.
 Do not lie awake at night hearing
 the doctor say 'It was just as well'
 and 'You can have another.'
 In this country you may not
 mourn small passings.

See: the newspaper boy in the rain
will sleep tonight in a doorway.
The woman in the busline
may next month be on a train
to a place not her own.
The baby in the backyard now
may soon be sent to a tired aunt,
grow chubby, then lean,
return a stranger.
Mandela's daughter tried to find her father
through the glass. She thought they'd let her touch him.
And this woman's hands are so heavy when she dusts
the photographs of other children
they fall to the floor and break.
Clumsy, she moves so slowly
as if in a funeral rite.

On the pavements the nannies meet.
These are legal gatherings.
They talk about everything, about home,
while the children play among them,
their skins like litmus, their bonnets clean.

II

Small wrist in the grave.
Baby no one carried live
between houses, among trees.
Child shot running,
stones in his pocket,
boy's swollen stomach
full of hungry air.
Girls carrying babies
not much smaller than themselves.
Erosion. Soil washed down to the sea.

III

I think these mothers dream
headstones of the unborn.
Their mourning rises like a wall
no vines will cling to.
They will not tell you your suffering is white.
They will not say it is just as well.
They will not compete for the ashes of infants.
I think they may say to you:
Come with us to the place of mothers.

We will stroke your flat empty belly,
 let you weep with us in the dark,
 and arm you with one of our babies
 to carry home on your back.

(De Kok, pp.61–63)

It is a striking and beautiful poem. It is clearly a poem that takes us on the road towards negotiation and new modes of understanding. But it is far from being triumphalist: it is a poem about suffering and about the feeling and the fellowship that can be generated by these experiences. And it is not a description of the new South Africa: in the land that the poem depicts the tragic fact of a stillborn birth mingles with the pain inflicted by an unjust and inhumane regime.

The second piece, by Serote, an extract from a longer poem, was written almost ten years ago, long before the present socio-political situation could have been predicted in any detail. Some people may find it a surprising passage to introduce in the context of negotiation and of a new South Africa: it may be judged to be too tough, too militant, too obviously representative of a rather earlier stage in the struggle. But I have chosen it because it seems to possess not only reasonableness and morality but even a kind of gentleness at the heart of its toughness. It is militant; it was written at a time when the armed struggle was at its height; it talks of the warriors of the present and of the past. But the battle is clearly for what is just, and it is clear that the battle is going to be won; in fact in the end it may even be something of a pushover. It is a tough poem; militancy is tough; but negotiation is tough too.

...
 no we say
 no we say in one voice
 no more we say
 no more of the bad time.
 the past is here now
 the present sings the solos of our warriors
 it sings it in a choir of our voices
 like a strong wind a hurricane
 the present sings our song from the past
 like a mad storm
 no!
 no one will have plenty when we have nothing
 we say
 this is a big land as big as the sky
 we can live here

we say
 all of us can have enough from this land
 we say like our warriors said
 from a long time past
 this is our land
 we say
 we will live like this is our land
 we say
 like our warriors said
 and time knows them like we know them
 no they said
 and we say no!
 yes there will be a better time because we say so
 there will be a better time because like our warriors
 we make a better time and many of us know that we can
 and must
 there will be a better time
 we say
 time has run out for our bad time
 we say we learnt from bad times to make time better -
 like a boiling pot spills water
 our country spills us now
 we ask for sleeping space in foreign lands
 sleep sleepless nights in prison
 die like dogs thrown away in the streets
 spill our blood like dirty water
 so it seems my little friend, so it seems
 here is a better time
 we learn
 from the knowledge of the world
 that we have to know what we want
 and what cannot be wanted by anyone
 and from the dark of the past we create a better time
 bright like a brand new day
 a day we make
 a better time
 ah
 there *will* be a better time made by us.

(Serote, pp. 143–144)

The passage is interesting in a number of ways. Many black poets have used an 'I' which is obviously representative, but here Serote openly says 'we'. He is speaking on behalf of many people, and the powerful simplicity of the movement of the poem and of most of its vocabulary give it an authentic ring of the people's voice. One notices

too the way in which the poem brings together a sense of inevitability and a continuing awareness of the fact that people must create their own futures. In earlier poems Serote developed both of these themes: the feeling that human value and freedom must triumph in the end was evoked in, say, 'For Don M. – Banned', while the need for an alert self-awareness and self-assertion was expressed in a poem like 'What's in this Black 'Shit'.' But in the poem that we are looking at the life-giving passing of the seasons is apprehended from within: the 'we' of the poem have become the manifestation of inevitability. And yet there is no question of relaxing and letting history happen; at every moment 'we' need to act thoughtfully, sensitively and strenuously:

and from the dark of the past we create a better time
bright like a brand new day

It is a movement from night into day; but 'we' control the movement:

a day we make
a better time
ah
there *will* be a better time made by us.

It will happen; it has to; but 'we' have to do it.

It is a powerful piece of writing which in my view succeeds in doing justice to a powerful phenomenon. But why do I see all this as negotiating poetry, as poetry also which negotiates the obstacles, the difficulties of the present? Because the people that Serote pictures, the 'we', with their unanswerable reasoning and their unstoppable movement, are the motive force behind all South African negotiations. They are what everyone else needs to recognize, to come to terms with, perhaps to become a part of.

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Aesthetics, Ideology, and the Position of the Critic

Anton van der Hoven

Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption: all else is reconstruction, mere technique. Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and its crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light. But [such knowledge] is also the utterly impossible thing, because it presupposes a standpoint removed, even though by a hair's breadth, from the scope of existence . . .

Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*

To speak of aesthetics, of ideology, or even of aesthetics and ideology might be misleading for it could be taken to imply that these concepts form two categories in the history of human thought whose content and usefulness can be separately defined and defended, and whose internal structures and development hide difficulties that will, in time, be resolved by wise scholarship. But the discourses we must use are rarely so amenable to our desires.

I

Aesthetics is characterised by two apparently contradictory impulses. On the one hand it is often constructed as a unique, untranslatable discourse which is distinct from all other ways of describing the world, and which can only be understood by those who are able to respond appropriately. But, on the other, aesthetics is also often characterised as essentially democratic, a universal discourse which desires to be open to all people and to comprehend human experience in its full variety and particularity. These two competing desires – to be restricted and to be open – turn out, in the end, to be complementary aspects of the same discursive strategy.

Clive Bell's *Art* (1913) may seem a poor example of aesthetic discourse; it is certainly not one of the most carefully considered texts in the tradition. But reading Bell is instructive because his account reveals this pattern, but with a clear emphasis on the first, the

restrictive, impulse. In his opening chapter, Bell argues that the purpose and value of art can only be explained by reference to a particular attitude that human beings have towards it:

The starting point for all systems of aesthetics, must be the personal experience of a peculiar emotion. The objects that provoke this emotion we call works of art. All sensitive people agree that there is a peculiar emotion provoked by works of art.¹

Bell does not mean 'that all works provoke the same emotion'; works of art patently differ and he would like to include the full variety of visual art – 'pictures, sculptures, buildings, pots, carvings, textiles, &c., &c.' – within his definition (p. 17). Nevertheless there must, he suggests, be some hidden common characteristic which makes all aesthetic responses recognisably of the same kind:

What quality is common to Sta. Sophia and the windows of Chartres, Mexican sculpture, a Persian bowl, Chinese carpets, Giotto's frescoes at Padua, and the masterpieces of Poussin, Piero della Francesca, and Cézanne? Only one answer seems possible – significant form. In each, lines and colours combined in a particular way, certain forms and relations of forms, stir our aesthetic emotions. (p. 17)

The remainder of *Art* is Bell's philosophical account of the importance of the aesthetic emotion, and an historical and descriptive analysis of the 'significant form' that he believes occasions it.

What is most striking about this theory is its formalism: Bell's hypothesis clearly leads him to privilege the discussion of artistic form, and to ignore the discursive content that is specific to individual works, even in the visual arts. It should not be at all surprising, therefore, soon to find him arguing that in order 'to appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs, no familiarity with its emotions'; while for the artist, on the other hand, representation or description is 'irrelevant' and 'often a sign of weakness' (pp. 27–29).

But Bell's aesthetic formalism also performs another perhaps more significant task. If its most visible effect is to privilege certain terms within aesthetic discourse then, precisely because they are terms which are given special significance within the discourse, formalism also privileges aesthetic discourse itself. Bell's argument, in other words, cannot be reduced to a tendential description of what is important within aesthetic discourse; it is also an attempt to erect a barrier between the aesthetic and other discourses and so to separate (and perhaps defend) the aesthetic from competing attempts to describe the world.² This second desire is most evident in the circular

structure of Bell's argument: he defines art in terms of the aesthetic emotion it evokes while at the same time defining the aesthetic emotion as that which is aroused by art. The point about this argument cannot be simply that it is circular, for it is openly so, and the introduction of a third term such as agreement among 'all sensitive people' hardly prevents this, since 'sensitive' in this context, can only be a synonym for 'capable of feeling aesthetic emotion.' Rather, the point is that its circularity functions not as a flawed logical argument but as a device for establishing and securing the discourse by insisting that it has its own ground and its own internal logic.³ Formalism, in other words, is a discursive strategy used to establish and defend the discourse itself; it is a device for privileging the aesthetic, for separating it and closing it off from other modes of discourse.

Of course it is possible to read even Bell's text another way, and to see in his argument something of the openness that is also associated with the aesthetic. If the phrase 'all sensitive people' seems to point towards a privileged 'Bloomsbury' cult, it is also a distant cousin of the universal aesthetic impulse that is supposed to reside in all of us; and one should not completely ignore the 'ethnographic moment' – the desire to be open to the aesthetics of other cultures – that is visible in this as it is in many other modernist accounts of the aesthetic. Nevertheless, to many who argue for the centrality of art, Bell's formalist bias will seem extremely limiting – appropriate, perhaps, to some modernist sculpture or painting, but of scant value when applied to other aesthetic endeavours such as literature.

Indeed defences of literature have typically concentrated on the second of the two impulses within aesthetic discourse. Wordsworth's Preface to the Second Edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) is a leading example. Not only does Wordsworth argue with an explicit sense of his immediate social context – one in which 'a multitude of causes, unknown to former times, are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and, unfitting it for all voluntary exertion, to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor' – but his answer to the question 'What is a poet?' is clearly intended to shape poetry into the democratic antidote for all who suffer this modern fate:

He is a man speaking to men: a man, it is true, endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind; a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him; delighting to contemplate similar volitions and passions as manifested in the goings-on of the universe, and habitually impelled to create them where he does not find them.⁴

This passage is central to romantic aesthetics and has often been analysed. What makes it important to the present discussion is its democratic impulse and its evident openness to the full range of experience. Unlike Bell who wants to reduce the aesthetic to a single, incorrigible emotion, Wordsworth argues that the goal of the aesthetic is to help us appreciate and understand all of human nature. And far from being a member of a coterie of sensitive people, Wordsworth stresses that the poet is representative of all human beings. If the poet appears to be endowed with 'a more comprehensive soul,' that is only because most people have been alienated from their natural humanity by the 'savage torpor' of the modern age.

Thus when Wordsworth comes to offer his definition of poetic discourse it is clearly intended to be anything but formalist:

Aristotle, I have been told, has said, that poetry is the most philosophic of all writing: it is so: its object is truth, not individual and local, but general and operative; not standing upon external testimony, but carried alive into the heart by passion; truth which is its own testimony, which gives confidence and competence to the tribunal to which it appeals, and receives them from the same tribunal. (p. 454)

The difference between this definition of poetry and Clive Bell's reckless eschewing of content seems enormous. Wordsworth, after all, speaks of 'truth' which is 'operative' in the world, whereas Bell speaks of an unique emotion which is the result of aesthetic contemplation and appears to be defined by its difference and separation from worldly concerns. But if Wordsworth's vision of a full and fully human truth gives the aesthetic a content and social mission that seem alien to Bell's formalism, his argument also reveals the same pattern, a kinship which accompanies their obvious differences. If poetry must embody truth, it is certainly not the truth of the traditional moralist, let alone that of the politician. It is a special, 'internal' truth which is itself the product of aesthetic experience; and it is a truth ratified by that same aesthetic experience rather than in any other way. Thus although Wordsworth argues that the truths found in art must be 'general and operative,' they can, paradoxically, only achieve this through being particular and autonomous – two crucial qualifications which ensure that the aesthetic remains privileged through its isolation from other discourses.⁵

This is not because Wordsworth is secretly a formalist who, despite his overt social concerns, is always more concerned to preserve the aesthetic as a privileged realm, a unique discourse for what Bell implies are the 'sensitive' few. Rather it is because the desire to attain such a special truth leads inevitably to formalism. If the aesthetic is to have any permanent value, this argument goes, it must lie precisely in

its desire to be a complete and completely humane discourse whose aim is to unite all human beings. But such an ultimate language would, by definition, need to be above other discourses and immune to their probings. Insofar as it strives towards being complete, then, aesthetics must also strive towards being self-sufficient; in Wordsworth's terms it must become a language that gives 'confidence and competence' to the very same tribunal to which it appeals. In short, formalism is not simply a tendential argument within aesthetics; it is also nothing less than the means and consequence of the aesthetic desire for a humane and universal discourse.

II

But is it possible to construct a discourse which will be unique and self-sufficient as well as completely humane? One way to pursue the question is by looking at Kant, whose *Critique of Judgement* (1790) is one of the first and perhaps the most sustained examinations of this possibility that we have. This may seem surprising since Kant is often regarded as the father of aesthetic formalism rather than as a theorist of the aesthetic as an humane ideal. But although the lineaments of subsequent formalism can indeed be found in Kant, it is wrong, in my opinion, to follow theorists like Frank Lentricchia and to see him merely as a formalist.⁶ Rather than simply to offer a tendential aesthetic, Kant's chief concern is to analyse the nature of aesthetic discourse itself. Consider, for example, his discussion of the second moment of the beautiful. Judgements of taste, he writes, are necessarily '*subjective*':

there can be no rule according to which anyone is to be forced to recognize anything as beautiful. We cannot press [upon others] by the aid of any reasons or fundamental propositions our judgement that a coat, a house, or a flower is beautiful. People wish to submit the object to their own eyes, as if the satisfaction in it depended on sensation; and yet if we call the object beautiful, we believe that we speak with a universal voice, and we claim the assent of everyone, although on the contrary all private sensation can only decide for the observer himself and his satisfaction.⁷

Here Kant outlines an argument that parallels those that I have suggested can be found in other exponents of modern aesthetics: he attempts to construct it as a discourse which is both singular and universal. Like most writers in this tradition, Kant insists that aesthetic experience is always an individual experience which cannot be reduced to or circumscribed by external rules. And as we found in Bell's defence of the aesthetic emotion, Kant argues that aesthetic

discourse must be grounded in the incorrigible experience of the individual. In section I of the *Critique of Judgement* he puts it like this:

In order to distinguish whether anything is beautiful or not, we refer the representation, not by the evident understanding to the object for cognition, but by the imagination (perhaps in conjunction with the understanding) to the subject and its feeling of pleasure or pain. (p.37)

Kant calls such judgements judgements of taste (*geschmack*). This may appear to put him at odds with Wordsworth who would, most decidedly, have objected to the term: immediately prior to his definition of poetry as the embodiment of a special aesthetic truth, Wordsworth admonishes 'those who converse with us as gravely about a taste for Poetry . . . as if it were a thing as indifferent as a taste for rope-dancing, or Frontinac or Sherry' (p.454). But by using the term 'taste' Kant is far from wanting to define art in terms of the leisure activities of either the traditional or the new urban élite.⁸ On the contrary, by locating aesthetic judgement in taste he is concerned to locate it in the incorrigibility of the individual whose 'feeling of pleasure or pain' cannot be reduced or done away with. The person who judges must feel 'quite *free* as regards the satisfaction which he attaches to the object' (p.46); as Wordsworth also argues, the aesthetic response must always be spontaneous, 'carried alive into the heart by passion.'

But Kant certainly does not want to reduce aesthetic experience to mere individual reaction. Again, like Wordsworth (and, as I have indicated to a lesser extent, even like Bell) he would like such judgements to 'speak with a universal voice'; and this idea of universality is Kant's version of the second desire in aesthetic discourse, the drive to truth and completeness. What this means for Kant, however, is that he must establish a notion of completeness which is genuinely humane, having its origins in the human beings that it encompasses, and which is different from the external, imposed completeness that he associates with the objective sciences. Kant does this by drawing attention to what he sees as the logic which governs aesthetic judgements: 'If we call the object beautiful,' he writes, 'we believe that we speak with a universal voice, and we claim the assent of everyone.' 'We believe,' 'we claim,' – both statements can only be ratified in a social form; one might say, then, that for Kant aesthetic judgements are always 'socio-hypothetical,' awaiting completion in social consensus.

Thus although Kant maintains that all judging is 'the faculty of thinking the particular' (p. 15), what makes it a valuable, perhaps even viable, human activity 'is the ability of the aesthetic judge, critic, or

spectator to rise above everyday interests by claiming an experience of aesthetic form to which all men can (in principle) give their assent' (p. 121). The logic of aesthetic discourse is not to

say that everyone will agree with my judgement, but that he *ought*. And so common sense, as an example of whose judgement I here put forward my judgement of taste and on account of which I attribute to the latter an *exemplary* validity, is a mere ideal norm, under the supposition of which I have a right to make into a rule for everyone a judgement that accords therewith, as well as the satisfaction in an object expressed in such a judgement. (p. 76)

What Kant reveals here is the extent to which this special language, this discourse of the individual and particular, depends on a general social vision: aesthetic judgment achieves its goal not by reaching the truth but by escaping from error into a 'common sense.' This idea is developed in section 40 of the third critique: 'Of Taste as a Kind of *Sensus Communis*':

under the *sensus communis* we must include the idea of a sense *common to all*, i.e. of a faculty of judgement which, in its reflection, takes account (*a priori*) of the mode of representation of all other men in thought, in order, as it were, to compare its judgement with the collective reason of humanity, and thus to escape the illusion arising from the private conditions that could so easily be taken for objective, which would injuriously affect the judgement.⁹ (p. 136)

The 'maxim of human understanding' that can be derived from this is that when making aesthetic judgements we must 'put ourselves in thought in the place of everyone else,' and

however small may be the area or the degree to which a man's natural gifts reach, yet it indicates a man of *enlarged thought* if he disregards the subjective private conditions of his own judgement, by which so many others are confined, and reflects upon it from a *universal standpoint* (which he can only determine by placing himself at the standpoint of others). (pp. 136–137)

Thus Kant argues that the focus on untranslatable, individual experience is also, in the end, a focus on the society at large, since what distinguishes the individual is an ability to escape the confines of idiosyncrasy and to sympathise with others.

It is scarcely surprising, then, that Hannah Arendt finds in Kant's notion of aesthetic judgement the basis for a political philosophy. Arendt argues that aesthetic judging is directly akin to making moral or political judgements because, unlike scientific or (perhaps)

philosophical judgements, they are not characterized by seeking to compel agreement, but operate in a different modality, which she describes as 'the hope of *coming* to an agreement with everyone else eventually.'¹⁰ In this sense judging is always normative and social: the former because it functions with an ideal in mind, the latter because that ideal remains hypothetical until the agreement of all human beings can be secured. Moreover, Kant himself appears to view political judgement in a similar way. In his brief commentary on the French revolution, he suggests that modern life is characterised by the emergence of the individual as 'spectator' – the person whose moral life is crucially affected by knowledge of political events in which he or she is not directly involved. Thus the significance of the French revolution does not lie solely in the 'deeds and misdeeds' that make up the event itself, but also and perhaps even more significantly, in the way in which those who are at some distance respond to it. Despite the 'suffering and horrors' occasioned by the revolution, there is, Kant suggests, a 'universal yet disinterested sympathy for the players on one side against those on the other, even at the risk that this partiality could become very disadvantageous for them if discovered'; and it is this sympathy which suggest to him that humanity is moral, 'at least in predisposition.'¹¹

Kant's implicit argument that aesthetic and political judgments are similar because they both demand that we put 'ourselves in the place of everyone else' is not the only thing that is significant here. What is equally important is the extent to which Kant makes it clear that such judging is a feature of the modern world which, in his view, is characterised by the simultaneous presence of the irreducible individual and the social ideal – the two contrary limits within which judging must operate. In other words, it is the absence of a universal discourse and the permanent political structures that would accompany it which calls forth aesthetic and political attempts to imagine one.¹² It is 'precisely when yardsticks of judgement disappear that the faculty of judgement comes into its own.'¹³

In this sense we must surely say that any genuine aesthetic judgement is always also a social judgement predicated on an understanding of society. Even Kant, who is so often called the father of modern formalism, does not remain *within* the language of the aesthetic for, as he himself makes clear, the category of the aesthetic is defined by the limits of modern society and its ideal is an attempt to transcend the contraries that those limits contain. Far from the discourse having been founded on the supposed facts of aesthetic experience, then, the experience itself must also be understood as a creation of the discourse. And the combination of individual freedom and universal agreement which modern aesthetic argument attempts

to negotiate is nothing other than the central dilemma of the Enlightenment which Kant himself described as 'man's release from his self-incurred tutelage.'¹⁴

It is therefore neither a travesty nor an accident but a working out of part of the logic of the discourse, that Schiller, Kant's most influential early reader, locates the emergence of the aesthetic – which he defines as a mode of understanding that combines 'the highest autonomy and freedom' with a sense of 'the greatest fullness of existence' – firmly within the development of the modern state.¹⁵ For Schiller the ideals of ancient Greece have, in modern times,

made way for an ingenious clock-work, in which, out of the piecing together of innumerable but lifeless parts, a mechanical kind of collective life ensued. State and Church, laws and customs, were now torn asunder; enjoyment was divorced from labour, the means from the end, the effort from the reward. Everlastingly chained to a single little fragment of the Whole, man himself develops into nothing but a fragment; everlastingly in his ear the monotonous sound of the wheel that he turns, he never develops the harmony of his being, and instead of putting the stamp of humanity upon his own nature, he becomes nothing more than the imprint of his occupation or of his specialized knowledge. (p. 35)

To argue, as Schiller does, that 'aesthetic education' will save us from this predicament is not without its irony: in the face of the fragmentation of both psyche and society he, like many other romantic theorists, presents one more fragment, the aesthetic (which is assiduously distinguished from other discourses) as the means to overcome it. As Lukacs argued in *History and Class Consciousness*, far from achieving its lofty ideals, the aesthetic tends merely to reproduce the reification that it was designed to combat by 'aestheticising' the world, making the subject 'purely contemplative,' and 'annihilat[ing] "action."' ¹⁶

My argument is only in partial agreement with this conclusion: historically the aesthetic has indeed failed to problematise itself sufficiently as a discourse within society, preferring either to retreat into the realm of private experience or to 'mythologise the discovery of intuitive understanding' into the salvation of all humankind.¹⁷ But the failure of aesthetics to establish itself as a universal discourse (or as an unequivocal guide to 'action') is a failure that must overtake all discourses that involve judgement. This, it seems to me, is one lesson to be learnt from Kant's insistence that aesthetic judging will only be complete and completely reliable once there is universal agreement. Another of equal importance is that the aesthetic is established in the absence of such agreement: the common sense to which it appeals is only an hypothetical ideal. The aesthetic, in other words, derives its

desire and its power from a lack of universal agreement. Thus it is impossible to understand the category of the aesthetic without also coming to terms with social difference and disagreement, without, in short, coming to terms with ideology.

III

If the aesthetic can never achieve the status of a complete and therefore completely authoritative discourse, if, in order to remain true to its values, it can at best only base its 'truths' on the hypothetical agreement of the *sensus communis*, does that not suggest that the ideological critique of the aesthetic will be a more rewarding endeavour? Ought we not, therefore, to place our allegiance in what may, in the end, be the more secure discursive realm of the social sciences whose task is precisely to analyse 'common sense,' and to reveal the aesthetic for what it is: a discourse whose very inner logic has been shaped by its separation from the social context in which it originated?

This was certainly the view of an influential body of French and English literary theorists who from the 1960s through to the early 1980s held that aesthetics should indeed be replaced by a form of ideological analysis. Arguing under the primary influence of Althusser, their project was to expose the worldliness of the aesthetic through the means of a discourse which aspired to be a more comprehensive and authoritative 'science of society.' Perhaps the most influential version of this position is to be found in the writings of Pierre Macherey, and it is on his argument that I will focus my discussion.

Macherey's *A Theory of Literary Production* (1966) offers an interesting and at points valuable re-insertion of the text into the social world. In direct opposition to the proponents of the aesthetic, Macherey suggests that aesthetics can never understand itself because it is nothing more than 'the mythology of its own myths.'¹⁸ Instead, the critic or theorist who aspires to a true understanding of art needs to stand *outside* aesthetic discourse and to see it in the fullness of its relationship to the surrounding world. Basing his discussion on literature, Macherey argues that neither the form nor the content discernible within any text is sufficient to account for that text's meaning, which will always to a significant degree depend on what has not been said. 'Thus the book is not self-sufficient; it is necessarily accompanied by a *certain absence* without which it would not exist' (p.85). From this insight Macherey derives his idea of de-centered form: because a text always has significant silences of which it is

'forbidden' to speak, its true form, far from being completely contained within the aesthetic, is always 'de-centered,' or dispersed, shaped as much by the world around it as by its own autonomous rules.

If this is so, then clearly the critics and theorists ought to confront the text with more than aesthetic presuppositions; they must also bring a knowledge of the silences that surround texts and allow these a voice in their critical discourse. In order to sustain this position, however, Macherey must have a view both of ideology – the way in which texts are shaped by their surroundings – and of the position of ideological critique. Macherey defines ideology as discourse which evades reality because it is always 'captive of its own limits':

By definition, an ideology can sustain a contradictory debate, for ideology exists precisely in order to efface all trace of contradiction. Thus an ideology, as such, breaks down only in the face of real questions: but for that to come about, ideology must not be able to hear these questions; that is to say, ideology must not be able to translate them into its own language. In so far as ideology is the false resolution of a real debate, it is always adequate to itself as a *reply*. Obviously the great thing is that it can never answer the question. In that it succeeds in endlessly prolonging its imperfection, it is complete; thus it is always equally in error, pursued by the risk that it cannot envisage – *the loss of reality*. (p. 131)

This is a powerful picture of the limitations that haunt any discourse which has become too self-absorbed. In particular, the autonomy of the aesthetic which was, for its advocates, a mark of its singular value, has here devolved into nothing more than blindness, an evasion of reality which, in the commonly understood manner of ideology, protects partial interests by concealing the contradictions of actual social reality. Only 'in the action of a radical criticism . . . *the critique of the ideological*,' Macherey contends, will genuine analysis be able to proceed (p. 131).

Yet Macherey does not reduce art to ideology in this movement. On the contrary, he suggests that the function of art is 'to present ideology in a non-ideological form,' and even if this does not completely redeem art, it places it in the middle of a triadic distinction – 'illusion, fiction, theory' – which does accord it a limited value (p. 133, p. 65). Works of art certainly do not offer 'true knowledge (a scientific knowledge),' but neither can they be reduced to mere ideology:

Science does away with ideology, obliterates it; literature challenges ideology by using it. If ideology is thought of as a non-systematic ensemble of significations, the work [of art] proposes a *reading* of these significations, by combining them as signs. Criticism teaches us to read these signs. (p. 133)

By imposing artistic form on its material, giving a 'determinate representation' to the 'non-systematic ensemble of significations' that make up the language of everyday life, the aesthetic can help reveal the contradictions within ideology (p.63).

But by making this claim Macherey reproduces, albeit in a modified form, the very self-understanding of the aesthetic that he was intent to criticize. Even while he distances the aesthetic from true theoretical knowledge, his maintaining of a distinction between the aesthetic and illusion is a weakened defence of the former. That this is in a crucial sense a *representation* of traditional aesthetic argument is made even clearer when we consider the way in which Macherey talks about literary discourse. Literature 'imitates the everyday language which is the language of ideology,' and, he continues,

we could offer a provisional definition of literature as being characterised by this power of parody. Mingling the real uses of language in an endless confrontation, it concludes by *revealing* their truth. Experimenting with language rather than inventing it, the literary work is both the analogy of a knowledge and a caricature of customary ideology. (p.59)

In his attempt to promote this view in the English literary establishment, Terry Eagleton clarifies and reiterates the structure of this Althusserian argument:

Science gives us conceptual knowledge of a situation; art give us the experience of that situation, which is equivalent to ideology. But by doing this, it allows us to 'see' the nature of that ideology, and thus begins to move us towards that full understanding of ideology which is scientific knowledge.¹⁹

Macherey and Eagleton clearly intend to re-evaluate the aesthetic, but rather than constituting a radical break, their argument is itself based on a 'caricature of customary ideology.' Traditional aesthetic argument grants special power to the aesthetic precisely because it 'reveals' rather than abstractly states the truth, and because it allows people to 'experience' and, on the basis of this experience, to offer their free assent to the reality created by the artist. Here Macherey and Eagleton re-evaluate the aesthetic, while nevertheless still relying on the traditional description of how the discourse works. To be sure, we must all borrow our discourses from history, but this particular representation of the traditional aesthetic argument is telling precisely because its advocates claim that it is *not* in any way the product of the aesthetic tradition which they insist is forever bounded by an horizon of 'illusion' (p.55). In their hands, they believe, aesthetics has been fully explained by 'scientific theory.'

Indeed, the whole of Macherey's project, his attempt to found a 'radical criticism,' is predicated on a sense of theory as the alternative, 'scientific' voice of truth. 'Theory' is, however, Macherey's most untheorised term, a singular silence in his own text, which leads him to mythologise 'reason' in a way directly analogous to the aesthetic mythologising which his discussions have done so much to critique. At times 'theory' is merely glossed by other words, as Macherey does when he claims that

a theoretical and therefore rigorous knowledge of the literary work must depend on a logic, in the general sense of the word . . . Obviously this logic could not be based exclusively on the study of literary works; it would have to derive from all those other forms of knowledge which also pose the question of the organisation of the multiple. (p.42)

At others, he discusses 'theory' in terms which are already so weighted as to constitute a circular rather than consecutive argument: Macherey connects his vision of theory to 'Spinoza's notion of liberation' which argues that we will only attain our freedom if we impose order on the 'impotent, inadequate, incomplete, torn and empty discourse' of illusion. The only way to do so is to engage in 'theoretical activity' which 'fixes language and makes it speak in concepts as the means of acquiring knowledge' (p.63). This fixed, rational language is found in the speech of the 'learned,' and

forms the horizon of their discourse, a rationality of concepts solidly rooted in definitions; and the power of the definition is such that even in their most violent disagreements they know – because of the stability of their concepts – that they are disagreeing about the same thing . . . the language of science and the language of theory is fixed, though obviously not in a state of arrested perfection. (p.55)

The untheorised certainty of this assertion, its all but blatant transmuting of intellectual desire into reality, its sheer élitism – these surely need no further comment.

That this is indeed the dominant tendency in Macherey's work is confirmed by his subsequent writing. When he reformulated his project in the light of Althusser's later and most influential essay, 'On Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' (1969), Macherey (this time writing with Etienne Balibar) argued that literary theorists should transfer their attention from the still too aesthetic questions surrounding the relationship between art and its conditions of production, to the more firmly social issues surrounding the work's ideological effects in the society in which it is read. But if this new focus suggests that there has been some movement towards democra-

tizing knowledge, readers will be disappointed because the effect of this re-orientation is to argue that even to grant literature this minimal value is to truck with the notion of aesthetics which is itself a product of bourgeois ideology.

The later work, then, moves away from what might be called a residual aestheticism of the earlier theory: instead of giving literature even circumscribed access to objectivity, it is inserted in the structure of ideological state apparatuses whose task is to legitimize the hegemony of the bourgeois state. In accordance with this over-riding principle Macherey and Balibar argue as follows:

The Marxist conception thus inscribes literature in its place in the unevenly determined system of real social practices: one of several ideological forms within the ideological superstructures, corresponding to a base of social relations of production which are historically determined and transformed, and historically linked to other ideological forms.²⁰

Despite its increased emphasis on the actual social position of the aesthetic, however, and despite its salutary warning that the 'aesthetic effect of literature' can indeed work as an 'ideological domination-effect,' this later theory does nothing to alleviate the idealism of a view founded on little more than a voluntaristic belief in the self-sufficiency of its own knowledge (p. 93).²¹ And the means to such a belief is, of course, to construct a formalised discourse which allows no other voice but its own. The authors do, it is true, continue the passage I have just quoted with the following disavowal:

Be sure that in using the term ideological forms no reference to formalism is intended – the historical materialist concept does not refer to 'form' in opposition to 'content,' but to the objective coherence of an ideological formation – we shall come back to this point. (p. 82)

But surely the point to be made here, and as I have already argued in my discussion of aesthetic discourse, is that formalism is always a double movement which not only emphasises form, but does so in order to establish a boundary between itself and other discourses. Formalism, in other words, lies not only in an emphasis on forms or patterns at the expense of content, but also in the insistence on a particular determination of content, which is what Macherey and Balibar do when they declare that they have ascertained the 'objective coherence' of the ideological formation. And, indeed, the authors frequently do 'come back' to this determination, this belief in the autonomous value of their discourse, most tellingly in their concluding paragraph:

The effect of domination realised by literary production presupposes the presence of the dominated ideology within the dominant ideology itself. It implies the constant 'activation' of the contradiction and its attendant ideological risk – it thrives on this very risk which is the source of its power. That is why, dialectically, in bourgeois democratic society, the agent of the reproduction of ideology moves tendentially via the effects of literary 'style' and linguistic forms of compromise. Class struggle is not abolished in the literary text and the literary effects which it produces. They bring about the reproduction, as dominant, of the ideology of the dominant class. (p.97)

If aesthetic discourse is nothing other than bourgeois ideology, then one might at least expect to hear the voice of those whom it attempts to dominate. But even this alternative voice is given only the most marginal entry into their discussion: a dominating ideology logically implies the presence of a dominated one, but the dominated are never allowed to speak since the dominating ideology 'thrives' on their presence, the risk of an other which, it seems, is never a real other. And both, most significantly, are characterised as ideology which, in its turn, is always opposed to the formally complete discourse of the social scientist who alone has the power to specify the 'objective coherence' of the social world.²²

It may appear, this time to the advocates of ideological critique, that I have chosen a bad example. This kind of thinking was, after all, born in the heady days of Paris, 1968 when intellectual struggles seemed to be one and the same with popular ones. But my point has not been to find a tendential example which can be used as grounds for dismissing ideological critique; still less is it my intention to forestall Macherey's criticism of the ideology of the aesthetic which has in the past turned a blind eye to its own 'foundation and pretext,' and indeed often continues to do so (p.131). On the contrary, I have attempted to use Kant's aesthetic argument in order to show the extent to which the aesthetic is necessarily a socially based discourse which can only ground itself in a conception of the *sensus communis*. And once one has acknowledged the inevitability of this move, then ideological critique also becomes inevitable: for if 'common sense' can function as an ideal – what we share as human beings – it is also, as Gramsci and others have convincingly argued, the territory in and over which competing hegemonies do battle.

My point, rather, is to draw attention to what I am arguing is the logic of ideological accounts of the aesthetic and, in particular, to the extent to which they must employ the same structure as that which I have suggested can be found in aesthetic argument. Just as the aesthetic is characterised by a twin ideal to open up to reality and to impose a final form on it, so in ideological analysis one can observe

the same pattern. It is precisely the formal desire of aesthetic discourse which Macherey criticises: for him its autonomy and closure must always be spurious, a 'loss of reality.' Accordingly, he promises to offer a discourse that is properly open to reality. But in the end, and not unlike the very versions of the aesthetic that he is intent to criticize, Macherey constructs a highly formal discourse which remains just as closed to reality, offering instead its own voluntaristic assertion of value and its own circular definitions. Rather than address the aesthetic he merely submits it to the authority of his own discourse, one which operates in self-imposed isolation and with its own internal definition of truth.

Paradoxically, then, it is precisely in the unwitting repetition and parody of aesthetic discourse visible in his earlier work that Macherey remains closer to social reality than in his overt discussions of the 'ensemble of social practices' that are the subject of his later work (p.83). His discussion of the ideology of the aesthetic, far from transcending aesthetic discourse, at first fails to repress it fully and finally ends up reproducing it as he, in his turn, aestheticizes the world according to his own theoretical conceptions. This similar pattern reveals the potential for similar error: ideological discourse, like aesthetic discourse, can never, except through bad faith, attain the ideal towards which it strives because it shares in the logic of judgemental discussion. If it is impossible to stand *inside* aesthetic discourse because it relies on social judgements and is therefore always open to ideological analysis, then it is equally impossible to stand *outside* of the aesthetic simply because it exists as a significant, perhaps even regulative, example of the structure of judging in our world. Aesthetics is a term whose very meaning makes it a suitable subject for ideological discussion; ideological critique, on the other hand, must always traffic in the realm of the aesthetic.

IV

I seem, then, to have arrived at a point often associated with deconstructive thought, at what one might, following Derrida's famous early essay, call the 'theorem' of aesthetic discourse.²³ It would go something like this: aesthetic discourse has a tendency to completeness which is impossible because it can only attain that by suppressing the ideological moment that is part of its very foundation; but conversely, ideological critique, which also strives towards completion, can never be more than a representation or parody of the aesthetic desire which, ironically, is the very thing which it has been constructed to diagnose.

But recognising the radical incompleteness of both discourses, their implication the one in the other, does not mean that one need or should adopt any of the intellectual positions popularly associated with deconstruction: the despair of metaphysical pluralism which maintains that if no discourse is complete, then 'anything goes'; the happier pluralism of those who, following one understanding of Levi-Strauss and Derrida's *bricoleur*, move eclectically and at will between the different methods of analysis; or the retreat into sophisticated linguistic analyses of critical discourse. I would, in conclusion, like to focus on what seem to me to be some of the possibilities and responsibilities created by my analysis of aesthetic and ideological critique. In order to do this I shall turn to Adorno and, in particular, to the analysis of 'aesthetic debate,' that he presents in his correspondence with Walter Benjamin.

In 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,' Benjamin argues (amongst other things) that the advent of film constitutes a major break in the history of the aesthetic. Traditional art is deeply 'embedded in the fabric of tradition' and achieves its authority and autonomy through the 'cult' or 'ritual' which surrounds it.²⁴ Because it is mechanically reproducible film, on the other hand, introduces a new art form which demystifies the magical 'aura' surrounding the unique, individual art objects of the past. Far from sharing this 'parasitical dependence on ritual,' film allows us to 'separate art from its basis in cult'; indeed, 'its social significance, particularly in its most positive form, is inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic aspect, that is, the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage' (p.224). Thus, Benjamin argues, the advent of film has brought about a radical democratization of the aesthetic:

Mechanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses towards art. The reactionary attitude toward a Picasso painting changes into the progressive reaction toward a Chaplin movie. The progressive reaction is characterized by the direct intimate fusion of visual and emotional enjoyment with the orientation of the expert. (p.234)

And he clearly hopes that this, in turn, will lead to equally dramatic social change as an 'unexpected field of action' becomes visible:

by exploring commonplace milieus under the ingenious guidance of the camera, the film, on the one hand, extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; on the other, it manages to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action. Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and

burst this prison world asunder by the dynamite of a tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go travelling. (p. 236)

In a letter written in March, 1936, Adorno takes issue with Benjamin's 'extraordinary study.'²⁵ The body of this letter is Adorno's empirical critique of Benjamin's characterisation of film and traditional art. If the bourgeois work of art does indeed rely on a 'magical element' which may serve a 'counter-revolutionary function,' that does not mean that it cannot also carry within it the seeds of utopian belief: the bourgeois work of art, Adorno writes in a now famous phrase, 'crosses the magical with the sign of freedom' (pp. 64–65). On the other hand, neither will it do any good to mystify film, which in Adorno's opinion is often characterised more by 'infantile mimeticism' than critical montage, and shaped more according to the 'immanent irrationality' of the culture industry than to any progressive tendency in the proletariat.

In this argument history would appear to be on Adorno's side; but the extent to which either of his criticisms is fair to Benjamin's overall view is not directly germane to my argument. What I find particularly interesting is the way in which Adorno does not simply attempt to confront each view individually, but also to mediate the opposition that Benjamin constructs between progressive cinema and traditional art. For there can be no doubt that Benjamin's distinction, although it purports to take place within the aesthetic, contrasting one art with another, is isomorphic with the opposition between art and ideology that has been our subject. On the one hand, Benjamin objects to (what was then) conventional art because, far from being democratic and universal, it remains 'embedded in the fabric of tradition,' crucially dependent on and subservient to traditional hierarchical social forms. Film, by contrast, is offered as a genuinely popular culture, an aesthetic alternative which meets the political requirements of the emerging democratic age. Interestingly, film is described in terms that are wholly consonant with the ideals of the romantic aesthetic tradition. It is not just its popularity or accessibility that makes film an essentially democratic medium; Benjamin argues that, through the mediation of the camera, film institutes 'testing' processes – it incorporates an 'unconscious optics' (p. 237) – which will liberate viewers from 'cult values' by 'permit[ting] the audience to take the position of the critic' (p. 228). This view of every person as critic is clearly intended to be part of the democratic vision of a truthful, shared discourse, which is also a fulfillment of the traditional aesthetic ideal in which the 'whole person' is realised: 'for the first time – and this is the effect of film – man has to operate with his whole living person, yet foregoing its aura' (p. 229).

It is important to note that Adorno shares Benjamin's belief that the 'liquidation of art,' is central to aesthetics, that (to put it less cryptically) he agrees that the emergence of the aesthetic as a distinctive, largely private realm was made necessary by the nature of the prevailing society (p.64). As Horkheimer writes in an essay from the same period,

in his esthetic behavior, man so to speak divested himself of his functions as a member of society and reacted as the isolated individual he had become . . . in order to withstand the plastic surgery of the prevailing economic system which carves all men to one pattern.²⁶

But to acknowledge this does not mean that one can ignore history or the materiality of the present moment: one cannot assume that the millennium is imminent, that a popular aesthetic form will be its foundation, or that the intellectual is a transparent witness whose chief task is to announce its arrival.

Thus for Adorno, Benjamin's misconstruing both of bourgeois art and of the cinema, his twin appeal to 'the immediacy of interconnected aesthetic effects' and to 'the actual consciousness of actual workers,' is not simply an empirical mistake; it is also an indication of a deeper desire to 'tear apart' two necessary and unavoidable poles of discourse in modern society, those represented by intellectuals such as Benjamin on the one hand, and the proletariat on the other (p.67).²⁷ In the last section of his letter, Adorno addresses this opposition by examining its politics. To demonize the (largely intellectual) appreciation of high art and unconditionally elevate the new 'art of the people' may, on the surface, appear to be genuinely liberatory, but it is in fact based on an illegitimate double movement which grants the proletariat the power to speak with the voice of truth and, while appearing to obliterate the voice of the intellectual, actually grants it an unwarranted power to recognise that truth and, Adorno contends, to create new 'tests' in the place of the old social 'taboos' that Benjamin's essay is so concerned to discredit (p.67). If the ultimate goal of the social revolution is the abolition of fear then, Adorno concludes,

we need have no fear of it, nor need we ontologize our fear. It is not bourgeois idealism if, in full knowledge and without mental prohibitions, we maintain our solidarity with the proletariat instead of making of our own necessity a virtue of the proletariat, as we are always tempted to do – the proletariat which itself experiences the same necessity and needs us for knowledge as much as we need the proletariat to make the revolution. I am convinced that the further development of the aesthetic debate which you have so magnificently inaugurated, depends essentially

on a true accounting of the relationship of the intellectuals to the working-class. (p.67)

The recognition of necessity and of the workings of desire in one's own discourse ought to temper and guide the claims of any intellectual endeavour; to fail in this will mean to fall short of the ideal that has been nurtured by both aesthetic discourse and ideological analysis.

But this last quotation from Adorno's letter suggests several further points. Benjamin, he argues, tries to elide what is in the end an essential part of the discussion: the position of the discussants and their relationship to social consensus. As Adorno was to put it some twenty years later, although it is the duty of the intellectual to attempt to see the world 'as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light,' it is equally important to realise that to gain such a perspective

is also the utterly impossible thing because it presupposes a standpoint removed, even though by a hair's breadth, from the scope of existence, whereas we well know that any possible knowledge must not only be first wrested from what is, if it shall hold good, but is also marked, for this very reason, by the same distortion and indigence which it seeks to escape.²⁶

Such a recognition need not lead to paralysis. If it is designed to encourage an awareness of the limitations of discourse – the paradox that 'the more passionately thought denies its conditionality for the sake of the unconditional, the more unconsciously, and so calamitously is it delivered up to the world' (p.247) – it is also an attempt to encourage a more thorough and critical understanding of the sociality of discourse. In particular, Adorno demands that both aesthetic and ideological debate develop a much stronger sense of what he calls 'the relationship of the intellectuals to the working class,' not, of course, as part of a programmatic ideological analysis of the social position of intellectuals in society (an approach which all too frequently assumes the possibility of transparent intellectual endeavour), but as a strategy which recognises their inevitable difference as both a limiting and enabling condition within the world as it has thus far been constructed. Finally, Adorno urges us to accept the demands thus placed on intellectual endeavour: recognising the complex and always compromised position of the critic is not an occasion for despair, but another step in the attempt to remain true to the ideal that is at the very heart of both aesthetics and ideological analysis.

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NOTES

1. Clive Bell, *Art* (New York: Putnam's, 1958), p.17. All subsequent quotations from Bell are taken from this text and page references appear in the body of the essay.
2. Although arguing about a specific literary critical movement rather than about art itself, Ann Jefferson clearly illustrates this dynamic of formalism when she writes that 'Russian Formalism represents one of the earliest systematic attempts to put literary studies on an independent footing, and to make the study of literature an autonomous and specific discipline' ('Russian Formalism,' *Modern Literary Theory: A Comparative Introduction*, 2nd Edition, ed. by Ann Jefferson and David Robey (London: Batsford, 1986), p.25). By emphasising formal aesthetic analysis, Russian formalism also aims to separate and privilege literary studies.
3. Matthew Arnold's 'The Study of Poetry' (1880) is a celebrated example of this insistence. Arnold devotes a large portion of his essay to a discussion of what constitutes great poetry. To discover this class of the 'truly excellent,' he argues, one can do no better 'than to have in one's mind lines and expressions of the great masters, and to apply them as a touchstone to other poetry' (*Poetry and Criticism of Matthew Arnold*, ed. A. Dwight Culler (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1961), p.311). It is true that Arnold offers his own examples of writing which possesses 'the very highest poetical quality,' but he, like Bell, has relied on a circular argument: one must use great poetry in order to discover great poetry. And, equally significantly, he openly refuses to offer any other kind of argument:

Critics give themselves great labour to draw out what in the abstract constitutes the characters of a high quality of poetry. It is much better simply to have recourse to concrete examples; - to take specimens of poetry of the high, the very highest quality, and to say: The characters of a high quality of poetry are what is expressed *there*. They are far better recognised by being felt in the verse of the master than by being perused in the prose of the critic. (p. 313)

Arnold valorizes ostensive definition and 'recognition' rather than argument because offering argument will mean leaving the realm of the aesthetic and submitting it to what he regards as an alien and therefore inevitably 'abstract' discourse.

4. William Wordsworth, 'Preface to the Second Edition of *Lyrical Ballads*' in *Selected Poems and Prefaces*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1965), p.449, p.453. All subsequent quotations from Wordsworth are taken from this text and page references will appear in the body of the essay.
5. In his definition of poetry Wordsworth does, it is true, appeal to Aristotle and through him to the classical account of art as the rendering of general truths about human nature. But this should not be taken as evidence of an essential continuity in definition; although I cannot argue it here, the circular definition of 'truth' that Wordsworth offers is as foreign to the classical conception as it is typical of the romantic and post-romantic aesthetic that is the subject of this paper.
6. In *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), Lentricchia sees Kant as a formalist for whom 'art yields no knowledge and is by its very nature incapable of doing so':

His intention of isolating the distinctive character of the aesthetic experience was admirable, but his analysis resulted in mere isolation. By barring that experience from the truth of the phenomenal world, while allowing art's fictional world entertainment value, he became the philosophical father of an enervating aestheticism which ultimately subverts what it would celebrate (p.41).

By simply assuming that one can 'isolate the distinctive character of the aesthetic experience,' Lentricchia avoids rather than discusses Kant's aesthetic. In the terms developed in this essay, Lentricchia appears to be arguing about the apportioning of value within aesthetics rather than about what initially interests Kant, the very possibility of constructing aesthetic discourse.

7. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, Translated by J.H. Bernard (New York: Hafner Press, 1951), p.50. Unless otherwise indicated, all subsequent quotations

from Kant are taken from this text and page references will appear in the body of the essay.

8. This is made particularly clear in the definition of the beautiful that Kant offers in the first moment of the third critique:

Taste is the faculty of judging of an object or a method of representing it by an entirely disinterested satisfaction or dissatisfaction. The object of such satisfaction is called beautiful. (p.45)
9. Kant uses two terms to refer to 'common sense' in the *Critique of Judgement*. The first is *Gemeinsinn* which, as Cassirer points out, Kant defines as a 'common sense, by which we understand not any outer sense but the effect resulting from the free play of our cognitive faculties,' and which must be 'presupposed' before we can make a judgement of taste' (H. W. Cassirer, *A Commentary on Kant's Critique of Judgement* (London: Methuen, 1938), p.211). Inexplicably, however, Cassirer simply ignores the second sense of the term which, as Kant himself suggests, is 'essentially different' and more akin to the notion of a 'common understanding which people sometimes call common sense (*sensus communis*)' (Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, p. 75). The importance of this latter meaning for aesthetic judgement can be gathered from Hannah Arendt's discussion of section 40 of the third critique: "The term "common sense" meant a sense like our other senses – the same for everyone in his very privacy. By using the Latin term [*sensus communis*], Kant indicates that here he means something different: an extra sense – like an extra mental capability (German: *Menschenverstand*) – that fits us into a community' (Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, ed. by Rudolf Beiner (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), p. 70).
10. Hannah Arendt, 'The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and Political Significance,' quoted by Rudolf Beiner, 'Hannah Arendt on Judging,' in Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, p. 105.
11. Immanuel Kant, *Der Streit der Facultäten in drei Abschnitten* (1798), in *Sämmtliche Werke*, 7, (Leipzig: Leopold Voss, 1868), p. 399. The translation is partly my own and partly taken from Beiner who quotes some of the material (using Lewis White Beck's translation) in his essay in Arendt, *Kant's Political Philosophy*, p. 124.
12. At the beginning of his discussion of the French revolution Kant deliberately locates himself in the modern political period: 'The importance of this happening,' he writes, 'does not necessarily lie in the deeds or misdeeds of people through which what is great is made small or what is small made great, with old shining state structures disappearing and others taking their place rising, as if by magic, from the depth of the earth. No, not at all . . . : (Kant, *Streit der Facultäten*, p. 399).
13. Rudolf Beiner, 'Hannah Arendt on Judging,' p. 96.
14. Immanuel Kant, 'What is Enlightenment?' in Kant, *On History*, ed. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963), p. 3.
15. Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man: In a Series of Letters*, ed. by E. M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 189. The subsequent quotation from Schiller is also taken from this text and a page reference is included in the body of the essay.
16. Georg Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (London: Merlin, 1971), p. 140.
17. Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 140.
18. Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. Geoffrey Wall (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 60. Unless otherwise indicated all subsequent quotations from Macherey are taken from this text and page references will appear in the body of the essay.
19. Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1976), p. 18.
20. Pierre Macherey and Etienne Balibar, 'On Literature as an Ideological Form,' in *Unrulying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, ed. Robert Young (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 82. All subsequent quotations from Macherey and Balibar are from this text and page references will appear in the body of the essay.
21. It should be added that the authors do make passing reference to history, but only to deny its materiality: their discourse is the the latest contribution to the 'relatively autonomous process of the history of science' (p. 83).

22. It may, perhaps, be argued that Macherey and Balibar, like Althusser, are using the term 'ideology' in a non-normative or descriptive way and do not imply any denigration of the 'ideology' of the dominated classes. In my opinion, this view is belied by the clear privileging of vanguardist, 'scientific' thinking in their work: unless one adopts the position of the social scientist, who alone can impose form on the ideological mire that is bourgeois society, one will be nothing but a victim of the domination effects of the ideological state apparatuses. But my main argument is more general than this: precisely because it represents the way in which other human beings think, it is impossible to use the term 'ideology' in a non-normative sense. The debate between those who see ideology as a neutral, descriptive term and those who see it as an evaluative one is actually a debate between those who recognise that the term is always already evaluative and those who want to shroud this evaluative moment in the fantastic garb of their own supra-evaluative rationality.
23. Jacques Derrida, 'Structure Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,' in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. by David Lodge (London: Methuen, 1988), p.117.
24. Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,' in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 223. All subsequent quotations from Benjamin are taken from this text and page references will appear in the body of the essay.
25. Theodor Adorno, 'Correspondence with Benjamin,' *New Left Review*, 81, (September–October, 1973), p.63. Unless otherwise indicated, all subsequent quotations from Adorno are taken from this text and page references will be incorporated in the body the essay.
26. Max Horkheimer, 'Art and Mass Culture,' in *Literary Taste, Culture and Mass Communication*, Vol.12, ed. by P. Davison, R. Meyersohn, and E. Shils (Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1978–80), p.3.
27. It is not difficult to find the workings of this desire in Benjamin's essay. Faced with the contradiction between his ideal cinema viewer and the reality, Benjamin must construct this rather bizarre account of movie going: 'film makes . . . cult value recede into the background not only by putting the public in the position of the critic, but also by the fact that at the movies this position requires no attention. The public is an examiner, but an absent-minded one' (pp.240–241).
28. Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from a Damaged Life* (London: NLB, 1974), p.247. The remaining quotations are from this text and page references will appear in the body of the essay.

My argument is also indebted to two other more recent discussions of this problem: Edward Said's account of Lukacs' view of theory in 'Travelling Theory' (*The World, the Text, and the Critic* (London: Faber, 1984), pp.230–234) and Gayatri Spivak's more explicit discussion of this problem in *In Other Worlds* (New York: Methuen, 1987) and elsewhere. In 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' Spivak makes a point that seems to me to be directly applicable to a critical assessment of Benjamin's position: 'one responsibility of the critic,' she writes in her critique of Foucault, 'might be to read and write so that the impossibility of such interested individualistic refusals of the institutional privileges of power bestowed on the subject is taken seriously' (*Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (London: Macmillan, 1988), p.280).

'The Humanity of the Senses'

Terry Eagleton's Political Journey to *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*

Jean-Philippe Wade

Perry Anderson recently paid tribute to the political generation that emerged in Britain in the late 1960s, arguing that its 'persistent dynamic helped to ensure that a radical public sphere did not lose ground even in a time of deepening political reaction',¹ and he went on to single out the career of Terry Eagleton – 'its most fertile writer' – as 'expressive' of this generation. While many of his generation have, in the ensuing years, turned to one or other variety of 'post-Marxism' or 'post-structuralism', or simply surrendered to the power of Capital, Eagleton has remained resolutely a Marxist, and from the publication of his immensely influential book, *Criticism and Ideology* (1976) onwards,² he has constantly surprised his many readers with a series of books and articles which have invigorated the terrain of Marxist literary and cultural theory. Eagleton's most recent book, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*,³ is no exception to this, and I believe the book is indispensable reading, not only for literary critics and socialists, but for all those who continue to desire an alternative future of radical democracy. I will approach this recent study by outlining the 'political journey' Eagleton has travelled in his theoretical works from *Criticism and Ideology* to the present, pointing to his continually changing readings of aesthetic ideology, so that his early wholesale dismissal of the aesthetic eventually gives way to the view that Marxism is its most capable defender – an important new articulation of materialist ethics.

I

For Eagleton, writing in the wake of May 1968, when the post-War social-democratic consensus was in crisis,⁴ the revolutionary task was, in *Criticism and Ideology*, to produce a critique of the Left-Reformist ideologies of the 'early' New Left whose project was seen to be implicated within that consensus. His target was a leading figure of that earlier generation, Raymond Williams, particularly his study, *Culture and Society 1780–1950*.⁵ For in that book Williams

re-read the Romantic 'culture and society' tradition (the British version of Continental 'aesthetic' discourse) in order to extract the 'radical elements' (eg. 'community') from a deeply conservative lineage in order to produce an organicist socialist humanist discourse tied to the reformist policies of a Labour corporatism ultimately accommodating to bourgeois hegemony.⁶

Against this Eagleton invoked May 1968 Marxist-Leninist 'class politics' (which for him meant membership of the Trotskyite International Socialists/Socialist Workers' Party) whose revolutionary aim was to *destroy* the social-democratic 'totality'. If proletarian culture has been irremediably 'contaminated' by bourgeois ideology, then we must look forward to the 'creation of new values which is in fact only *enabled* by revolutionary rupture'(p. 27), and thus the only position from which such a radical critique can be launched is, in Althusserian vein, that of the 'scientific' discourse of the Marxist theorist/Party, which alone can escape the legitimizing 'false consciousness' of ideology, placed as it is outside of that repressive totality.

The specificity of the 'aesthetic' as an autonomous discourse is recognized (and here Eagleton breaks with a cruder Marxist criticism for which the fictional text simply reproduces the dominant ideology), but only to place that autonomy back into ideology: 'the ideological produces within itself that internal distanciation which is the aesthetic' (p. 177). It is precisely its autonomy from ideologies that enables the fictional text to produce a 'second order' totalising resolution of potentially disruptive discourses in the interests of hegemonic consensus.

This immensely productive account of the relation between the 'aesthetic' and ideology nevertheless remains within what Frederic Jameson has called the 'negative hermeneutic'⁷ of ideology-critique, lacking that is a 'positive hermeneutic' which would rescue from the text a Utopian impulse which prefigures the 'collective unity' of the future.⁸ And the *political* reason for this can be traced to that conjunction of an Althusserian functionalist concept of ideology (stabilizing the exploitative social relations of the all-embracing totality) and the highly 'economistic' and 'workerist' line of the SWP. For without a notion of ideological struggle (of 'oppositional' cultures and counter-hegemonic strategies), without any sense that some ideologies may be more valuable than others, without a Gramscian sense that systemic political change can only follow from a profound *cultural* change within civil society, and lacking a recognition that the values of an ideology are not exhaustively explained by its contemporary class allegiance, the task of the Marxist critic was wholly to break the mystifying hold of the dominant ideology over the working

class by revealing its actual contradictions, which are themselves ultimately determined by the contradictions of the Base. Suitably demystified, the working class would then be unleashed into class struggle. There is undoubtedly a rather crude Base/Superstructure model at work here that owes more to the text's Trotskyitism than its Althusserianism (which is in a contradictory relation to it), in that the 'creation of new values' which will follow the proletarian revolution will thus be determined from below, from the newly dominant class, and thus Eagleton must remain 'silent'⁹ on the valuable, 'utopian' aspects of the 'aesthetic'.

A combination of Althusserian theory and May 1968 Marxist-Leninist politics therefore produced a valuable 'negative' critique of the 'aesthetic', implicating it within the hegemonic project of capitalism, but at the same time it rode roughshod over any potentially 'positive' (or dialectical) contributions it could make to any counter-hegemonic strategy.

Eagleton's following book, *Walter Benjamin or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (1981)¹⁰ is written in the wake of the collapse of the revolutionary expectations of May 1968: ironically, the crisis of social-democracy led in 1979 to the rise of 'New Right' Thatcherism, determined to dis-articulate the inherited political consensus in favour of a new hegemonic discourse feeding off pre-corporate Victorian ideologies of economic individualism. Eagleton's book is therefore pervaded by both a political and personal despair, and the turn to Benjamin is a deliberate attempt both to make sense of this new conjuncture, and to find a way of overcoming its attendant political pessimism.

The book is haunted by the gloomy fate of 'Western Marxism', 'bred largely by a history of proletarian defeat',¹¹ and if Benjamin found in the barren landscape of the seventeenth-century German Baroque *Trauerspiel*, with its 'frozen time' bereft of all 'historical dynamic' and 'drained of all immanent meaning', a way of understanding his own early twentieth-century Germany, then Eagleton will similarly read this as a portrait of his own 'bad new days'.

Eagleton's severe critique of Raymond Williams in *Criticism and Ideology* can be read in Lacanian terms as a resistance to the lures of a Left-Reformist interpellation¹² which was threatening to place Eagleton within the Symbolic of late capitalism, in favour of a strategy that pinned its hopes on the destruction of that Symbolic in the name of a new proletarian order. Hence Eagleton's assault on the mystifying nature of such 'organicist' ideologies. In the later text however, the key figure is Benjamin's melancholist, who remains 'disconsolately marooned in the symbolic order . . . theoretically demystified but to the same degree impotent' (Benjamin, p. 42).

Given this bleakly unrevolutionary conjuncture, the text asks how a Marxist cultural intellectual must act in order not to surrender to political pessimism, and two broad answers are provided. The first flows from the recognition, no doubt occasioned by the electoral victory of Thatcherism, that encouraging the crisis of social-democracy does not necessarily lead to the emergence of a revolutionary working class, and that what was therefore missing in Eagleton's earlier 'class politics' of struggle at the Base was a sense of the positive role of the 'superstructure' in building a progressive oppositional culture. Now what Britain lacks, unlike Bolshevik Russia or the Weimar Republic, is a 'revolutionary culture', and thus Eagleton argues that what is vitally necessary is the 'cultural emancipation of the masses' from bourgeois hegemony, and this entails a vital theoretical shift from Althusser's 'functionalist' account of ideology to Gramsci's emphasis upon cultural struggle, which crucially emphasizes the need to fight *within* the terrain of the capitalist Symbolic. A 'revolutionary literary criticism' would:

dismantle the ruling concepts of 'literature', reinserting 'literary' texts into the whole field of cultural practices. It would strive to relate such 'cultural' practices to other forms of social activity, and to transform the cultural apparatuses themselves. It would articulate its 'cultural' analyses with a consistent political intervention. It would deconstruct the received hierarchies of 'literature' and transvaluate received judgements and assumptions; engage with the language and 'unconscious' of literary texts, to reveal their role in the ideological construction of the subject; and mobilise such texts, if necessary by hermeneutic 'violence', in a struggle to transform those subjects within a wider political context. (Benjamin, p.98)

The second answer deals with overcoming the personal paralysis of melancholy in a world 'sundered from transcendence', and for Eagleton this importantly means a turn to the affirmation of *utopian* discourse, which he discovers both in Bakhtin's 'liberating laughter' of the satiric carnival, from which emerges 'the potential for a golden age' (Bakhtin's 'utopian' carnival is itself an apposite way of depicting the 1960s), and in Benjamin's messianic notion of *Jetztzeit*, that apocalyptic moment of humanity's redemption. Moreover, such a crippling discrepancy between 'ought' and 'is' can be turned to some sort of advantage if that conflict is lived ironically, and Eagleton finds such therapeutic humour in Brecht's 'joke of contradiction and its pleasurable release' (p.170) and in Marx's satiric *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. If 'Western Marxism' is equally strong on political pessimism and utopian hoping, then what is lacking is the 'third term' of the revolutionary Party, and Eagleton concludes his

book with an affirmation of Trotsky – 'one of the two greatest Marxist revolutionaries of the twentieth century' (p. 174) – and his theory of 'permanent revolution'.

To figure contemporary Britain in the shape of the Baroque Trauerspiel or of Benjamin's fascist Germany is to offer an extremist ultra-Leftist analysis of modern Western societies as bleakly 'totalitarian' as that found in the Frankfurt School or in Althusser's similar portrait of the wholly 'administered society'. Such an exaggerated account of a reality emptied of all value is of course in part a consequence of the intensity of the hopes engendered by May 1968, which would then produce an equally intense despair, while Eagleton's interest in Benjamin's revolutionary apocalypticism can be similarly seen to emerge from a view of the present as utterly meaningless. Within this conceptualization can also be traced a Trotskyite misrecognition that advanced capitalism in crisis will inevitably turn to fascism (signalled in late-1970s Britain by the rise of Thatcherism and various fringe fascist groups), an analysis remarkably naive about how the bourgeoisie actually maintains its hegemony in advanced Western formations. Furthermore, Eagleton continues to refuse any 'positive' reading of the bourgeois cultural inheritance, focusing instead on the artists of the revolutionary Left.

Nevertheless, *Walter Benjamin* is a valuable text, in the light of our narrative of a political journey a 'transitional' text, reconciling itself ultimately to the hard lesson of Williams's 'long revolution' of cultural transformation through a Gramscian critical engagement with inherited traditions in order to build a counter-hegemonic culture. Similarly, 'utopian' thinking is now recognized as offering a critically productive 'counter-image' to bourgeois society. If this transformation was the product of political defeat, it would nevertheless lead to a more sophisticated cultural politics, signalled by Eagleton's enthusiasm for the feminist movement.

Thus his *Literary Theory: an Introduction* (1983)¹³ resituates literary theory in the 'material practices, social relations and ideological meanings in which it was always caught up' (p.21), the argument being not only that since literary theory has always really been political, Marxism is in one sense doing no more than anyone else, but also that the liberal-humanist notion that reading literature 'makes you a better person' can only be rescued from its abstract naivete by the 'concrete and practical' discourse of Marxism, whose mode of analysis is also capable of revealing the questionable politics of other theories, and therefore:

Any method or theory which will contribute to the strategic goal of human

emancipation, the production of 'better people' through the socialist transformation of society, is acceptable. (p.211)

Here Marxism has become a 'radical' humanism, operating rhetorically on the terrain of an academically hegemonic liberal-humanist literary discourse (the book would appear to be aimed at 'any moderately enlightened student' (p.217) of literature); disarticulating that humanism from its 'suburban' middle-class location and re-articulating it as a discourse whose invigoration is dependent upon its acceptance of 'socialist transformation'. And while it continues to be vital to 'explore how the signifying systems of a "literary" text produce certain ideological effects', there are also "'utopian" uses of literature . . . and a rich tradition of such utopian thought which should not be airily dismissed as "idealist"' (p.212). The utterly degraded world of *Walter Benjamin* is now far more reasonably recognized as containing valuable discourses whose limiting class-belongingness does not preclude their contribution to socialist discourse, and the key discourse, which will be vital to *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, is humanism.

Eagleton's 1984 work, *The Function of Criticism*¹⁴ similarly unearths the *political* history of 'criticism', emerging in early eighteenth-century England as a cultural politics whose task was to consolidate a ruling-class alliance of the mercantile bourgeoisie and the aristocracy. Such a criticism was thus closely implicated in the construction of what Habermas has called the 'bourgeois public sphere', and according to Eagleton, 'in this ceaseless circulation of polite discourse among rational subjects, is the cementing of a new power bloc at the level of the sign' (p. 14).

The development of capitalism – the commodification of culture, the increasing intervention of the state in 'civil society', the rise of radical discourses – gradually erodes the 'public sphere', until we arrive at our contemporary malaise of criticism 'as a handful of individuals reviewing each other's books'. What is therefore needed is a 'proletarian' counter-public sphere which would enable a properly public (and 'traditional') function for the socialist critic, whose task, as in *Walter Benjamin*, is to encourage the development of such a counter-hegemonic culture by

re-connecting the symbolic to the political, engaging through both discourse and practice with the process by which repressed needs, interests and desires may assume the cultural forms which could weld them into a collective political force. (*The Function of Criticism*, p.123)

As with the earlier 'humanism', the bourgeois notion of the 'public sphere' is rescued from its limiting class interests to be productively

transformed into the model for a radical social consensus which takes seriously the notion of 'the free, equal interchange of reasonable discourse'. We have also arrived at a 'politics of the body', which Eagleton has gained from his strong interest in feminist theory and the work of Michel Foucault, and which will play a central role in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. In his recognition of authentic 'needs and desires' (p.120), which are then 'repressed' by patriarchy or limitingly 'colonized' by consumer capitalism, Eagleton has travelled a great distance from that deep suspicion of 'lived experience' whose somatic body, in *Walter Benjamin*, 'historical materialism knows to be the very terrain of the ideological' (p.7), and whose 'illusions', in *Criticism and Ideology*, can only be countered by scientific theory.

For now the body, in its practical engagement with nature and with others, has *inherent* 'needs and desires' whose demands function as a potential challenge to bourgeois discourses and institutions. One can only contrast Althusser's functionalist-legitimation account of ideology, which then reduced 'culture' (as a 'whole way of life') to the ideological, with Eagleton's now far more complex model in which bourgeois hegemony is in continual struggle with an autonomous cultural existence whose potentially disruptive energies and needs must continually be wrestled into conformity by the dominant discourse. For in Modernity's shift from 'coercion' to 'hegemony', a new discourse of the rights and legitimate desires of the autonomous subject operates in perpetual potential rebellion against a regulating hegemonic discourse. A contradiction is identified, not so much between a hegemonic project and a recalcitrant populace, but *within* the larger hegemonic project of Modernity itself, which both encourages, and then seeks to control, the desiring subject. The difficulty of seeking to contain this contradiction is only intensified in a later consumer-capitalism dedicated to promoting the private pleasures of commodity consumption. As Frederic Jameson argues:

In other words, if the ideological function of mass culture is understood as a process whereby otherwise dangerous and protopolitical impulses are 'managed' and defused, rechanneled and offered spurious objects, then some preliminary step must also be theorized in which these same impulses – the raw material upon which the process works – are initially awakened within the very text that seeks to still them . . . (and) must necessarily involve a complex strategy of rhetorical persuasion in which substantial incentives are offered for ideological adherence. We will say that such incentives, as well as the impulses to be managed by the mass cultural text, are necessarily Utopian in nature.¹⁵

The progress of British post-1968 politics that I have sketched above led to a period of creative rethinking of the socialist project (whose

slogan inevitably became: 'Pessimism of the intellect; optimism of the will'), and nowhere was this more valuably seen than in the pages of the Communist Party journal, *Marxism Today*, during the 1980s. The central figure here was Gramsci, who enabled socialism to be re-articulated as a fundamentally *radical democratic* discourse which must build a counter-hegemonic alliance of the working class and the new social movements (feminism, the peace movement, ecology, blacks, gays, etc.) by a 'long march' of ideological struggle through the social institutions in order to transform them from within. Such a strategy was opposed to (and by) the 'class politics' of the older wing of the Communist Party (who controlled the Party newspaper, *The Morning Star*), and to (and by) Trotskyitism, and it was therefore inevitable that Eagleton would in the early 1980s leave the SWP and join the Labour party, which he had so ably derided in *Criticism and Ideology*, as part of a general movement of many Left intellectuals and activists in this period who recognized that the intellectual bankruptcy of the old Right of the Party opened a space for the Left to attempt to transform the Party from the inside.

II

A 'Western Marxism', faced with a politically docile working class, turns to the two spaces, both opened up by the Enlightenment, where 'negativity' is still to be found: Critical Theory and the Aesthetic. This is as true for Althusser as it was for the Frankfurt School. We are all too aware of the problems of this turn, of how Theory, confined to intellectuals, could not become a popular discourse of rebellion, and of how a defence of the Aesthetic meant for both Adorno and Althusser a focus on the 'significant' art of 'high' culture which again remained aloof from intervention into working-class existence, whose conformity was assured by the Culture Industry.

However, it does not seem to me necessary to describe 'Western Marxism' in such pessimistic tones, since the turn to the 'aesthetic', and therefore to the importance of culture in any socialist politics, may very well prove to be, in this age of hegemony, potentially the most successful strategy devised by 'Western Marxism'. For the Frankfurt School, the turn to 'high' culture was the consequence of a critique of the Culture Industry as an entirely hegemonic apparatus that removed all possibility of 'utopian' thinking by producing a 'mass culture' at one with the interests of capitalism.

A problem with this analysis, if one is searching for points of resistance, is that the account of how the mass media functions is dependent upon a 'bullet' model of indoctrination in which a passive

subject defencelessly receives an ideological message, and it cannot therefore theoretically entertain the notion of an active subject who may, from a more or less 'oppositional' position, 'negotiate' the message directed at him or her. Behind this is of course a sociology of an atomized urban mass, emptied of the firm values of a traditional culture and thus easily the victim of the degraded values of the Culture Industry.

The point to be made is that such a pessimistic 'Modernist' analysis is an unsuitable one for the present epoch of 'Post-Modernism', which has witnessed the increasing fragmentation of society into a plurality of sub-cultures, 'life-styles', discourses and 'new social movements' to the extent that subjectivity itself has become the site of a multiplicity of interpellations. This has not only problematised any simple class explanation of subjectivity, but has also foregrounded the symbolic realm of culture in any oppositional politics.

Such social diversity makes any 'totalising' strategy of a hegemonic project 'in which all the component parts are ruled by a *singular principle*'¹⁶ increasingly difficult to achieve. Indeed, the twin notions of a multiplicity of cultural values and practices potentially in conflict with bourgeois hegemony, and of the subject as the site of a multiplicity of potentially contradictory interpellations, makes untenable the sociology of the Frankfurt School and opens the way for a productive political intervention on the terrain of 'civil society' which Adorno was unable to countenance.

The moment of May 1968 (which perhaps signalled the appearance of such diversity) – in its radical democratic anti-authoritarianism, its 'Romantic' (sensuous and ecological) opposition to technological rationality, its festive collectivity, in its hostility to the repressive uniformity of the Cold War consensus – was not only a 'counter-cultural', ie., a fundamentally *ideological* rebellion (rather than one emerging solely from the shop-floor), but can be importantly seen as the beginnings of a critique of the Age of Hegemony itself. If Gramsci articulated the shift from feudal absolutism to capitalism as a movement from the age of 'coercion' to that of 'hegemony', then the generation of 1968 revealed the oppressiveness of such a 'singular principle' within that enlightened rational-democratic discourse. Nowhere is this critique more apparent than in the work of Michel Foucault, who would re-read the age of Freedom and Reason as the discursive disciplining of a potentially rebellious subjectivity, and whose influence is everywhere to be found in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. In this book Eagleton will similarly find, athwart its hegemonic function, an 'aesthetic' critique of the hegemonic which provides the basis for a theory of a post-hegemonic subjectivity and social consensus.

At a time when the prevailing economic and political models of Marxism are visibly crumbling, when the mass media has announced the 'death of communism', and socialists everywhere are understandably dejected and confused, it would appear that a vital element of any re-invigoration of the socialist project must necessarily involve a return to fundamentals, and in its concern for the centrality of 'ethics' to Marxism, Eagleton's book admirably does just this. Marx's radical reworking of the 'aesthetic' tradition produces an 'aesthetic' humanist discourse which will form the basis of what Eagleton calls a properly 'materialist ethics' whose goal of communism is now scandalously rewritten as the 'aesthetic society'. The bourgeois 'ideology of the aesthetic', divested of its repressive limitations, can now only materialize with the overthrow of capitalism.

The autonomization of what were in pre-capitalism the interlinked areas of knowledge, the 'ethico-political' and the 'libidinal-aesthetic' is for Eagleton a central problem of Modernity, despite the valuable liberation from the power of Church and State that this process entailed. Knowledge, separated from ethical considerations, imposes the modern division of 'fact' and 'value'; ethics becomes 'non-cognivist', no longer 'making reference to my actual place within the social relations of the *polis*, and the rights and responsibilities which that brought' (p.367); art, dis severed from its cognitive and ethico-political functions, enters the vacuous freedom of the market-place as a discourse of the sensuous, marginalized by a dominant reified instrumental rationality:

Now it exists, not for any specific audience, but just for anybody with the taste to appreciate it and the money to buy it. And in so far as it exists for nothing and nobody in particular, it can be said to exist for itself. It is 'independent' because it has been swallowed up by commodity production.

Art itself may thus be an increasingly marginal pursuit, but aesthetics is not. Indeed one might risk the rather exaggerated formulation that aesthetics is born at the moment of art's effective demise as a political force, flourishes on the corpse of its social relevance. Though artistic production itself plays less and less of a significant role in the social order . . . what it is able to bequeath to that order, as it were, is a certain ideological model which may help it out of its mess – the mess which has marginalized pleasure and the body, reified reason, and struck morality entirely empty. (p.368)

Eagleton's purpose then is not to offer a 'Marxist aesthetic', an alternative way of reading literature, but to examine how such an 'ideology of the artefact' becomes, within the discourse of aesthetics, a '*theory of ideological practice*'. For Hegel as much as the Earl of Shaftesbury, the emergent capitalist formation, torn between a

'rational' State which only recognizes the *abstract* equality of its subjects and a civil society of 'private' monadic individuals competitively pursuing economic goals, was by itself unable to produce a 'spontaneous' social cohesion, vital to bourgeois dominance. Content and form, the particular and the universal, the sensuous and the rational, the individual and society, lacked harmonious integration. The turn to the 'aesthetic' is therefore to discover there, in art's autonomy, in its concern for the sensuous needs and desires of the individual, and in its emphasis upon pre-rational, intersubjective communion, *models* for the bourgeois subject ('self-regulating and self-determining') and for social consensus. The historical shift from a 'coercive' feudalism required a new model of *hegemonic* social control, and the 'ideology of the aesthetic' would play a central role in paradigmatically articulating such a politics of the body. A depoliticized aesthetic will lead to an aestheticized politics.

This process can be traced in the founding work of German aesthetics, Alexander Baumgarten's *Aesthetica* (1750), which Eagleton reads as an attempt to shore up the late Absolutist State by attempting hegemonically to *accommodate* the 'affective subject' of an emergent bourgeoisie to which an abstract rationality remains dangerously indifferent. The aesthetic therefore emerges as a 'kind of prosthesis to reason, extending a reified Enlightenment rationality into vital regions which are otherwise beyond its reach' (p. 16), and its central function is to theorize (and here Eagleton finds similar themes in Rousseau's *Social Contract* and Hegel's 'concrete ethical life') the hegemonic disciplining of this emergent autonomous subject in order for the exteriority of absolute law (reason-power) to become internalized as the very expression of the sensuous needs of the individual subject:

The ultimate binding force of the bourgeois social order, in contrast to the coercive apparatus of absolutism, will be habits, pieties, sentiments and affections. And this is equivalent to saying that power in such an order has become *aestheticized*. It is at one with the body's spontaneous impulses, entwined with sensibility and the affections, lived out in unreflective custom. Power is now inscribed in the minutiae of subjective experience, and the fissure between abstract duty and pleasurable inclination is accordingly healed. To dissolve the law to custom, to sheer unthinking habit, is to identify it with the human subject's own pleasurable well-being, so that to transgress the law would signify a deep self-violation. The new subject, which bestows on itself self-referentially a law at one with its immediate experience, finding its freedom in its necessity, is modelled on the aesthetic artefact. (p.20)

This introjection of the Law, which Freud's concept of the Superego does much to explain, offering an account of a social totality uniting,

like the artefact, the abstractly rational and the sensuously specific, is for Eagleton 'hegemonic' rather than liberating precisely because 'unlike a law which the subject really does give to itself, in radical democratic style' (p. 27), the Law is here a 'singular principle' coming from elsewhere to incorporate the individual subject into its disciplining embrace.

A similar hegemonic discourse is identified in Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, where his 'aesthetic education', that refining of crude sensuous appetite (seen as the degraded desires of the middle class, and the 'animal satisfactions' of the workers) which would enable a community of self-regulating subjects, necessarily involves the 'collusion' of Reason with the sensuous experience it seeks to discipline, ideologically preparing its now 'aestheticized' subjects for their orderly place in the Rational/Absolutist State.

A central theme of Eagleton's study is of how ethical discourse turned to the aesthetic in the epoch of hegemony, and he begins with a study of the Earl of Shaftesbury and the British 'Moral Sense' philosophers. In the wake of the revolution of 1688, the stability of the emergent order (grounded in the alliance of the mercantile bourgeoisie and the aristocracy) depended upon its 'naturalization', and for Shaftesbury this meant a turn to concrete sensuous experience where a proper social consensus could be grounded. Drawing upon an aristocratic humanism (its self-delighting and self-determining individual), he becomes the 'central architect of the new political hegemony' by anchoring morality (seen as social cohesion and regulation) in the notion of a pre-rational 'compassionate community', a concept Eagleton traces all the way to Heidegger:

In our natural instincts of benevolence and compassion we are brought by some providential law, itself inscrutable to reason, into harmony with one another. The body's affections are no mere subjective whims, but the key to a well-ordered state. (p. 34)

Such an instinctual consensus, which is no less than the aestheticization of social existence, is to be achieved in the eighteenth century through the graceful (disciplinary) behaviour of 'virtue' and 'manners', which again is the internalization of an objective (moral) law which will enable social cohesion through the hegemonic construction of subjects who 'work by themselves'.

As we have earlier seen, for Eagleton morality loses its rational, public grounding in Modernity to become an autonomous discourse. For Alasdair MacIntyre¹⁷ what has been lost is a pre-capitalist moral discourse closely linked to ascribed social roles and the obligations and rights internal to them. Now, however, since no spontaneous

social consensus can emerge from a civil society 'given over to bourgeois utility and self-interest' (p.35), 'fact' and 'value', social existence and morality, have split apart. The solution to this dilemma is offered by the 'ideology of the aesthetic', where the self-referentiality of autonomous art becomes the very model for ethical discourse, which can itself therefore be seen as autotelic, its rational justification replaced by the ineluctable mystery of 'value': "'Moral sense" is equivalent to confessing that there is no longer any rationally demonstrable basis for value' (p.64). It is this problem that Eagleton will attempt to resolve, as we shall soon see, in his articulation of a 'materialist ethics'.

Post-Cartesian philosophy importantly concerns itself with the subject/object' division (the Hegelian problem of a transcendental subject which, in destroying all 'objectivity', finds itself undermining the very grounds of its self-definition), and Eagleton argues that Kant offers an 'aesthetic' solution to this in his *The Critique of Judgement*. In aesthetic judgement, the reification of both subject and object is overcome since 'objects are uncovered which seem at once real yet wholly given for the subject' (p.78), thus providing a model for the subject's 'pre-rational' centredness in reality, and for Eagleton this is no more than (in Lacanian and Althusserian terms) the 'imaginary resolution of real contradictions' producing

the consciousness, beyond all theoretical demonstration, that we are at home in the world because the world is somehow mysteriously designed to suit our capacities . . . the kind of heuristic fiction which permits us a sense of purposiveness, centredness and significance, and thus one which is of the very essence of the ideological. (p.85)

For Hegel, Kant's 'aesthetic' resolution of the alienated subject is 'ontologised' in his metaphysical-historical notion of the identity of the subject and object, and thus he has 'covertly aestheticized the whole of reality', and, like Kant, produced an ideological fiction of a subject purposively integrated with reality. Furthermore, Hegel's attempt (in his writings on religion) to found social cohesion on a 'concrete ethics' which can only emerge through the mediations of the affective *institutions* of civil society, signals a 'decisive shift in political theory from problems of *ideology* to questions of *hegemony*' (p.145), since it is now those very institutions which will carry the burden of ideological consensus.

Eagleton's purpose is to read the aesthetic tradition 'dialectically', akin to Marx's own reading of capitalism as a 'felicitous Fall'; in a very different spirit to *Criticism and Ideology*, he argues that 'there is much to be admired in the history of the middle class' (p.218), and he thus continually identifies a 'utopian' discourse productively rescu-

able for a socialist cultural politics from the ideological functions of the 'aesthetic', based upon its own liberating struggle from feudal repression. Thus, the 'aesthetic' totality of the bourgeois public sphere produces a 'utopian' image of 'a community of subjects now linked by sensuous impulse and fellow-feeling rather than by heteronomous law, each safeguarded in its unique particularity while bound at the same time into social harmony' (p. 28), a Kantian *sensus communis* at odds with bourgeois individualism. Similarly, Shaftesbury and Schiller's view of the aesthetic as the 'rich, all-round development of human capacities' (p. 36) as an end in itself is almost as troubling to the bourgeoisie as it was for feudalism, and will become central to Marx's humanism.

Eagleton's development of a 'materialist ethics' is critically based upon what he sees as the 'three greatest "aestheticians" of the modern period – Marx, Nietzsche and Freud . . . Marx with the labouring body, Nietzsche with the body as power, Freud with the body of desire' (p. 197), and will significantly involve a careful relinking of ethics, knowledge and aesthetics.

If traditional aesthetics focused upon the sensuous body ultimately only to conquer it for reason, then Nietzsche will unequivocally blast apart such constraints by returning reason to its material, bodily origins. Eagleton finds in Nietzsche the first critique within the aesthetic tradition of hegemony, which is seen as a profound self-disciplining leading to the 'herd' values of a conformist society. Such a disciplining of the instincts will for Nietzsche create the conditions for entrance into a new stage of what Eagleton calls the 'self-hegemony' of the 'overman', that ungrounded, self-regulating subjectivity whose model yet again is the aesthetic artefact. To become the 'poets of our lives' is as much as saying that the 'whole of existence is accordingly aestheticized'. For Eagleton, and here he has clearly also in mind Nietzsche's 'post-modernist' successors, such as the later Foucault of *The Use of Pleasure* (Oliver Stone's recent film, *The Doors*, positions Nietzsche as the theorist of the anti-hegemonic transgressive impulses of the 1960s), such an aesthetic of 'self-actualization' is defended by abandoning the aesthetic as 'social harmony', and it is this radical individualism that he finds most problematic, driven as it is by a disgust for human community.

Eagleton reads Freud as a 'radical anti-aesthetician' who relentlessly assaults every imaginable category of traditional aesthetics, and yet he produces a theoretical critique of hegemony which enables the identification of 'points of resistance' to its procedures. Thus for Freud the hegemonic insertion of the body into the Symbolic will involve fraught repressions which will always threaten to destabilize it. Similarly, through the category of the Superego Freud identified

the coercive nature of the introjection of the Law: 'every human subject is colonized by a foreign master, a fifth columnist within the self' (*The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, p. 272).

Freud's notions of the somatic basis of cognition and ethics, and his view that bodily desire produces a need for sociability in the very experiences of the infant, leads Eagleton, through a reference to Edward Bond's preface to his play, *Lear*, to begin to develop an ethics rooted in human biology. For Bond, we are all born with certain 'biological expectations' – that the baby's 'unpreparedness will be cared for, that it will be given not only food but emotional reassurance, that its vulnerability will be shielded, that it will be born into a world waiting to receive it, and that knows *how* to receive it'.¹⁸ If, as Freud wrote, 'the original helplessness of human beings is thus the primal source of all moral motives',¹⁹ and if for Bond we have a 'right' to culture, then for Eagleton this grounding of morality in biology enables the 'fact/value' opposition to be overcome, and upon this basis a 'more reciprocal, egalitarian style of loving' can be imagined.

Eagleton argues that there is an 'implicit materialism' in the idealist aesthetic tradition which will become explicit in Marx, who is now viewed as a full-blooded aesthetician whose historical analysis enables both an historical understanding of the conflicts (sense/reason; subject/object; individual/totally) to which his idealist forebears could only offer an 'imaginary' solution, and a comprehension of the material conditions that would make an 'aesthetic society' possible.

For Marx, as for Schiller, 'human powers and human society are an absolute end in themselves. To live well is to live in the free, many-sided realization of one's capacities, in reciprocal interaction with the similar self-expression of others' (p. 226), but now such an 'aesthetic' value is turned against the very social formation it was articulated to sustain, so that it is only with the overthrow of capitalism that the 'final aestheticization of human existence we call communism' will be possible. For Marx the body is an historical object whose sensuousness became 'abstracted' in the reifying 'objectifications' of class society, and thus the concrete sense/abstract reason opposition of classical aesthetics is shown to be the product of capitalism, with its 'instrumentalization' of people and nature under the abstract law of the commodity, 'which expels from it all corporeal pleasure'. What the young Marx in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* called the 'humanity of the senses' can only therefore be achieved historically through what Eagleton calls 'instrumental' political activity.

A 'communist ethics' thus anchors itself in the full development of

individual capacities as an end in itself. Eagleton argues that if such an account sounds very much like the 'expression/repression' model of Romantic humanism, so that in its Marxist version the removal of the constraining social relations of production will unleash the full productive forces of humanity, then where Marx is at odds with this view is in his perception that human powers are not 'indiscriminately positive':

Marx does indeed discriminate between different human capacities . . . which provides the foundation of a communist ethics . . . that we should foster only those particular powers which allow an individual to realize herself through and in terms of the similar free self-realization of others. (p.224)

To recognize this is to accept that communist society would still require superstructural apparatuses where such discriminatory norms could be decided upon, which is also to say that such a morality must be rigorously *rational* in its discussion of such norms. If knowledge, ethics and aesthetics emerge from our biological nature and its needs, then Eagleton rejoins Modernity's sundered trinity in the articulation of a properly communist ethics.

If the hegemonic operates, as we have seen, by accommodating the variety of the sensuously particular to a 'singular principle', then to think towards a post-hegemonic society must involve the overcoming of this concrete/abstract division through a radical democracy, and here Eagleton draws upon Habermas's notion of a radical 'public sphere' where truth would emerge from a consensus produced by free and equal participants. Ethical discourse and other cultural values would thus escape abstract imposition precisely because that abstract realm has now been repossessed by concrete individuals. Therefore morality

consists primarily . . . in creating the material conditions in which a communication about these matters as free as possible from domination could be established, so that individuals, given full participatory access to the processes by which common meanings and values are formulated, could then select and exercise a plurality of values and styles in ways not currently available to them. (p.408)

Eagleton's view that a 'true' aesthetic experience would be a 'relation to nature and society which would be at once sensuous and rational'(p.207), clearly distances him from those versions of the Romantic aesthetic which have been dismissive of reason as inherently repressive, but since reason is now seen to emerge from our bodily practical engagement with (social and natural) reality, he is

also at odds with Althusser's reified notion of Theory as being 'without a subject'. If much of *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* is an implicit (and in the final chapter an explicit) critique of Post-Modernist theory, then Eagleton wishes to salvage reason from its wholesale contemporary rejection, but without of course returning to any transcendental or dominative forms. He finds such a model in Habermas's 'ideal speech community', where truth would be 'that sort of proposition which would, did the discursive conditions allow it, command the free consent of anyone who could enter unconstrained into the relevant discussion' (p. 405). Truth therefore emerges from consensus, but this is only possible in a future radical democratic society, and therefore critical reason, like the 'aesthetic', continually drives us to the wall of our socio-historic limitations, demanding from us political transformation if its project is to be fully realized.

In the light of Eagleton's book, I would argue that 'reason' and the 'aesthetic' can be seen to have been maintaining a productive tension in Modernity. When a dominative reason has sought hegemonically to discipline the sensuous subject, the 'aesthetic' has been on hand to defend the desiring body; when the 'aesthetic' has played its role in ideological domination, critical reason has been on hand to produce a critique of its hegemonic function. The radical aspects of both discourses have also been marked by this opposition: a critical reason continually runs the danger of elevating itself into an abstractly disinterested realm free from all sensuous implications, while the 'aesthetic' all too often defends the sensuous individual *against* the claims of a threatening reason and its totalizing ambitions. This tension between a resolutely abstract reason (State/System) and the thoroughly concrete individual – the former repressing its origins in the 'concrete', the latter unable to comprehend that it can only realize itself fully in the 'abstract' (of society) – can therefore only be resolved historically, in a radical democratic humanist culture where sensuous needs and desires are recognized within a political formation regulating such needs in a wholly democratized manner.

Eagleton's study offers a valuable challenge to both conservative and radical views of the 'aesthetic'. For if the former sees it as wholly opposed to ideology and the political, then the latter all too often politically reduces it to nothing more than ideology. Instead of having to choose between 'aesthetics' and 'politics', it is perhaps more useful to deconstruct the opposition, and this is one of the salutary effects of *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. If bourgeois ideologues have used the 'aesthetic' for 'political' ends, then Eagleton wants to use the 'political' for 'aesthetic' ends. On the one hand, the 'aesthetic' is resolutely 'political', ideologically serving the hegemonic project of capitalism *and* offering a utopian glimpse of a liberated future; on the

other hand, for Marx, the 'political', with its allied ethical discourses, becomes the future 'aesthetic society', the struggle towards it in part motivated by such 'aesthetic' values. An emancipatory knowledge, its 'facts' (says Eagleton's study) emerging from its interest in the 'value' of human liberation, finally learns that its 'values' can be traced to the 'fact' of the desiring biological body.

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NOTES

1. Perry Anderson, 'A Culture in Contraflow', *New Left Review*, 180, March/April, 1990, p. 44.
2. Eagleton of course had books published prior to *Criticism and Ideology*, but this text is his first major theoretical work. In the following discussion, I have focused on his subsequent theoretical studies, and have ignored his other books.
3. Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).
4. The model of the social formation used by Eagleton is of course derived from Althusser. Ideology, in the form of the Ideological State Apparatuses, functioned solely to reproduce the social relation of exploitation by reconciling individuals to their social roles through hegemonic subjection. To read this 'functionalist' account of ideology *politically* is to see it as a pretty accurate model of twentieth century monopoly capitalism and, more specifically, of its post-War, pre-1968, social-democratic phase, where a de-politicized working class, led by social-democratic parties and Left-reformist ideologies, had been more or less successfully incorporated into the bourgeois 'totality'.
5. Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963).
6. Eagleton therefore re-read the 'Great Tradition', not as a critical and utopian prefiguring of the 'organic community' of socialism, but as the introduction of an ideology of 'aesthetic organicism' into nineteenth century bourgeois England which, moving into a 'higher' corporate phase, required such a hegemonic model of social cohesion.
7. Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (London: Methuen, 1981), pp. 281-299.
8. Since the 'totality' of late monopoly capitalism signified no more than repressive hegemonic incorporation, an uneasy conflation of the concept of 'organicism' with the concept of 'totality' itself meant that a correct critique of the former is made at the cost of losing the productive value of the latter. The same fate would befall 'humanism' and the 'individual', both reduced to being no more than ideology which, because it is not 'theory', must be 'false consciousness'.
9. This is how *Criticism and Ideology* ends (p. 187):

The 'aesthetic' is too valuable to be surrendered without a struggle to the bourgeois aestheticians, and too contaminated by that ideology to be appropriated as it is. It is, perhaps, in the provisional, strategic silence of those who refuse to speak 'morally' and 'aesthetically' that something of the true meaning of both terms is articulated.'
10. Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin: or towards a revolutionary criticism* (London: Verso, 1981).
11. see Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: New Left Books, 1976).
12. With Raymond Williams here as the paternal interdict within this Oedipal process of subjection.
13. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: an Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983).
14. Terry Eagleton, *The Function of Criticism: from The Spectator to Post-Structuralism* (London: Verso, 1984).

15. *The Political Unconscious*, p.287.
16. *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, p.392.
17. Eagleton draws upon Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics* (London, 1967), and *After Virtue* (London, 1981).
18. See Edward Bond, *Lear* (London, 1972), p. viii. Quoted in Eagleton, p. 284.
19. Sigmund Freud, *Project for a Scientific Psychology*, in Ernst Kris (ed.), *The Origins of Psychoanalysis* (New York, 1954), p.379. Quoted in Eagleton, p. 285.

F.R. Leavis

Hegemony, Canon, Intelligence, Ideology*

P.J.H. Titlestad

F.R. Leavis was made Reader at 65, university lecturer in his fifties, assistant lecturer in his forties, a member of the Faculty Board at 60 but he never had a hand in making any appointment.¹ Frank and Queenie Leavis had themselves buried in a corner of their garden. The presence of their graves, with a maintenance clause in the deed of sale, affected (perhaps still does) the property's marketability. This refusal to be interred obscurely, this desire for a monument, could be interpreted as the last expression of a persecution mania in a life frequently so characterised, or as the last fighting act whereby the Leavises would, in an eminently practical way, continue to exacerbate the academic community in which they had expended their lives.

In an eminently practical way. The name Leavis is unfortunately and inaccurately synonymous with practical criticism. Leavis, in his characteristic concern not to be pigeon-holed, would insist that the name was not his, that for him it meant criticism in practice, above all that the analysis of short extracts that could be contained in examination papers was not his concept of critical discipline,² so distancing himself from his foes who controlled the Faculty and who proudly laid claim to the method of practical criticism.³ At the same time more recent foes are refuted. When Raymond Williams, some years after Leavis had retired, posited a Leavisite consensus in Cambridge English, so setting up polemical tramlines for a new generation,⁴ he is not to be trusted. Appointed obligingly by the 'liberal-humanists' who unhegemonically thought that Cambridge could do with a Williams but who had been slow to accord a place to Leavis, Williams was positing a hegemony in the wrong place. Williams and various students in turn made the same allegations about Leavisite practice (exclusive concentration on short passages) as did earlier generations. History has its ironies.

Nevertheless, Leavis in his individualism did achieve a prominence denied to many of those who wielded Faculty power. The records of conferences held in South Africa in 1948 and 1949⁵ display a familiar

* This is a revised version of a paper read at a conference of the Association of University English Teachers of Southern Africa, held in July 1990.

mixture of acknowledgement, trepidation and abhorrence, including statements about Leavis's being the pre-eminent and most memorable figure of Cambridge English. For better or for worse, with greater or lesser accuracy Leavis, Cambridge and practical criticism became linked.

Leavis's unhegemonic career was oppositional from beginning to end and characterised by a remarkable degree of courage and endurance, of boldness and originality of opinion. He was an outstanding champion of the new literature of his youth, with certain consequences. For example, having applied through official channels to import a copy of Joyce's *Ulysses*, he was summoned to the Vice-Chancellor who showed him a letter from the Public Prosecutor suggesting firm University action⁶ and containing details of attendance at his lectures, including the number of women. Leavis characteristically suggests in his account that the Vice-Chancellor had passed word on to 'the *de facto* (the Latin tag is part of the satire) centre of power in the English School.'

Persona non grata at an early stage, Leavis was not the proclaimer of assured classics. When one comes to consider his complicity in the canonical bugbear, one must remember that time has obscured the pioneering originality of his early judgements. And when the canon (not a Leavis term or category of thought) is regarded as an impediment to new work one must remember that no-one more than Leavis more daringly accepted what in his time was new, nor had anyone else his penchant for toppling classics from pedestals, for calling for the revision of accepted wisdom or for trying to get obscure works granted significance. No critic has ever been more ready to lay his head on a block, to expose himself. And no critic has ever been more flexible. The stock notions associated with his name, for example his allegedly slavish debt to Arnold, are given the lie by the many-sided judiciousness with which he made his statements.

A very early essay espousing Eliot's early criticism did not prevent him from a trenchant later rejection. His was one of the earliest defences of Lawrence, an abiding allegiance, but he nevertheless refused to run with the Bishop of Woolwich and the fashionable pack over *Lady Chatterley*. He wrote pioneering work on *The Waste Land* and on Pound. Victorian criticism was rebutted in an attack on Bridges's comments on Hopkins, Shelley, Tennyson, the Georgians (the prevailing taste) were marginalised. Having carried a pocket Milton through the War, he toppled the idol of the classicists, along with Spenser. Bradleyan criticism was flayed in the first number of *Scrutiny* and in a later essay on *Othello*. No critic was more oppositional. The flexibility and incisiveness continued in later life: for example, his essay on *Anna Karenina*, which asserted Tolstoy's

superiority to James and rebutted with scorn Arnold's judgement of the novel in question and Arnold's Victorian, classicist concept of literary artistry, was the work of a man of seventy. James's exclusive ('elitist', one might say) criteria of art are said to be limiting factors and Leavis praises in Tolstoy's work the 'range' and 'depth' and 'vividness' that James cannot achieve. The James of *The Great Tradition* fame is thus 'placed' in relation to *Anna Karenina* in terms of truth and vision, which does indeed imply a crucial but not simplistic relation of art to life. His whole career exemplifies the possibilities of free intelligence, the concept that he disputed on so many fronts.

If only Leavis had not given his work on the novel the name *The Great Tradition*. Rightly understood, it is a polemical title; wrongly understood, as is depressingly usual today, it implies a fixed tradition and hierarchy. Leavis, weary with the current opinion that the French novel generally and Flaubert in particular set standards of artistry from which the English novel fell short, asserted the claims of the latter for qualities more positive than Flaubert's hatred of life. In *How to Teach Reading*, of 1932. Leavis had already pointed out that criticism of the novel was in its infancy, stamped by facile notions of abundance of 'characters' who had a real life extending beyond the text and who created a world. In a series of articles in *Scrutiny* he used the term 'dramatic poem' to indicate a formal and structural approach to the novel. He is one of the pioneers of narratology but was never content to remain within the bounds of narratology. Characteristically he also insisted that prose should be read like verse with the required attention to close detail while insisting that the isolated passage could not do justice to the whole.

The Great Tradition continued this pioneering work. The nature of the argument is typically complex. Not the whole of James was equally acceptable. The conventionally praised last novels were rejected in favour of *The Bostonians*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Europeans*, at the time given little attention. Conrad's potboilers and patches of weakness (for example in *Heart of Darkness*) were placed and other works suggested for attention for range, depth and interest in what men can and do live by, with Flaubert as the contrast and target.

Many of Leavis's remarks did become the stock-in-trade of English Departments (other than Cambridge). Nevertheless, the spirit in which he offered his frequent revisions of the literary map and the terms in which discriminations are made are essentially uncanonical. He insisted time and again, including in the opening pages of *The Great Tradition*, that he did not imply that other books were not worth reading or that his strictures against, for example, Shelley or Milton,

were not to be accepted other than in the spirit of the co-operative venture of criticism, certainly not in granite finality.

Despite the currency of so much that he said, Leavis had his hopeless failures, which are illuminating to ponder, if one can get past the barrier of mercilessly conventional derision. Certain works by George Sturt seemed to Leavis to be significant as offering a view of the famed organic community and a language of undissociated sensibility as opposed to the alienations of industrial society. Leavis here espoused the cause of a nonentity. The incident illustrates how he cannot be considered the arch-villain of a rigid, canonical élitism that prevents unknown work from being granted significance. Those readiest to ridicule Sturt are sometimes the readiest to attack Leavis on the imputed canon.

The recent imputations of élitism ironically echo early similar accusations from the Cambridge establishment. Tillyard's *The Muse Unchained*, which purports to tell the story of Cambridge English to 1932, the year *Scrutiny* began, praises the broad liberalism that prevailed and hints darkly at how undergraduates were told in certain quarters what they should believe and accept and the 'contaminated' areas they should keep out of.⁷ Read with eyes that can see, the most interesting feature of Tillyard's book is the undercurrent of anti-Leavisism. Those, early and late, who levelled the same kind of accusation against Leavis are strange bedfellows. It must in all fairness be admitted that Leavis's toppling of Milton might have been partly an attack on Tillyard's extensive Miltonic studies.

Leavis's best known exposition of how judgements are formed and of how criticism is not philosophy is his reply in *Scrutiny* of 1937 to Wellek's review of *Revaluation*. This statement has caused Leavis to be deemed the opponent of philosophy or theory in favour of untheorised practice, a partial truth that became yet more partial in his later work. Wellek wanted a norm to which one could bring up a work. Leavis expresses in reply his concept of the complete reader, realising the complex experience of literature as opposed to abstract philosophical formulation.

The critic is indeed, Leavis argues, concerned with evaluation, which is implicit in the full realizing of any literary work, but these value judgements arise out of completeness of response, not by the application of an external norm, and hence are not immutable. Leavis refuses to formulate criteria, the next work might be different. Inevitably the individual critic forms a structure based on more constant preference. This structure must be offered for communal consideration and modification. The structure is open to further modification by new work which could require a different response, other grounds of judgement, hence the refusal to state norms. As

Leavis put it later on, no-one who knows the real nature of critical authority can talk of fixed standards or of imposing accepted values. Critical judgement has the form: 'This is so, isn't it?'⁸ The new modifies the sense of value, creates the sense of value by which it is to be judged. Mention of that insistent Leavis theme, the free intelligence, is appropriate here. It is only in the context of this freedom that the new can modify the existing sense of value. Leavis's criticism is a constant exemplification of oppositional debate, of the rejection of the critical wisdom of his time whether 1930 or 1970, not the announcing of absolutes for the future.

What did Leavis mean by the 'free intelligence'? – that concept that to Marxists and structuralists and Foucaultians is the liberal-humanist chimaera or the disguised, self-interested lie. There is no neutrality. We all have ideologies, we must know ourselves and declare ourselves.

Leavis, as is characteristic, did not define his term abstractly but exemplified it in practice. He was in fact attacked for these imputed claims to disinterestedness from the 'right' as well as the 'left'. *Restatements for Critics* of 1933, starts with a reply to *The Criterion* on this issue before Leavis turns his attention to Marxism and Marxist criticism later in the same article.⁹

His argument against *The Criterion* is substantially the argument he uses against Welleck. Judgement is not a matter of abstractions. *The Criterion's* declared bent, for which it accuses *Scrutiny* of not declaring an equivalent, cannot be the grounds of literary judgement. What one needs is 'a real and appropriate responsiveness to the thing offered' and a 'free and delicate receptivity to fresh experience'. Declared values become 'empty husks'; things formerly validated by experience, once fixed and become automatic (like Welleck's 'norms'), cease to have life. The tradition and orthodox Christianity of *The Criterion* is therefore condemned, as would be that Marxism for which, as Johan Degenaar puts it, 'the political perspective of the class struggle is not one amongst many but rather "the absolute horizon of all interpretation"'.¹⁰

Before continuing with Leavis's argument in *Restatements*, it would be as well to point out that the term 'free intelligence' is not used, rather 'free and delicate receptivity to fresh experience', 'real and appropriate responsiveness to the thing offered', as opposed to 'husks' or 'abstractions'. The *Manifesto* that formed the very first article of the first *Scrutiny* did indeed use the phrase 'a play of the free intelligence upon the underlying issues', but the adumbrations one year later in *Restatements for Critics* should be borne in mind. The word 'intelligence' does occur in later writing, especially in the defence of literature as an object of university study against Lord

Robbins, when Leavis uses the phrase 'the discipline of intelligence'.

When the word 'free' is used in *Restatements*, it is qualified:

It is not wisdom that stops at advocating the free play of individual sensibility. Indeed, the truly living sensibility cannot be content to be merely individual and merely free. One cannot suppose it either possible or desirable to go on 'experiencing' as if there had been nothing before.

One has a history, in other words, one develops structures: this Leavis knows. There are hints in the text at this point that Leavis has Eliot's *Tradition and the Individual Talent* in mind. The trouble with *The Criterion*, however, is that, unlike Eliot himself, judgement is too easily 'the applying of accepted standards', thought is too easily the 'moving of recognised abstractions according to rule'.

The Marxist critic is, therefore, in the same boat as *The Criterion*! Not that Leavis proposes that the judgements of literary criticism, of 'literary value', do not involve 'extra-literary choices and decisions'. He is not proposing an aestheticism concerned only with the literary work as a thing of beauty. The relationship to life is all important to him, as it is to the Marxist. Judgements of literary value involve extra-literary choices.

Restatements for Critics comes as close as Leavis ever comes to a statement of political creed. He declares himself 'not politically indifferent'. No hope is to be based on bloody revolution but some form of economic communism he states (in 1933) to be inevitable and desirable. Civilization needs to be saved by an intelligent working towards this end. The question is 'communism of what kind'. In this regard Leavis wishes to foster through education an anti-acquisitive, anti-competitive moral bent.

But he refuses to succumb further to the intellectually fashionable Marxism of between the wars. He insists on a 'sense of complexities', knowing well that to the Marxist this is to play the bourgeois game. He deplores the dead language of set phrases such as 'bourgeois'. His partial, limited assent to some aspects of Marxism and sharp criticism of other things is typical of Leavis's attempt to deal in discriminating fashion with the claims of competing establishments or orthodoxies – hegemonies or discourses. Marxism is 'the alcohol of the intellectual, warming and exalting, obliterating difficulties and incapacitating for elementary discriminations'; so much for the 'opium of the masses'. The Marxist is, furthermore, 'too bourgeois' in being, like the bourgeois themselves, too much the product of the material environment, being the creature of processes, in the same rut as the capitalist on the possibilities of 'progress'. The Marxist future is 'vacuous,

Wellsian' with too little thought about the nature of culture once the millenium has arrived.

Intelligence, anti-deterministic capacity, which requires the assumption of an 'inner human nature' opposed potentially to the shaping of purely predestinating material forces, is further discussed in *Literature and Society* of 1952.¹¹ The various issues so commonly and axiomatically asserted in recent critical theory: is the author or critic a person or a 'site' or 'hologram'? – is the author dead? – what are the defects of romantic notions of the inspired individual genius? – how are we written by the system of language (self-reflexive, of course)? – what other systems or discourses determine us? – is there such a thing as human nature? – are all implicit in this essay, as they are in his earlier writings of 1932 and 1933.

In *Literature and Society* Leavis once again defends himself from the accusation that he asserts isolated, individual and purely literary values, starting by attacking Romanticism. It is not enough to say that individuals of specific creative gifts, genius, were born and created certain works, hence masterpieces arise. However, he asserts that there are sets of determinants other than the material and economic, 'enormous' though material considerations are. The shaping tradition for critic and writer can be literary as well as material. These various shaping systems admitted, he then asserts that there is nevertheless a measure of 'spiritual autonomy', 'human intelligence, choice and will' do matter, there is an 'inherent human nature'. Without the 'individual talent' there is no creation, only predestined automatism (not Leavis's own phrase) – only in individuals does society live. In dealing with the products of human creativity in this situation the sphere of the critic is to perceive subtleties and complexities, rather than to enforce the domination of commissars of whatever persuasion.

He directs his argument in *Literature and Society* towards Blake (who features increasingly in his later criticism, despite Leavis's strictures against Romantic genius). Blake, in his successful work, says implicitly, 'it is I who see and feel. I only see what I see and feel only what I feel. My experience is mine and in its specific quality lies its significance'. Interestingly and characteristically, Leavis at once seeks to qualify the claim to individual vision. In line with his awareness that there are indeed constraints on individuality he is not satisfied with the concept only of Romantic individuality. However, this argument itself takes an unexpected turn:

Blake uses the English language, and not one of his own invention; and to say that he uses it is not to say that it is for him a mere instrument. His individuality has developed in terms of the language, with the ways of

experiencing, as well as of handling experience, that it involves. The mind and sensibility that he has to express is of the language.

In other words, even the apparently supremely individualistic and eccentric Blake, the creator of private mythologies, is not immune from broader systems. At this point, however, Leavis expresses fears that he is stating a 'truism', in fact something hardly worth recalling, one of the 'familiar truths' that we contemplate when we contemplate the nature of language, familiar enough for us to lose sight of it. The sting in the tail is characteristic. But it is not the tail, we discover. To see the indebtedness of even William Blake to the system of language is to realise 'perhaps the most radical of the ways in which the literary critic's interest in literature leads to a new recognition of the essentially social nature of the individual and . . . of the "reality" he takes for granted'.

La nouvelle critique has, in its Anglo-American manifestations, had to define itself against Leavis. It is polemically useful to find a hegemonic enemy, a tactic of which Leavis himself was not always guiltless, although there was indeed reason. Yet it would appear that Leavis in 1952 was anticipating many of *la nouvelle critique's* arguments. And in relation to the individual romantic visionary Blake, no less. If Leavis ever had a vested interest in a writer, it was Blake, yet he here seems to be abandoning the ramparts, with characteristic freedom granting his opponents their case. But he goes further. He says that Blake would have been a better poet had he been part of 'a responsive community of minds', a tradition that nurtured him rather than something that he felt that he had to escape from. Once again, Leavis is distinguishing, following the argument in unpredictable directions, failing to stay on the anti-systemic tramlines as one might have expected him to do. Systems can be good or bad, stultifying or nurturing.

In *Under which King Bezonian* of 1932,¹² Leavis had already made a similar point about language, in relation to Shakespeare who, 'did not invent the language he uses'. The point is particularly significant as Shakespeare is so frequently used by Leavis to illustrate the creative use of language. Shakespeare uses 'codes developed in ages of continuous experience'. Again, Leavis is pointing out the beneficial nature of inherited systems. One might point out, however, as Leavis does not, that Shakespeare might have been the begetter as well as inheritor, leaving a permanent legacy, helping to shape the linguistic flux of the Renaissance. Does the writer not have a measure of autonomy, which it is the critic's concern to note? Does the writer not create? Does determinism explain all? Can one not in fact, sometimes, use the word 'genius'?

Under which King Bezonian, contains a fairly extensive analysis of Marxist ideology in general and of its literary and cultural theory in particular, indicating how *Scrutiny* came into existence in an atmosphere in which Marxism was already one of the prominent voices. When Leavis states that the way in which Marxists and non-Marxists had taken up entrenched positions indicated the 'contemporary chic' of the time, he is in fact saying 'a plague on both your houses', refusing to ally himself with either entrenched position. The Anglo-Catholicism and Royalism of *The Criterion*, the other immediate example of 'dead academic thinking' does not go unmentioned. Neither side exemplifies intelligence: 'Stalin or King by Divine Right'.

One is tempted to add, however, that Divine Right had suffered an irreversible decline from 30 January, 1649, whereas Stalin was at the time an evil of unimaginable future proportions, the uncertain decline of which we are observing today. The extent of Leavis's rebuke to the 'chic' Marxist intelligentsia of 1932 is more apparent if one remembers that the, for Leavis, relatively intelligent Trotsky, whom he sees as being unknowingly on the brink of discovering the radical flaw in Marxist criticism and cultural theory, had been expelled from the party by Stalin in 1927 and exiled from the Soviet Union in 1929, a chapter closed by his assassination in Mexico in 1940. The ice-pick in Trotsky's brain followed the untimely deaths (chiefly by execution but with one suicide and one disappearance) of Tomsky, Zinonyev and Kamenev (1936), Radek (1937) and Bukharin and Ryker (1938). Not that Trotsky needs idealising as the isolated and acceptable intellectual: his dissidence was only relative, balanced by his career as commissar of the revolutionary Red Army and organiser of the early stages of Bolshevik dictatorship. Stalin was only more deadly on the domestic front of party in-fighting.

Leavis's criticism of Marxist thought includes that of dead language, 'the blanketing use of essential terms', exemplified in quotations from Trotsky. This goes hand in hand with the desire for salvation in a 'formula or simple creed', the ideological avoidance, or imperception, of complexity from which Trotsky as well as certain Anglo-American Marxists stand accused. Essentially the Marxist is 'bourgeois', in the same boat as the capitalist, equipped with the same blinkers. As Leavis puts it in *Marxism and Cultural Continuity*¹³, 'there is a certain autonomy of the human spirit'. There can be intellectual and aesthetic and moral activity that is not merely an expression of class origin and economic circumstances:

What, as a matter of fact, one commonly finds in Marxists is that [same] oblivion of, indifference to, the finer values, which is characteristic of a 'bourgeois', 'capitalist' or Rotarian civilization – the civilization produced by a century of the accelerating modern process.

Note that the autonomy is qualified by 'certain'.

Leavis's criticism of Marxism expressed in 1932 and 1933 and his castigation of the modish intelligentsia of the Anglo-American left is the outward expression of the deeper desire for the possibility of thought and perception that is not totally deterministically moulded. Leavis was fully aware that the free intelligence was not totally free: he was an exponent neither of theories of romantic creative genius nor of critical neutrality or detachment. Nor did he deny that literature and criticism were related to society. What he wanted to preserve was a 'certain autonomy of the human spirit'. Systems are not absolute. How else does anyone ever think a different thought? Systems are modified: the significant new work can change the whole structure of one's previous perceptions.

The significance of the new must be possible, requiring the potential recognition of what is significantly new. Hegemony and intelligence are at odds. Leavis's own pioneering criticism illustrates this. And presuming the liberal-humanist, Leavite, Neo-critical hegemony ever to have been a hegemony, how did the pioneers of *la nouvelle critique* (although not the followers of a new 'chic') ever break away?

Leavis's intelligence is a state of embattled wariness and vigilance: an attempt to preserve a kind of space in which the critic can function. But it was not stasis behind ramparts: his criticism was pioneering, and he could encounter systems in literature that were both sharply opposed to what could be surmised to be his own, and also opposed to one another: Hopkins and Bunyan in early criticism, *The Four Quartets* in later work. Ideology in the work and in the critic (alias poetry and belief in an older formulation) was for Leavis the occasion for exemplification in practice of his capacity to deal with systems contradictory among themselves and, as far as we can surmise, for no statement of position is made, differing from what Leavis himself might have held.

Despite his wariness of ideology and group thinking and his refusal to formulate philosophical 'norms' for Wellek, Leavis became actively involved in his later years with the work of Michael Polyani and Marjorie Grene. He found in the work of these two philosophers, one a scientist and the other concerned with the philosophy of science, valuable discussion of the validity of intuitive knowledge, of the heuristic nature of knowledge and of language, of the relation of the knower to the known, of the rational, disciplined nature of this knowledge and of poetic language as being the most significant kind of language. The 'discipline of intelligence' was not closed to theoretical alliance. The process starts with a *Scrutiny* article as far back as 1941, reprinted in 1943 in *Education and the University*.¹⁴

Arguments about the nature of practical criticism, of entering into full possession of the text, extend to considering the ontology of the text and the relation between text and reader. Leavis was already at this time undermining the neo-critical notion of the autonomous and objective text:

Analysis is not a dissection of anything that is already and passively there. What we call analysis is, of course, a constructive or creative process . . . It is a recreation in which, by a considering attentiveness, we ensure a more than ordinary faithfulness and completeness.

It is a paradox. Paying more than ordinary faithfulness is at the same time a creative process. The text is and is not. In his notorious attack on C.P. Snow¹⁵ the paradox is taken up again. The poem is there only in the recreative response of individual minds to the marks on the page but it is something in which minds can meet, Berkeleyan solipsism and the tramlines of ideology are held at bay. So criticism is a 'collaborative - creative' process: 'This is so, isn't it? Yes, but . . .'. So the poem is established 'out there' despite a judgement's being personal or nothing. The poem is both public and private, a third realm, the possession of a critical community. The function of a critical community is there in his first *Scrutiny* article in 1932 and remained basic to his evolving thought. *English Literature In Our Time And The University* of 1969 adds to the argument.¹⁶ The poem is 'there' only when realized in separate minds but is not merely private, although it cannot be produced in a laboratory or tripped over: the alternatives are not exhaustive. This, says Leavis, is as far as the literary critic needs to go, epistemologically.

The debt to Polyani and Grene and the rejection of Wittgensteinianism (although Wittgenstein, the man apparently warmed himself at the Leavis fires)¹⁷ becomes plainer in *The Living Principle* of 1975 (when Leavis was 80). The line of thought about language evinced in, for example, his early attack on Bridges and defence of Hopkins, here reaches its culmination. Leavis here uses the concepts of that long debate in English thought from Bacon and Hobbes through Locke and Hume to Ayer's relatively recent logical positivism. The Shakespearean use of language is a refutation of the premises of Newton and Locke (Blake's *Urizen* is evoked and the references to William Blake generally are a feature of his late writing). Newton and Locke conceived their own conventions of utterance as 'belonging to the basic nature of things', as being 'natural'.¹⁸

The system of language is there but one can never be a *tabula rasa* inscribed by the system. It is especially the creative writer who exemplifies freedom, and literature is our most significant mode of

language. 'Heuristic' becomes a late addition to the characteristic Leavis vocabulary. The rejection of positivism in his last discussions of Shakespeare's imagery, the either/or interpretations of editors who could not rest in creative *aporia*, (not Leavis's term) the insoluble attraction of different possibilities, illustrates further what is implied in the reader's full possession of the text.¹⁹

So the discipline (as he always insisted) of literary studies has its last justification in the Urizenic world of C. P. Snow and the Robbins report on the universities. The education technocrat is but commissar writ large. These were the last enemies in his austere and astringent, prophetic concern for the true nature of criticism that had begun in the post-war milieu of historical scholarship, classical scholarship, philology, aestheticism, impressionistic enthusiasm, Marxism and Anglo-Catholicism.

Leavis must remain one of our beacons of criticism, not just the past against which the present defines itself but as an active exemplum in the present of criticism in practice. His range of incisive judgements ventured about new literature or his attempts to change the map should be a challenge to the scanty practice of *la nouvelle critique*. In this practice he exemplified that wariness and resistance to fashion, intellectual chic and to pressure groups which should evoke admiration rather than objugation. His criticism is not devoid of theory. He dealt fruitfully (and in relation to particular judgements) with many of today's critical preoccupations, long before they had become such preoccupations. He showed how relative freedom is indeed a possibility, he presented a challenge to dogma that must remain permanent. He exemplified how negotiation between society, tradition and the individual and between the text and the reader, between the given and the new, between system and change could take place. His warning to ideologies to know themselves and to know their place, stands.

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NOTES

1. Letter to TLS, March 3, 1972.
2. *Ibid.*
3. See E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Muse Unchained* (Chatto, 1953), *passim*.
4. 'The State of English', TLS, Feb. 25, 1972.
5. *A Symposium on Practical Criticism*, By Members and Graduates of the South African Universities, General Editor Professor W.S. Mackie. Published for The Conference of South African University Teachers of English by the University of Cape Town, 1948. *Proceedings of the Second Conference of University Teachers of English*, Pietermaritzburg, 1949, University of Natal.
6. Letter to TLS, May 3, 1963.
7. E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Muse Unchained* (Chatto, 1953), p.93.
8. *English Literature In Our Time And The University* (Chatto, 1969), pp.147-150.
9. 1933, reprinted in *Valuation in Criticism and other Essays*, ed. G. Singh (CUP, 1986).
10. 'Marxism and Deconstruction', John Degenaar, SAVAL Papers IX, Potchefstroom, April 1989, p.1.
11. *The Common Pursuit*, (Chatto, 1952; Peregrine Books, 1962). The paper was first delivered to the Students' Union of the London School of Economics and Politics.
12. 1932. Reprinted in *Valuation in Criticism and other Essays*, ed. G. Singh, (CUP, 1986).
13. Reprinted in *Valuation in Criticism and other Essays*, ed. G. Singh, (CUP, 1986), p.35.
14. Chatto, p.70.
15. Two Cultures? The Significance of C. P. Snow. Being the Richmond Lecture, 1962, (Chatto, 1962), p.28.
16. Chatto, 1969, pp.46 ff.
17. 'Memories of Wittgenstein' in *The Critic as Anti-Philosopher*, ed. G. Singh, (Chatto, 1982).
18. *English Literature In our Time . . .* (Chatto, 1969), p.52.
19. *The Living Principle* (Chatto, 1975), p.102.

Writers and Discourse Producers

Peter Knox-Shaw

Production is the crux of Marx's thought, the node from which his theories of both economics and history spring. In the economics, production is the source of real value – labour displacing the criteria of desire and scarcity; and because the infrastructure and the class relations engendered by it are what determine social change, production is the motor of history. Marx believed, too, that the economy would not only bring in the new society but flourish under it as never before. Production was to be Alpha and Omega, an immanent purpose moving towards a final manifestation. Yet in recent versions of the creed the godhead has gone into small print. G.A. Cohen, most lucid of exegetes, is among those who have dumped the dogma of historical materialism in an attempt to save the 'socialist project'.¹ And in a critique that has proved influential in France, Jean Baudrillard accuses Marx of lifting the concept of production wholesale from the political economy he was concerned to attack, so perpetuating some of the worst features of nineteenth-century capitalism.² But while many commentators now regard Marx's keyword as a millstone of fatal gravity, a specialized but related use of *production* has become standard fare at institutions of literary study. What I propose here is a brief look at the ingredients of this term.

To speak of the text as a production is to insist on its links with the infrastructure. But although it is an article of faith among strict Marxists that the economic base determines the character of the culture, in practice the plotting of this causal relation tends to be both vague and crude. The usual ploys of argument, the gestures towards 'liberal-humanist values of a particular phase of industrial capitalism' (Eagleton's shorthand for D.H. Lawrence's 'metaphysic') or to 'petty-bourgeois ideology' (the box into which the same critic pops Dickens, George Eliot, Hardy, Joyce) fall far short of showing the text as a product of the economic formation.³ But when the phrase *textual production* took on in the late 1960s, something more concrete appeared to be in store. Why not view the actual processes of writing, bookmaking and dissemination as a material base, a kind of micro-infrastructure for the text concerned? An immediate gain of the approach was a renewed attention to differences of mode, to the distinctions, say, between oral and written performance, or between

work patronized, touted, or sold by the bookseller. And with this focus on origin and ambience there certainly went a sharpened awareness of the broader social interests that writers serve. But the attempt to wrest a diagnostic instrument from the analysis of production was bound to fail, and the failure is nowhere more conspicuous than in the case of book markets in the West today. Few publishers (and those mainly left-wing) go out of their way to prescribe politics, and even a firm as committed as Croom Helm numbers titles like *Growing Begonias* among its productions. In plain fact opposing ideologies issue from the same base; and quite different bases, conversely, give rise to the same ideology. It is no surprise to find Eagleton admitting as much in *Criticism and Ideology*⁴ but so contemptuous is he of empirical method in that book that he goes on to uphold the Marxist position *de fide*:

We are not merely concerned here with the sociological outworks of the text; we are concerned rather with how the text comes to be what it is because of the specific determinations of its mode of production . . . The literary text bears the impress of its historical mode of production as surely as any product secretes in its forms and materials the fashion of its making.⁵

The wording of the last clause is revealing for in his zeal to present literary production as a showcase of historical materialism – the mode *intrinsic* to the work's content – Eagleton gives an organic touch to the metaphor he draws from manufacture. But whether the product is personified or animated here (depending on the meaning of *secrete*), the more pressing point is that a machine or process has taken the place of the author – who will typically figure some pages on as the *site* of various programmes of *construction*. So it is that talk of literary production sets the scene, whether consciously or not, for a deterministic reading of cultural activity. And the deconstructionist vogue for decapitating texts – whether in flight from 'authorial appropriation' or a 'metaphysics of presence' – flows from the same premise; indeed, a continuity with earlier Marxist work is visible here.⁶ Discourse of this kind can be relied on, however, to consign itself to a limbo in so far as it is true to its findings. For the simple fact is that communication presupposes intentionality and cannot be divorced from issues of reference.⁷ Already the avant-garde look elsewhere as the new wave ebbs away before breaking.

But where, then, does all the buzz of literary production leave the writer? The short answer is in one quarter headless or chined, in another either deified or arraigned. On the historicist model writers are rated according to their allegiance to a proper social cause, and in

South Africa where political issues have for long been decisively clear-cut, approaches of this kind have proved overwhelmingly attractive. A premium has attached, with good reason, to writers who can readily be identified as champions of the struggle, and the rhetoric of production has played its part in the tactics of shaping reputations. On the occasion of an honorary doctorate Nadine Gordimer, for example, is compared – as a ‘social activist’ – to a ‘two-stroke engine’ that achieves ‘unrelenting force’:

[Her] rotation between the real and fictional, like a dynamo, charges the South African scene and electrifies it. Lamps lit by her work are seen from far, while nearby they light up the ground and path on which we tread.⁸

With writers such as this what need of infrastructure! Arthur Koestler once complained of the gap in Marxist practice between ‘a basement-production and an attic-intellectual production; only the stairs and lifts are missing’:⁹ the citation for Gordimer carpets every metre of the way. When it comes to literature produced in the past, however, the strategy of equating the text with an ideology or social cause works, more often than not, against the writer. Former classics are used to parade the evils of a host of isms and the old homiletic strain of *Scrutiny* is revived – though the tone often comes closer to those didactic tags gummed to unhappy icons in the Museum of Religion at Moscow.

Such methods can be gratifying to the pedagogue whose overriding aim is to impress a point of view. But criticism that exists to promote a long foregone conclusion soon cuts itself off from renewing energies, and when the conclusion is extra-literary calls into question, too, its status as a viable discipline. Branches of knowledge that are in some way special to literary study – rhetoric, genre theory, stylistics, literary history – tend to be among the first casualties of a thorough-going historicism. Among the hardy survivors there is likely to be some account of language as a self-referential system (hastily fathered on Saussure),¹⁰ and a historical period or two flattened to a diagram of dialectical struggle (the English Civil War featuring, for example, despite the evidence, as a quarrel between bourgeois and aristo).¹¹ Into a melodrama of goodies and baddies writers are slotted whose works convey – if they are read on their own terms – views of experience fuller, finer (and often more worldly) than those on offer. The truth is that history is larger and more various than theory and that the great intelligences of the past deserve something better than the strait-jacket of a discarded creed. Eagleton, in an influential phrase, has spoken of the need to show the text as it cannot know itself,¹² but time has shown, also, that the text can teach us to see the critic.¹³

The study of a group of contemporary writers in their historical context will continue to prove one of the most fruitful of academic projects. No particular relevance is required to make the history rewarding, for the realization of an intricate external structure is of value in itself. But the study will be richer and more exciting if the literary figures concerned are of the sort who in Pope's words 'stood the furious foe',¹⁴ who chose, that is, to examine rather than retail – whatever their success – the credences and nostrums of their age. What literary study wants, in sum, is the writer rather than the producer. Of course the view that the critic's job is to show the text as an *ideological precipitation of the social formation* (to fall in with the jargon) rests on the premise that the critic enjoys a freedom (or *potential for distantiation*) the writer lacks. Ever since the Enlightenment, however, artists whose aim has been to excel have struggled for and prized their independence, and there is no better way of assessing the strength of demand than to withstand it. Writers as different, say, as Pope and Virginia Woolf have found ways of resisting the pressure to conform, often at some cost: Pope coming under fire for exposing the propaganda of Walpole's hirelings and the sale-driven antics of Grub Street; Virginia Woolf for killing the angel in the house and refusing to sew 'every button as the Bond Street tailors would have it' in order to write as a 'free man and not a slave'.¹⁵ But how free, in any case, is the space in which the academic critic now operates? No one mistakes universities for extra-terrestrial objects these days, and English departments in particular have become increasingly procrustean on the whole, mostly in inverse ratio to their merits. Reasons for this are numerous, but a leading ideologue puts a finger on one of them when he urges that 'commitment is not first and foremost a matter of moral choice but of taking sides in a struggle between embattled groups'.¹⁶ Cause there for talk of production.

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NOTES

1. See 'Reconsidering Historical Materialism' in *Marxist Theory*, edited by Alex Callinicos (Oxford 1989); G. A. Cohen is the author of *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (Oxford 1978).
2. Jean Baudrillard, *Le miroir de la production* (Paris 1973).
3. Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology* (London 1978), pp. 15, 125, 155. In the case of Joyce, Eagleton observes a conflict between *naturalism* described as an 'obsessive petty-bourgeois preoccupation with material routine' and a *Romantic idealism* which also turns out, however, to be a 'characteristically petty-bourgeois ideology'.
4. *Criticism and Ideology*, p. 57.
5. *Criticism and Ideology*, p. 48.
6. It is a short step from Lukács's preoccupation with a writer's automatic disclosure of the contradictions inherent in an ideology – witness his discussion of Balzac in *The Historical Novel* (Harmondsworth 1969, p. 96ff.) – to Macherey's obsession with conflict in the unconscious of the text (*Pour un théorie de la production littéraire*, Paris 1966, p. 103), or to Derrida's arabesques round the theme of absence (*De la grammatologie*, Paris 1966, p. 100).
7. For an analysis of the philosophical implications of this issue, and an important refutation of Derrida, see Roger Scruton, 'Public Text and Common Reader' in *Reconstructing Literature*, ed. Laurence Lerner (Oxford 1983). See also H. P. Grice, 'Logic and Conversation' in *Syntax and Semantics 3: Speech Acts*, ed. P. Cole and J. Morgan (New York 1975).
8. Citation delivered at UCT graduation ceremony, 12 December 1986.
9. Arthur Koestler, *The Yogi and the Commissar* (London 1945), p. 70.
10. For a cogent critique of these theories and their relation to Saussure see John Holloway's excellent essay, 'Language, Realism, Subjectivity, Objectivity' in *Reconstructing Literature*, ed. Laurence Lerner (Oxford 1983).
11. For an empirical account see Conrad Russell, *The Causes of the English Civil War* (Oxford 1990).
12. *Criticism and Ideology*, p. 43.
13. See, for example, Jonathan Bate, *Shakespeare and the English Romantic Imagination* (Oxford 1989).
14. Alexander Pope, *Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot*, line 343.
15. Virginia Woolf, 'Modern Fiction', in *Collected Essays II*, (London 1966), p. 106.
16. Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (London 1981), p. 290.

Afrikaans Language, Literature and Identity

Johan van Wyk

There is a close interrelationship between Afrikaner identity, the Afrikaans language and literature. The following essay is an exploration of this close interrelationship and how it was formularised in discourse.

The first section focuses on the way in which the Afrikaans language was made the constitutive element of the political identity of the Afrikaner, an identity which was consciously constructed in the early years of the twentieth century by Afrikaans-speaking intellectuals. In this process the Afrikaans language was used as a central mobilising factor and was made into a question of the 'existence or non-existence' (D.F. Malan in Pienaar, p.2) of the Afrikaner.¹

In the second section the imaginary nature of this identity is explored. Through the analogical use of De Saussure's theory of linguistic identity (1981) the Afrikaner's identity is seen as a value that does not refer to a concrete material entity.

In the last section the development of Afrikaans literature and Afrikaner nationalism is related to the establishment of Afrikaans as a written language. It will be illustrated how this occurred in the context of similar developments in other South African languages.

I

The first attempts to link the development of the Afrikaner's national consciousness with the Afrikaans language was S.J. du Toit's *Geskiedenis van die Afrikaanse Taalbeweging ver vrynd en vyand* (1880) and the founding in 1890 of the Zuid-Afrikaanse Taalbond with the express purpose of promoting knowledge of the people's language (*volkstaal*) and developing a national consciousness (Van Niekerk, p.26).

But it was in the early years of the twentieth century that Afrikaans was made synonymous with the being of a particular section of the white speakers of the language. Gustav Preller in an article 'Laat 't ons toch ernst wezen' from *De Volkstem* of June 1905 said:

[The language] is not an arbitrary construction of grammatical rules and laws, no printed thing, no series of black markings on paper, but the image of the thoughts of a people, a continuously changing diorama of the inner consciousness of man.² (Pienaar, p. 18)

It is during this period – when people like Preller made language synonymous with the existence, the thoughts and the ‘inner’ being of the Afrikaner subject – that literature was developed as an important part of the symbiotic intertext of language and identity.

The furtherance of an own literature became one of the main objectives of the second language movement (1905–1925). Literature, at the second congress of the Afrikaans Language Society in December 1908 was seen as one of the chief means by which the *volk* could be reconciled with the language. A people without a literature, a people that did not read, was described by Preller as a deaf-and-dumb people. Preller concluded his article ‘Laat ‘t ons toch ernst wezen’ by quoting Eugène Marais’ poem ‘Winternag’, proving that ‘sublime feelings’ could be expressed in an Afrikaans literature.

Although the language and the literature came to be seen as essential elements of the character of the people or the *volk*, the coincidence of language and national identity was not complete as is shown by General Hertzog’s view that Afrikaans and English speakers who believe in the dictum ‘South Africa first’ are Afrikaners. This was the dominant view until 1934 when D. F. Malan broke away from Hertzog and Smuts’s United Party to form the Purified National Party.

In the early years of this century many ‘Afrikaners’ maintained that Dutch and not Afrikaans was the language of the Afrikaner. In the *Geref. Maandblad* of Sept. 1905 a Prof. Marais said referring to Afrikaans:

The kitchen language which is glorified in Pretoria . . . is not the language of the cultured Afrikaner. (Pienaar, p. 33)

Therefore, to the Dutch-orientated Afrikaners Afrikaans had the image of being the language of the lower strata of society, of being a proletarian language or the language of a people fast becoming proletarianised in the cities. On the other hand the language was essential in the communication with and the mobilisation of the white Afrikaans-speaking working class. Preller said in this regard:

The totality of our people of which a large section is slowly degenerating into an ignorant proletariat – these we want to uplift, we want to communicate with them through newspaper and book. (Pienaar, p. 33)

The attempts to make the Afrikaans-speaking working class participate in nationalist and racist cultural programs were not always successful. In the 1930s Johanna Connelius, president of the Garment Workers Union, attacked the attempts by the FAK (The Federation of Afrikaans Cultural Societies) to co-opt the Afrikaans working class. She called it a 'plot of capitalists and employers to keep workers backward by fomenting race hatred' (Du Toit, p.42).

The symbiosis of Afrikaner nationalist ideology and literature was also threatened by divisions amongst the Afrikaner intelligentsia on the issue of aesthetics in relation to ideology. The debate in 1924 concerning the alien references to Greek mythology in Toon van den Heever's first poetry book *Gedigte* (1919) initiated this division. This conflict intensified during the 1960s when the Nationalist government promulgated more stringent censorship laws.

It is clear then that the symbiotic relationship between literature, language and identity which early nationalists like Preller tried to establish, and which nationalist institutions sought to project to the outside world was not as complete as is often presupposed. In the following section I will explore the imaginary nature of the Afrikaner identity, and the way in which this identity is constituted by an unconscious other.

II

Ferdinand de Saussure's discussion of linguistic identity in the chapter 'Identities, Realities, Values' from *Course in General Linguistics* (1981) had far-reaching implications for other disciplines like structuralist anthropology and poetics. It was not solely applied to linguistics but also to semiotics in general.

De Saussure introduced this chapter by asking questions relating to the nature of linguistic identity. When does one recognise one linguistic unit as being the same as another in a different context, or attribute identical meaning to the same 'slice of sound' (De Saussure, p. 108) in two different sentences?

Answering these questions De Saussure concluded that linguistic identity is not primarily determined by the material (the sound) aspect of the sign. The word 'Afrikaner' for instance, although pronounced identically, can express in different sentences and contexts different ideas: apart from referring to a nationality, it can denote a type of ox or a type of flower. On the other hand, the two dissimilar words 'Afrikaner' and 'Boer' can be recognised as referring to the same concept in particular contexts. De Saussure extends his argument by drawing comparisons with facts taken from 'outside of speech':

... we speak of the identity of two '8:25 p.m. Geneva-to-Paris' trains that leave at twenty-four hour intervals. We feel that it is the same train each day, yet everything – the locomotive, coaches, personnel – is probably different. Or if a street is demolished, then rebuilt, we say that it is the same street even though in a material sense, perhaps nothing of the old one remains. (De Saussure, p. 108)

Applying this example to a group identity one can show that this identity also does not reflect a material substance. Nations and groups are constantly changing. Immigrants, emigrants, deaths and births all point to the fact that the matter denoted by a group name is in a continuous flux.

The linguistic sign according to De Saussure is in essence a 'value', the same is true of a group name. The word 'Afrikaner' evokes a reality not in that it refers to a material or a fixed conceptual entity, but because it functions as a value. De Saussure explains the relationship between identity, value and material entity with the example of a chess game. Answering the question whether the knight in itself is an element in the game, he says:

Certainly not, for by its material make-up – outside the square and the other conditions of the game – it means nothing to the player; it becomes a real, concrete element only when endowed with value and wedded to it. Suppose that the piece happens to be destroyed or lost during the game. Can it be replaced by an equivalent piece? Certainly. Not only another knight but even a figure shorn of any resemblance to a knight can be declared identical provided the same value is attributed to it. We see then that in semiological systems like language, where elements hold each other in equilibrium in accordance with fixed rules, the notion of identity blends with that of value and vice versa. (De Saussure, p. 110)

Afrikaner identity does not have as fixed a value as a knight within a chess game, nor are the rules that govern history as constant as those of a chess game. Nevertheless, like the knight Afrikaner identity is determined by virtue of the fact that it forms part of a system of oppositional identities; by the fact that it is a value amongst other values. It does not refer to a material substance but is a socially and conventionally constructed discursive value which changes with history: the very existence of the language movements and other institutions which shaped Afrikaner identity gives proof of its discursive construction in history. An interesting passage from Dolf van Niekerk's novel *Die Son Struikel* (1960) explores this process whereby people were made aware of their identity. A student caught during the rebellion of 1914 tells of his wish to become a politician, a politician who would conscientise the people as to their identity. He says:

I will become a politician as soon as I am released. I want to teach my people what they are. (p.8)

This passage brings out the artificial nature of the identity; identity is not something that people have within themselves, that they are born with, but something they have to be taught. It has no reality outside history, outside the discursive system in which the particular relations between the values constituting the game of national identities is shaped and developed.

Value when ascribed to the term Afrikaner implies (a) a conventional and arbitrary relation between the sound-image 'Afrikaner' and the concept of the 'Afrikaner' at a particular point in history; (b) a relation between the concept and other similar concepts like English or Zulu. Value then is governed by the principles of 'a dissimilar thing that can be exchanged for the thing of which the value is to be determined' (De Saussure, p.115), and a relationship with similar constructs of identity which are compared differentially with one another. Identity therefore presupposes a relationship with the other identities or values within a world system of identities, a system in which relationships are continuously changing and which are dialogically and dialectically defined by the conflicting economic and ideological forces underlying the different identities. The ideological and economic struggles define the value or values evoked by the identity.

Because of this continuously changing nature of the system of national identities in the world it is necessary to look at identity from the point of view of diachrony and synchrony. Diachrony would for instance refer to the succession of definitions of the Afrikaner in history. Herman Giliomee in 'The Beginnings of Afrikaner Ethnic Consciousness, 1850–1912' (Vail 1989) gives a list of such a succession of definitions. According to him the term Afrikaner was used

- a. in the early eighteenth century for slaves or ex-slaves of African descent;
- b. in 1830 for those 'whether English or Dutch who inhabited the land' (p.22);
- c. but still in this period and thereafter to refer to the halfbred descendants of slaves.

Synchrony, the 'axis of simultaneities, which stands for the relations of coexisting things and from which the intervention of time is excluded' (De Saussure, p.81) would refer to the definition of the Afrikaner at a particular time in relation to other group definitions

within the system of national identities but also to the internal structure of values implied by the identity in a fixed period.

One of the dominant definitions of Afrikaner identity in our own time implies skin colour and the language Afrikaans. This definition became dominant in 1934 when Afrikaners were mobilised according to a racial and linguistic definition within the ideology of the newly formed Purified National Party.

This definition was the consequence of earlier, though not yet definitive formulations by influential authors like Langenhoven who saw Afrikaans as specifically a 'white man's language' and the Afrikaner as exclusively white. At a meeting of the Akademie in 1914 he said:

(Afrikaans) is our most splendid glory, our highest possession: the one and only white man's language, which was made in South Africa and did not come ready-made from overseas . . . it is the one bond which unites us as a nation: the expressed soul of our people. (Pienaar, p. 63)

This definition is contradicted by the mixed origins betrayed in the diachrony which operates as an unconscious in the sense that it is an index of successive events that have been repressed; in the sense of being 'a chapter of history that is marked by a blank or occupied by a falsehood' (Lacan, p. 50) or which in the words of Lacan can be retrieved 'in monuments', 'in archival documents', 'in semantic evolution', 'in traditions' and in 'traces that are inevitably preserved by the distortions necessitated by the linking of the adulterated chapter to the chapters surrounding it' (p. 50.) An unravelling of the history would at the same time be an unravelling of the unconscious, of the 'historical turning-points' (Lacan, p. 50) which constitute an identity.

The unconscious diachrony of the Afrikaner betrays racial hybridisation and contact. This is seen in the number of Malay-Portuguese and Khoi-Khoi words contained in the Afrikaans vocabulary. It is further reflected in the grammatical structure itself; for instance in the disappearance of inflections.

When J. Lion Cachet identifies the Afrikaans language with an 'arme Boerenooi' in his poem 'Die Afrikaanse Taal' (Opperman, p. 14) he is probably not aware that the word 'nooi' discloses the slave or Malay-Portuguese contribution to the language: the word 'nooi' is derived from the Malay 'njonjah' and the Portuguese 'donna'.

The Malay-Portuguese origins of the word 'nooi' stand in stark contrast to the message of the poem which states that the Cinderella 'Afrikaans' is of noble European ancestry:

From Holland my father came
To sunny Africa;
From France, with its vines
My beloved, pretty mother

(Opperman, p. 14)

The racially exclusive image of the language nevertheless betrays the history of *another*. The language which in the poem is supposed to make the inner being of the 'Afrikaner' visible, contains traces of the other which is repressed. Its mixed origins are inscribed in the word 'nooi'.

The repression of the racially 'other' in Afrikaner identity is indicative of the construction of this identity *for* the European 'other', or the attempts to make this identity conform with an European identity. Afrikaner identity was developed in a period when European civilisation was the model, and when everything African was stigmatised. In a context where Afrikaans was called a 'Hotnot's language' or the bastardised language of 'Asian and Mozambican maids' (Pienaar, p.66) the supporters of the language reacted by emphasising the racial purity of the language. The racism which was made an element of the identity speaks of the way in which the African aspects of the identity was socially traumatised.

Consequently the African and Asian origins of the language were underplayed in the many debates on the emergence of the language. Various institutions were further established to purge the language from all traces of 'barbarism' (Pienaar, p.43).

The early Afrikaner Nationalists, especially in the first two decades of this century, realised that Dutch could not be maintained in South Africa as a means of communication and that the only way to resist the imperialist language policies of the British was by propagating a simplified form of Dutch: an Afrikaans based on the model of Dutch. The 1876 dictum of the first language movement 'We write as we speak' (*Die Afrikaanse Patriot*, p. 3) became in 1903 'Spell according to pronunciation, but do not deviate without reason from the spelling rules of High Dutch' (Pienaar, p. 12).

The identification with Dutch instead of English as European model is indicative of the threatened economic position of the Afrikaans- or Dutch-speaking petit bourgeoisie during this period: the small town lawyers, teachers, shop owners and dominees who lost their clientele to the cities and the new values of industrial and mining capitalism. English was a symbol of these values.

To make Dutch the model was to give Afrikaans European status. The Europeanisation of the language was further reflected in the conscious efforts by Afrikaner cultural organisations to construct a

standard language which is divorced from the Afrikaans of the street and the Afrikaans of the white and black working class. According to Preller Afrikaans had to reflect only 'the sounds heard where Afrikaans is spoken in its most pure form' (Pienaar, p.123). In this process the establishment of Afrikaans as a written language played an essential role.

III

The transformation of Afrikaans into a written language must be seen in terms of what Derrida (1984) called 'logocentrism'. 'Logocentrism' is defined as the 'metaphysics' of phonetic writing

... which was fundamentally ... nothing but the most original and powerful ethnocentrism, in the process of imposing itself upon the world.
(p.3)

Derrida though does not describe this process. Instead he focuses on some of the main representatives of modern logocentrism: Heidegger, De Saussure, Levi-Strauss and Rousseau. The study of the transformation of the different South African languages into written languages throws some light on this process.

Logocentrism refers to (a) the location of truth within the ego of the individual as thinking subject as well as to self-consciousness and the internal word in its presumed nearness to the truth. It finds expression in the linguistics which views language as internal and mental, and (b) the expansion of Christianity or truth located in the transcendental God ('The sign and divinity have the same place and time of birth', Derrida, p. 14).

Logocentrism in South Africa relates to the orthographic activities of missionaries in their attempts to convert the 'heathen' languages of South Africa into written languages so that the Bible could be translated and read by the people speaking these languages. The first evidence of this was the list of Khoi-Khoi words and the translation into Khoi-Khoi of the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments and the Confession of Faith which N. Witzen conveyed to the German philosopher, G.W. Leibniz, in October 1697 (Nienaber, p. 121).

Logocentrism refers to the very status of a language as language. Before the introduction of writing into Afrikaans, it was not considered a language. It was seen as an 'impoverished, dissonant gibberish that is offensive to the ears' (Van Niekerk, p. 9), in which it would be disrespectful to address God (Van Niekerk, p. 9) which is barbaric and originated with the lower classes in the backstreets of

Amsterdam (Van Niekerk, p.23.) It was all exterior; the lack of a tradition of phonetic writing implied a lack of memory, truth, being; all concepts which evoke an image of interiority.

The transformation of Afrikaans into a respectable language was a process whereby it became established within the metaphysics of logocentrism. This happened on three levels: (a) transcribing an oral language into a written language, (b) transforming it into a language of the Book by translating the Bible into it and (c) making it the language with a canonised written literature.

This process has many points of comparison with other South African languages. Xhosa was transformed into a written language by missionaries at Lovedale as early as 1820 and Sotho at Morija in 1868. The process in Afrikaans started with the establishment of the *Genootskap van Regte Afrikaners* (GRA) in August 1875.

The establishment of the GRA was a consequence of Arnoldus Pannevis's efforts to have the Bible translated into Afrikaans. He wanted the Bible to be translated specifically for the coloured population. The British and Foreign Bible Society was not sympathetic and in reply to the request stated:

we are by no means inclined to perpetuate jargons by printing scriptures in them. (Steyn, p. 137)

Pannevis attended the founding meeting of the GRA, but never became an active member.

The GRA, in contrast to Pannevis's view of Afrikaans as a coloured language, saw itself as representative of the '20 000 white Afrikaners' (*Die Afrikaanse Patriot*, p. 8) who were not Anglicised in the 70 years subsequent to the British takeover of the administration of the Cape in 1812. The aim of the GRA was to elevate Afrikaans to the status of a written language and in this way transform what they saw as a 'deaf-and-dumb' people (*Die Afrikaanse Patriot*, p. 7) into a political force.

The objective to transform Afrikaans into a written language was realised in the publication of the periodical *Die Afrikaanse Patriot*. It was a monthly which appeared for the first time on 15th January 1876. It contained many examples of poetry and articles on customs, traditions, history and the language itself.

Other projects which laid the foundations of Afrikaans as a written language were the printing of grammars, vocabularies, dictionaries and the publication of alternative history books. S.J. du Toit's *Die Geskiedenis van ons Land, in die Taal van ons Volk* (1877) was a conscious attempt to rewrite South African history from an Afrikaner's perspective.

These projects had their equivalents in the other South African languages: John Tengu Jabavu, one of the first African Nationalists, became the editor of the *Imvo Zabantsundu* which was launched in November 1884. The Xhosa grammar *A systematic vocabulary of the Kaffrarian language in two parts; to which is prefixed an introduction to Kaffrarian grammar* of 1826 predated by a few decades the first grammars in Afrikaans such as the *Eerste Beginsels van die Afrikaanse taal* of 1876 and *Fergelykende Taalkunde Fan Afrikaans en Engels* of 1882. In the editorial of the first *Die Afrikaanse Patriot* Afrikaners were urged to write Afrikaans because of the fact that other African languages were in the process of becoming written languages:

Write your language! They are writing Kaffir languages and Bushmen clicks presently. Why should we then smother our language? (p.3)

Like William Wellington Gqoba's *Imbale yaseMbo* which gives 'a historical account of the scattering of the tribes under Chaka's reign' (Gérard, p.37) and 'which illustrates a budding awareness of the interdependence of the black peoples faced with the European threat throughout the subcontinent' (Gérard, p.37), S.J. du Toit's *Die Geskiedenis van Ons Land in die Taal van Ons Volk* (1877) represent the premature awakening of a broader nationalism. A united (white?) South Africa became an ideal of S.J. du Toit since Lord Carnarvon planned a confederation of South African States. This vision of a united (white?) South Africa explains Du Toit's anti-war propaganda during the Anglo-Boer war and his ties with Rhodes.

The many superficial points of contact between Afrikaans and the other African languages in the process whereby they became logocentric languages must be explored further in the light of the symbiotic interrelationship between individual and group psychology, the concomitant theo- and egocentric metaphysics and the relationship between nationalism and logocentrism.

The individual poets became the heroes (Freud, p.170) who elaborated national myths whereby the group became cohesive entities. Poets like Totius, Jan Celliers, N.P. van Wyk Louw and D.J. Opperman shaped to some degree the collective psychology of the Afrikaner. Tiyo Soga, Sol Plaatje, John Dube and A.C. Jordan did the same for the African nationalist movements within South Africa. The emergence of these Afrikaans and African poets were only possible because of the transformation of their respective languages into writing and because of the accompanying logocentric metaphysics.

The respective anthems, the GRA's 'Die Afrikaanse Volkslied' and

Mankayi Enoch Sontonga's 'Nkosi sikelel'i-Africa' epitomise the comparative positions of the two opposing nationalisms within logocentrism. Both songs find in that evasive, indeterminable source of Western metaphysics, God, the protector of the people. Both represent a direct model of the Oedipal Family: God the Father in relation to the people as his children. He is the transcendental origin of their melancholic self-alienation. He has become inscribed in their languages. Their languages no longer represent an exterior, worldly, un-selfconscious state; no longer did they have their origin in heathendom, in the sailors, slaves, the nomadic farmers and tribes outside the boundaries of a Western metaphysics.

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NOTES

1. See Isobel Hofmeyr's article 'Building a nation of words: Afrikaans language, literature and ethnic identity, 1902-1924' from Marks's and Trapido's *The Politics of Race, Class & Nationalism in Twentieth Century South Africa* (1987).
2. I have translated all the quotes from Afrikaans texts into English.

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Bob Dylan and the Dialectic of Enlightenment

Critical Lyricist in the Age of High Capitalism

Tony Fluxman

Henry Miller said it: 'The role of an artist is to inoculate the world with disillusionment'.¹

Bob Dylan appears as a complex and indeed paradoxical phenomenon. For a start, Dylan has probably altered his ideological stance more often than any other figure of mass culture. Positions he has adopted include being the darling of the folk left in the early sixties, the leader and pace-setter of the counter-culture (at least during the mid-1960s), espouser of archetypal love, mystical poet, Hasidic Jew, and most recently, a *born again* Christian. He is at once the incisive critic of the multiplicity of forms of life in modern capitalist America and at the same time the patron of its most naive forms of consciousness.

There are a number of studies of Dylan's work. Much has been written concerning Dylan's biography,² his lyrics³ and his music.⁴ Although the political meaning of his songs has been discussed in the literature, no attempt has been made to look at his overall development from this perspective; more specifically, no attempt has been made to examine in a systematic manner Dylan's social critique. Dylan at his best, the author will argue, is a profound critic of the forms of domination in late capitalist society.

The complex nature of Bob Dylan's critique can be fruitfully explored, by examining his work in the light of Horkheimer's and Adorno's dialectical exploration of late capitalist society in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Horkheimer and Adorno seek to understand why, despite the great developments in science and technology, humanity 'instead of entering into a truly human condition, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism.'⁵

The essence of the Enlightenment tradition is emancipatory: its goal is to overcome the myths which keep humanity in a state of thralldom and fear and this it does by replacing human fancy with scientific knowledge.⁶ Much of the thrust of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is to show how the realization of this Enlightenment goal has had

the paradoxical result of producing new structures of myth, fear and domination, instead of the emancipated state of affairs that was its original motivation. In realizing itself Enlightenment has 'forgotten' its original emancipatory inspiration. The function of thought has been reduced to the universal rational administration of particular processes and things (human as well as natural) and the task of comprehending the *totality* of the socio-economic system which Enlightenment originally helped bring into being is repressed. Reason now concerns itself only with positive facts and their ordering according to universal scientific laws.

According to Horkheimer and Adorno, without a theoretical orientation to the whole, social phenomena can only be organized for purposes of domination; as a result the foundations of the social structure are left untouched. Worse, the existent socio-scientific system takes on the character of the mythical realities it was supposed to supersede. This is because in 'both the pregnancy of the mythical image and the clarity of the scientific formula, the everlastingness of the factual is confirmed.'⁷ Science, because it is concerned with the lawfulness of positive facts only, construes the factual as falsely inevitable. This is completely analogous to the behaviour of classical myth – the status-quo is enshrined as cyclical (that is, eternal), subject to fate, and hence without hope of transformation.⁸

For Horkheimer and Adorno the development of capitalist social relations is intimately connected with the Enlightenment inspired scientific rationalization of the environment. The levelling down of all forms of experience to scientifically repeatable formulas is the origin of the universal measurement of all goods in terms of their exchange-value, the *sine qua non* of the capitalist economy. Since everything is regarded as measurable, all things can in principle be exchanged with one another.⁹ Just as the application of science and technology is extended to all spheres of society, so too does society increasingly fall under the sway of the laws of the market-place until even culture itself has become a fully-fledged capitalist industry.

By using the schemas of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* it is hoped that we can throw some light on the development of Dylan's critique from the early 1960s to the present. There has been some resistance to discussing the *meaning* of Dylan's songs, as opposed to the techniques by which Dylan achieves his effects. J. Herdman, for example, has expressed reservations about interpreting the content of Dylan's material.¹⁰ For example, Herdman alerts us to interpretations of Dylan songs which refer to drugs or sexual matters; sometimes these references are taken as constituting the whole meaning of the song.¹¹ Nevertheless, the claim that some Dylan interpretation is distorted does not imply that all Dylan interpretation need be. That is a

non-sequitur. Moreover one can hardly avoid providing accounts of meaning. All great art intends meanings, even if the artist himself is not completely aware of the meaning of the work. The effectiveness of a work surely depends, to an important extent, on the meaning. Contrary to Herdman's position, it does not seem possible to comprehend the effectiveness of the techniques used by an artist without examining the meanings he or she intends. This article focuses on the meaning of Dylan's songs. It is unapologetically an exercise in interpretation. The author attempts to utilize a powerful and influential social theory, that of Horkheimer's and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, to do so. The usage of this material is not meant to put Dylan in a theoretical box, but to facilitate an understanding of the development of the political ideas in his songs.

It should also be noted that the examination here will be restricted almost entirely to Dylan's lyrics. To include a discussion of the music in an overall investigation of Dylan's critical vision would be a mammoth task, much bigger than can be done in the scope of an article. This analysis must therefore be considered incomplete. Dylan is first and foremost a songwriter, even though his works have been compared to the great poets.¹² The real effect of his lyrics can be gauged only from listening to his songs. In order to at least partially offset this limitation, the analysis provided here has been developed through listening to Dylan's songs. Though the analysis must be taken as provisional, the author is of the opinion that musical analysis would confirm the arguments made here.

II

Dylan's work can be divided into different periods. The first phase proper we may refer to as the 'protest phase'; this is the period in which Dylan produced a number of well-known protest songs, including 'Blowing in the Wind' and 'Masters of War'.¹³

Much of the content of the songs of the 'protest' period has to do with the destructive effects of Enlightenment society, especially its effects on its weakest and most down-trodden members. But the songs of this period do not provide a picture of the overall character of this system. Certainly, in songs like 'Masters of War',¹⁴ Dylan singles out the perpetrators of war who, he claims, 'hide behind desks' and who try to 'deceive' us into thinking that 'a world war can be won'. The tone of 'Masters of War' is one of moral outrage. The powers-that-be are rebuked for their complete inhumanity: 'Even Jesus would never/Forgive what you do.' However the song does not examine the

actual social mechanisms that lie behind the power of the war-mongers.

Some songs do explore this dimension. Thus 'Only a Pawn in Their Game'¹⁵ is concerned with more than just the story of the killing of Medgar Evers, an important civil rights campaigner of the 1950s. It is firstly an analysis of the personality of the kind of white man who engages in such deeds: he is mindlessly obedient ('like a dog on a chain'), he is herd-like ('he's taught to walk in a pack') and psychopathic (he kills 'with no pain'). Secondly, Dylan shows us how racist ideology is much more than just a set of irrational beliefs; it is one of the chief mechanisms employed by the rulers for the maintenance of their domination over all men, black and white:

And the Negro's name
Is used it is plain
For the politician's gain
As he rises to fame
And the poor white remains
On the caboose of the train.¹⁶

Thus in these early songs Dylan manifests an unusual ability to portray the machinations behind individual cases of injustice in a way which gives us a glimpse of the real America and which constantly judges it according to its self-proclaimed ideals, and finds it wanting. Moreover, Dylan's intention in this period is to stir people to action, to encourage protest and social action in the hope of realizing liberal goals. There is faith in radical political transformation, and a kind of utopian longing as made evident in for example, the song 'When the Ship Comes In'. Here 'ship' is a metaphor for freedom and the message is that when the ship does come in justice will be achieved and all moral debts will be repaid: 'the sun will respect every face on the deck' and the 'foes' will 'be drowned in the tide/ And like Goliath, they'll be conquered.'¹⁷

By the time of his fourth album, *Another Side of Bob Dylan*, Dylan has begun to question his role as protest songwriter. And yet at the same time the album contains a more sophisticated critical perspective than hitherto. In 'Motorpsycho Nightmare',¹⁸ for example, Dylan presents himself as a fictional character, on the run from the typical American farmer, who is overwhelmingly driven by the desire for self-preservation and fear of the unknown. The narrator (a medical student) seeking a place to stay, is greeted by a cocked rifle. Eventually he is allowed to stay over on condition he leaves the farmer's daughter alone and milks the cow in the morning. The daughter, who unfortunately turns out to be a female Tony Perkins,

invites Dylan into the shower. Dylan manages to escape only by invoking Castro's name, thus rousing the farmer, who attempts to punch him, flings a *Reader's Digest* at him and then tries to shoot him.

In this ballad, Dylan has captured Horkheimer's and Adorno's characterization of the bourgeois estate-holder as one who operates according to the Enlightenment principle of bringing all alien phenomena under rational administration. For this Enlightenment individual 'nothing at all may remain outside, because the mere outsideness is the very source of fear.'¹⁹ The prototype of this individual is Odysseus who rationally administers all his possessions – animals, lands, women – and whose governing principles throughout all his voyages are utility and self-preservation. Thus the various mythical entities Odysseus encounters on his voyages are all eventually brought under control to suit these ends. For the farmer likewise anything foreign is a source of fear and must be tamed or otherwise eliminated – the medical student with urban ways, Castro, etc. Furthermore, the relationship must be one of utility and exchange. Largesse is ruled out: Dylan can only stay if he milks the cow.

As we noted, by this stage Dylan has become disenchanted with art being tied to political protest. Thus in 'My Back Pages' he derides the simplicity of his earlier protest vision: 'equality' he spoke 'As if a wedding vow', uttered 'Lies that life is black and white' and strode around like a political musketeer with 'Crimson flames tied through my ears'.²⁰ The refrain of the song emphasizes quite effectively that he views his earlier commitment as staid. The ironic use of 'older' and 'younger' indicates this rather well: 'Ah, but I was so much older then, / I'm younger than that now.'²¹

Dylan now describes his intention of developing what he describes as a more authentic basis for song-writing: 'Me I don't write for people any more. You know to be a spokesman. From now on I want to write from inside me . . .'²²

What is strikingly different from the previous material is that the tone is not at all one of moral outrage. Dylan does not rely here on some pre-established truth in terms of which reality is to be judged. Instead, the social criticism has an internal character to it: in merely presenting a sequence involving typical events and values he is able to show that the underlying basis of the so-called normal and acceptable values of property and order are violence and fear. It would not be mistaken to suggest that Dylan is engaging in the kind of criticism which Adorno regards as genuinely critical. This criticism, according to Adorno, 'takes seriously the principle that it is not ideology in itself which is untrue but rather its pretension to correspond to reality. Immanent criticism of intellectual and artistic phenomena seeks to

grasp, through their analysis of their form and meaning, the contradiction between their objective idea and that pretension.²³

Adorno is referring to the work of the cultural critic but there is no reason in principle why the artist cannot be considered a kind of cultural critic himself, engaging in immanent criticism of the forms of mass culture and mass society in general. In any case, society continually makes claims as to its own nature and the artist or social critic is perfectly justified in judging their correspondence with the reality he experiences.

Dylan's immanent criticism is most evident in the last verse of 'Motorpsycho Nightmare':

He still waits for me
Constant, on the sly.
He wants to turn me in
to the F.B.I.

Me, I romp and stomp
Thankful as I romp
Without freedom of speech
I might be in the swamp.²⁴

Clearly, Dylan is being ironic here; there can be no freedom of speech in a society dominated by violent and paranoid homesteaders. Dylan's critique is internal. The notion that a society built on bourgeois individualist principles will result in freedom and tolerance is shown to be mere illusion when its actual nature is revealed.

III

After this album Dylan moves away unambiguously from explicit political concerns. Contrary perhaps to expectation, this move does not lead to the abandonment of social critique, but, on the contrary, to its deepening. According to Gray, Dylan's aesthetic undergoes a profound change at about the time of the fifth album, *Bringing It All Back Home*: there is a new sophistication in the lyrics.²⁵ Gray observes astutely that, despite the move away from explicit protest, Dylan does not really change his political ideology. From our perspective what happens is that protest gets replaced by social critique.

The focus of Dylan's critique is the contents of his own experience; social institutions are approached through the artist's own experience. It is precisely through presenting the social world through his own experience enables the sensitive individual to reveal the manifold

social relationships and social structures around him. By being sensitive to the various alienating situations he finds himself in, Dylan is able to capture the varied and subtle ways in which Enlightenment society maintains its control.

According to Adorno, the refusal of *explicit* political commitment on the part of an artist does not necessarily mean that the artist's work is likely to be less than fully critical. Adorno explains how the move away from explicit commitment can nevertheless be accompanied by a more penetrating criticism.²⁶ In this regard he cites Beckett and Kafka, neither of whose works express a definite political content, but which nonetheless, in Adorno's view, contain a much greater understanding of the effects of the law of modern society on the human situation than do explicitly committed works of art.²⁷

These remarks are applicable to Dylan's development. The work that immediately follows Dylan's change of heart demonstrates a far more penetrating critique than the earlier social criticism. This critique is developed in three classic albums from the mid-1960s: *Bringing It All Back Home*, *Highway 61 Revisited*, and *Blonde on Blonde*. In these albums Dylan provides us with an extremely powerful account of how controlled, unspontaneous, and petty, life in late capitalist society has become.

The critique in these works is immanent: Dylan stands within late capitalist society and reveals to us the real meaning of the realization of Enlightenment. He shows that far from facilitating the development of individuality and the conditions for the maintenance of individual freedom, Enlightenment bears down crushingly on individuals until they are scarcely able to maintain a sense of their own particular identities. Some of this material can almost be considered an artistic representation of Horkheimer's and Adorno's theoretical critique in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

For Horkheimer and Adorno, the processes of scientific abstraction and rationalization in capitalist society lead to the denial of the uniqueness of human individuals as well as the uniqueness of natural phenomena. Individuals count only in so far as they belong to the 'unity of the manipulated collective'²⁸, that is, only insofar as they all follow the dictates of Enlightenment society in the same way. Dylan's well-known 'It's Alright Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)' gives artistic form to Horkheimer's and Adorno's perspective.

The whole of 'It's Alright Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)' – a talking blues which develops by way of ever-increasing crescendos – is precisely about the economic, social and political mechanisms that force or entice individuals to give up every aspect of their possible individuality. True individuality, in such a society, is one massive illusion. Not only is the individual profoundly deformed so that he fits

into society's mould – he 'Gargles in the rat-race choir/Bent out of shape from society's pliers' – but instead of showing any resistance he tries to reduce all other members of society to his pitiable state: he 'Cares not to come up any higher/But rather gets you down in the hole/That he's in'.²⁹

Everything that has the potential to enhance is turned into an instrument of exploitation. Thus, education which should enrich the individual is only significant because it 'can lead to hundred-dollar plates'³⁰, and children, who are supposed to be valued for themselves, are cultivated by their parents as if they were 'nothing more than something' to 'invest in'.³¹ Furthermore, morality becomes immorality when it is turned into sexual repression: 'Old lady judges watch people in pairs/Limited in sex, they dare/To push fake morals, insult and stare'.³² And the invitation to solidarity is used for purposes of psychological exploitation:

Alone you stand with nobody near
When a trembling distant voice, unclear
Startles your sleeping ears to hear
That somebody thinks
They really found you.³³

What Enlightenment society requires is set out precisely: the commoditization of oneself in every aspect of life, from birth to death; only in this way can one succeed. If education and children are means of making money, so too is religion. Christmas is reduced to 'flesh-colored Christs that glow in the dark'.³⁴ In 'Desolation Row', (a song with ten long verses with simple guitar and mouth organ accompaniment), the details of this dehumanization are carefully laid out. The song's terrifying first line explains just how all-pervasive commoditization is: 'They're selling postcards of the hanging.'³⁵ Even death is made into a repository of exchange-value. The song provides a coherent picture of how the various repressive institutions of Enlightenment society combine to produce a world which, in Adorno's apt phrasing, is becoming more and more like 'an open-air prison'.³⁶ This is brought out most forcefully in the following chilling verse:

Now at midnight all the agents
And the superhuman crew
Come out and round up everyone
That knows more than they do
Then they bring them to the factory
Where the heart-attack machine

Is strapped across their shoulders
And then the kerosene
Is brought down from the castles
By insurance men who go
Check to see that nobody is escaping
To Desolation Row.³⁷

The whole panoply of controls is set out here: first there is thought control, then labour, which engenders disease, and finally death. It is even suggested that the latter two are produced by design as further means of accumulation and are not merely the accidental product of an exploitative system.

But besides dramatizing the extremely regulated nature of this society and its crippling effects, the song also shows us that the system is out of control. Violence is latent: 'the riot squad they're restless/ They need somewhere to go'.³⁸ Moreover the system is tending towards disaster. The metaphor for the system as a whole is the 'Titanic' which 'sails at dawn'³⁹ (portending the destruction of a supposedly perfect technological creation) and the future is so bleak that the 'fortune-telling lady' no longer even desires to predict it, for she 'has taken all her things inside'.⁴⁰

As in 'It's Alright Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)', everything is inverted in 'Desolation Row'. Thus for example intelligence has been made stupid, if not pitiful – Dylan speaks of Einstein in the following terms:

He looked so immaculately frightful
As he bummed a cigarette
Then he went off sniffing drainpipes
And reciting the alphabet.

Clearly something is radically wrong when perhaps the most original mind of the twentieth century has been reduced to reciting the alphabet.

Further, love and sex have been perverted by manuals on how to succeed:

They're spoonfeeding Casanova
To get him to feel more assured
Then they'll kill him with self-confidence
After poisoning him with words.⁴²

Youthful vitality becomes premature old age. Referring to Ophelia who represents burgeoning womanhood, Dylan sings:

She is already an old maid
To her, death is quite romantic.⁴³

Dylan has rendered the crippling dialectic of modern society in a very powerful manner. As 'Desolation Row' presents it, modern society is ungovernable. Moreover it has a mythical character to it. It is a 'purely' factual reality. As we remarked earlier, modern myth and classical myth are analogous. In both 'systems' reality is subject to fate and, as a result, unpredictable. However, there is a crucial difference. In ancient society nature was the primary focus of myth. Nature was construed as fate because humanity had not yet learnt how to control it and shape it according to human goals (through science and technology). Now precisely because humanity has learnt more or less how to deal with it, nature has essentially ceased to be a mythical entity. But society more than ever remains mythical. It is outside human control and determines the opportunities and life-chances of human beings as if it were pure fate.

Though Dylan's focus is on the subjective effects of the system – the many ways in which it controls and distorts people's lives – it is quite clear that he does not regard the system as somehow inevitable. The metaphor of the 'Titanic' emphasizes cogently that Enlightenment society is essentially a human project which has gone out of control, even if not a very successful one, and not simply a 'natural' socio-economic process, which human beings will inevitably have to conform to as best they can.

Dylan no longer believes that a definite political solution is available. Nor does he even suggest that the system is alterable. The only authentic response is that offered by 'Desolation Row' itself. This is where Enlightenment society's victims arrive and Dylan has to recreate their identities:

All these people that you mention
Yes, I know them, they're quite lame
I had to rearrange their faces
And give them all another name.⁴⁴

The songs that follow *Highway 61 Revisited*, the album containing 'Desolation Row', (collected in the double album *Blonde on Blonde*) are less concerned with presenting a picture of the nature of the overall forces that distort individuality than with the individual's frustrating attempts to find *meaning* in the nightmare of confusion that he is surrounded by. In one sense Dylan's critique is deeper here. Though the individual was continually assailed in 'Desolation Row' and 'It's Alright Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)', he still had the courage to declare:

'all is phony';⁴⁵ he still had the capacity to strive for an authentic existence, albeit in the midst of a dehumanized reality. In *Blonde on Blonde* Dylan explores the subjective effects of the inverted world of late capitalism. In *Blonde on Blonde* the process of dehumanization is shown to be extreme: one is left with the impression that the individual cannot divorce himself sufficiently from the system to be able to condemn it. The madness and chaos reach right down into his personal relationships and even threaten to undermine his very identity.

Thus, for example, 'I want you' shows the narrator as would-be-lover surrounded by a world of meaningless actions and inverted values. Desire is continually impinged upon by pathetic characters symbolized by a jaded band:

The silver saxophones say I should refuse you
The cracked bells and washed out horns
Blow into my face with scorn.⁴⁶

Moreover everything is out of place. Thus:

The drunken politician leaps
Upon the street where mothers weep
And the saviours who are fast asleep
They wait for you.⁴⁷

All forms of behaviour are completely inappropriate, if not downright callous. Everything stands in the way of desire's satisfaction. Then Dylan shows in marvellously concise terms the castrating effects of social reality:

And I wait for them to interrupt
Me drinkin' from my *broken cup*. [my emphasis, T.F.]⁴⁸

'Rainy Day Women 12 & 35'⁴⁹ extends the castration of the individual to all spheres of social life. In this bizarre reality every move any person makes is attacked, undermined and thwarted. Every line begins with 'They'll stone you', (which should be taken in both its original Biblical sense as well as its more modern): 'They'll stone you' when you are 'young and able', when you are at 'home', 'alone', 'walking to the door', 'walking on the floor', at 'the breakfast table', when 'you're trying to make a buck', and moreover say 'good luck!' Each of the five verses is set to exactly the same blues progression and is accompanied by uproarious shrieks of delight in the background (shrieks which express more an atmosphere of madness than of joy).

Thus Dylan alludes to all the structures of social life that frustrate, in every possible way, individuals' attempts to realize just their basic needs: these structures include family, bureaucracy, police, employers, restaurant owners, etc.

These themes in effect illustrate Horkheimer's and Adorno's maxim that 'the supreme law' of the culture industry is people 'shall not satisfy their desires at any price'.⁵⁰ Obviously, this can be extended to capitalist society as a whole and not just the culture industry. For Horkheimer and Adorno, Enlightenment society is built upon 'the threat of castration'.⁵¹ Dylan is vividly portraying the multiple aspects of this process.

IV

After *Blonde on Blonde* Dylan once again changes direction more drastically. He embarks on a complete self-criticism, and one which involves a decisive move away from any concern with social critique. *John Wesley Harding*, the album which succeeds *Blonde and Blonde*, was produced eighteen months later. This is striking given that Dylan had produced *Bringing it All Back Home*, *Highway 61 Revisited* and *Blonde on Blonde*, all between March 1965 and May 1966. Dylan had had a serious motorcycle accident in July 1966. And given the long delay until the next album, Dylan probably had been doing some rethinking. *John Wesley Harding* has been interpreted as a sustained self-criticism by Dylan. The album moves through various disavowals of Dylan's earlier roles of social critic and counter-culture hero to his final embracing of the personal realm (specifically that of heterosexual love) as the arena for salvation. The metaphorical framework for the album is the Bible and continual reference is made to the Christ-like position that Dylan was placed in by his followers. Dylan regards his acceptance of the role of social prophet as responsible for having this huge burden placed on his shoulders;⁵² he is no longer willing to be the vehicle through which people discover the truth about Enlightenment society and through this perhaps find some authentic response. Many authors have remarked on the causes of this shift. These include the motor cycle accident and Dylan's rejection of the 'messiah' role that had been foisted upon him and which he had accepted, as *John Wesley Harding* indicates.

He feels driven to escape from an involvement in what he now views as merely the interminable confusions of society. At first the escape mechanism is love. The last song on *John Wesley Harding* indicates that in love people find complete fulfilment:

Close your eyes, close the door
 You don't have to worry anymore
 I'll be your baby tonight.⁵³

The 'door' on the world is to be truly shut. Salvation lies in the personal arena, which can be safely secluded from the complex and evil machinations of society. This perspective is developed in later albums. Earlier, we remarked on how Dylan shifted from protest to personal experience; yet we observed also that the personal experience was still conceived of as being within a socio-political network. The concentration on the 'personal' now, as we shall see, is such that the socio-political arena is entirely excluded from consideration. The result is that the self no longer functions as a mirror reflecting the various mechanisms of social control. Instead truth is located wholly within the context of personal relations and any attempt to find meaning in society, even if that meaning exists only as a kind of 'negative critique',⁵⁴ is an exercise which at best gets nowhere and, at worst, produces only more suffering.

The albums that follow *John Wesley Harding* are not particularly exciting. These albums⁵⁵ have been variously regarded as belonging to a distinctly non-innovative period. At any rate, they do not offer any particular insights into the development of Dylan's politics.⁵⁶ It is only with *Planet Waves* (1974) that the lyrics again become interesting. Here Dylan embarks on a direct critique of politics, as set out in 'Dirge'.⁵⁷ The song can be considered as a kind of reprise of Dylan's earlier political past. Here, unlike *John Wesley Harding* (in which politics was merely pushed into the background), the socio-political vision is explicitly repudiated:

Heard your songs of freedom
 And man forever stripped
 Acting out his folly
 While his back is being whipped
 Like a slave in orbit
 He's beaten till he's tame
 All for a moment's glory
 It's a dirty rotten shame.⁵⁸

Clearly, to even thus think of changing the socio-political reality is a pathetic illusion – the political animal is a naked and essentially powerless creature, inevitably beaten back into submission. The word 'orbit' suggests that the political project amounts to nothing more than an eternal cycle of actions which only results in the same pitiable human condition.

With this Dylan has reversed his earlier position with respect to Enlightenment society. In his mid-1960s period he demonstrated that Enlightenment society had taken on the character of myth, but it was still evident that Enlightenment society was at a bottom a human project. Now for the first time Dylan affirms its mythical status. The message of 'Dirge' is that the human situation is unchangeable, eternal, and thus the equivalent of a natural phenomenon.

In fact politics is itself reduced to being part of the 'myth' of Enlightenment society:

So sing your praise of progress
And of the Doom Machine
The naked truth is still taboo
Whenever it can be seen.⁵⁹

For Dylan here, the myth of Enlightenment society is progress. Progress is equated with scientific and technological domination: domination over all that is unique and good; and politics is inescapably part of the technological enterprise, that is, the 'Doom Machine'. Technology and science have a life of their own, a mythical character, and this reality is wholly bad in its effects. There is no attempt to present a more dialectical view; social institutions (which of course, include science and technology) are regarded in a purely negative light. The potential for liberation (expressed even in *Blonde on Blonde* as a point of authenticity within the madness, and which produced such astute commentary) finds no place here. The only valid response, according to Dylan here, is to find a personal authentic vision. The only path to truth in this 'age of fiberglass' is 'solitude'.⁶⁰

Of course, this purely personal vision is an impossibility. This is quite clear from Dylan's own earlier analysis: the individual can hardly be expected to escape from a society whose effects reach right down into the core of his personal identity. The whole idea of a self-sufficient private sphere is an illusion – social questions continually impinge upon it. That this is so is also evident from Dylan's quest henceforth to find a purely personal truth. He will continually return to analyse and criticise the society and its evil effects. This is because the person searching for a safe personal vision is forced like everyone else to deal with the never-ending encroachment of society upon him.

From now onwards Dylan directs himself to finding this personal truth. His work of the seventies indicates that this 'truth' becomes less this-worldly. Once Dylan has disposed of social critique, he is led ineluctably towards the pursuit of a transcendental truth. This has

direct bearings on his art. He continues to condemn modern society for its many failings. But his criticism is no longer immanent. Instead Enlightenment society is criticized because it does not conform to an a priori set of moral and religious principles. Ironically, he now reverts to the artistic position which characterized his protest period; social reality is once again evaluated from a standpoint external to it.

Planet Waves marks a creative period which lasts up to the release of *Street Legal* (1978). There is much fine material in the albums that follow *Planet Waves* – *Blood on the Tracks* and *Desire*. The former offers an incisive look at the disappointments in personal relationships; the work is to some extent an expression of Dylan's attempts to save his marriage.⁶¹ Neither album gives particular insight into the development of Dylan's political perspective. It is *Street Legal* which brings Dylan's relationship to society back into focus.

Street Legal chronicles Dylan's return to searching for the 'naked truth'. The album indicates that 'truth' will be religious. Material satisfactions are portrayed as false. In *Street Legal* society is condemned because of its denial of religious meaning. The secular world is a false world, whatever it might offer – material pleasures are placed along with politics in the realm of illusion. The secular world disturbs the search for authenticity. It allows no 'time to prepare/For the victim that's there!'⁶² Everything is satirized as either perverted or inverted. There are a myriad seductions which lead us away from Christ. The real world is filled with 'all these decoys' – 'China Doll, alcohol'⁶³ (emphasizing the plastic, the superficial and the disorderly), 'duality, mortality'⁶⁴ (emphasizing the distortions of any world view that denies the omnipresence of God). Temporal solutions to anything are of course illusory, merely further aspects of society's repudiation of the truth. 'Socialism' is equated with 'hypnotism', 'materialism' with 'patriotism'.⁶⁵ And in tones reminiscent of 'Dirge', all we can really expect from socialism, capitalism, or indeed any social system is continued domination – in reality, imprisonment and torture:

Fools making laws
For the breaking of jaws
And the sound of the keys
As they clink.⁶⁶

At one level there is a strong similarity between the 'critique' offered here, and the earlier one. Both criticisms focus on inversion – everything is the opposite of what it should be. However, the critiques are fundamentally dissimilar. The inversions discussed earlier were distortions of the system itself. Dylan portrayed rather vividly how

late capitalist society failed to realize the potential within it, in a variety of different ways. The understanding of this inversion was based on an immanent analysis. Now things are only the opposite of what they should be because they do not realize Christian potential. Here the real world is God; the apparent one, secular existence. This critique cannot be immanent: it presupposes an *a priori* set of values. As a result it adds little insight into the failings of modern society.

Although there is nothing particularly illuminating in *Street Legal* about the mechanisms of oppression in modern capitalism the imagery is still evocative. This changes drastically once the struggle between flesh and spirit has been resolved and Dylan has embraced a full-blown Christianity (represented in the two albums that follow *Street Legal* – *Slow Train Coming* and *Saved*).

The effect of this new religious certainty is that Dylan's social criticism degenerates further – to the level of clichéd denunciation. In *Slow Train Coming*, the artist is so convinced of the indubitability of his vision that he does not deem it necessary any longer to convince via the power of his images. Dylan's use of language has become almost entirely literal and has the subtlety of the discourse of a Southern Bible thumper. Thus for example:

There's a Man on the Cross
And He's been crucified for you
Believe in His power
That's about all you gotta do.⁶⁷

Moreover the 'critique' of society, if one can call it that, is merely a *re*-presentation of the platitudes of the popular consciousness (and one with a disturbingly right-wing drift). Thus the 'rich seduce the poor', the 'young' the 'old', 'adulterers' are appointed as 'judges', there is 'pornography in the schools'. And characteristically the song gives expression to the ideological standpoint most commonly found amongst the lower-middle classes, who are highly suspicious of working class movements as well as big business. Both the agents of imperial control and those who oppose them are condemned:

Counterfeit philosophers have polluted all of your thoughts
Karl Marx has got ya by the throat
Henry Kissinger's got you tied you up in knots.⁶⁸

In fact it becomes clear that the Fundamentalist attitude is scarcely able to offer a criticism of society at all. Its actual function is, on the contrary, to affirm the existing state of affairs (whilst appearing, no doubt, to be uncompromisingly critical). In 'Gotta Serve Some-

body'⁶⁹ (also on *Slow Train Coming*) the message is, whatever your circumstances (you may 'own banks', you may be a 'construction worker', a 'state trooper', you may 'like to wear silk', etc.) you still have to serve Christ. But the sub-text is that, whatever one's place in the hierarchy, one will continue to serve in the essentially unalterable socio-economic system. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the 'Christ' that we are being exhorted to pay homage to is not much more than a mystified representation of the *status quo*, that is, the domination of capitalist relations over all of modern society.

Dylan has come full circle. His philosophical scheme has become implicated with the Enlightenment society he inveighed against earlier. To have an authentic vision now is to ignore the historical side of reality and to recognize only 'the things that remain' (that is, Christian eschatology). The man of faith claims to have transcended Enlightenment society with his religious vision but he does so only in his thought – in his religious experience – and not in reality. In effect, enlightenment society remains as it is and the religious man is perfectly reconciled to it.⁷⁰

V

Dylan's more recent work (what we might call his post-Fundamentalist phase) has done nothing really to alter the analysis offered here. Certainly he has repudiated his simplified vision of the good life (in *Empire Burlesque* his rejection is most clearly stated: 'Never could learn to drink that blood/And call it wine').⁷¹ At the same time Dylan has given up the platitudinous style that went with it. He continues to provide social criticism. Yet most of the writing remains at the level of denunciation: an attack on corruption and the inversion of values.

The basic paradigm remains the same. One exception seems to be the song, 'Jokerman' (on *Infidels*), which offers a fairly subtle critique of modern, scientific man. Modern man originally had the potential to create a decent world:

You were born with a snake in both of your fists
While a hurricane was blowing
Freedom just around the corner for you.⁷²

In the period of late capitalism's slow decline modern man is helpless to stop the evil around him:

It's a shadowy world, skies are slippery gray
 A woman just gave birth to a prince today
 And dressed him in scarlet
 He'll put the priest in his pocket,
 Put the blade to the heat
 Take the motherless children off the street
 And place them at the feet of a harlot
 Jokerman you know what he wants
*You don't show any response.*⁷³ [my emphasis, T.F.]

Modern man has completely conquered nature ('You're a man of the mountains, you can walk on the clouds')⁷⁴. But he can do nothing to stop the destruction around him. He has become indifferent to it: the violence, the distorted uses to which religion is put, the poverty, the prostitution, etc. In the face of all this the man of progress has become merely a 'jokerman'. Yet in spite of these subtle and sometimes lavish descriptions of the decaying society, Dylan does not really comprehend its inner dynamic. All political activity is still equally pointless, violence of either side is simply equated. Dylan sings:

Nightsticks and water cannons, tear gas, padlocks,
 Molotov cocktails and rocks behind every curtain.⁷⁵

There is state violence and there is 'terrorism'. That is all. Contrary to the earlier period, there is scant understanding of what the causes of all this violence and counter-violence might be. Indeed Dylan's comprehension of the causes is weaker now than even in the protest period, during which, despite not having a grasp of the overall system, Dylan had given an account of some of the deeper causes of the violence and suffering. This deterioration in his political understanding is shown most dramatically in the song 'Neighbourhood Bully', (on *Infidels*). The song endorses without hesitation Israel's actions in the Middle East. The invasion of Lebanon is described as knocking out 'a lynch mob' (the PLO), and the bombing of Beirut is characterized as merely destroying a 'bomb factory'.⁷⁶

Because Dylan's perspective is still an external one he cannot perceive the forces that work *systematically* to create both the deprivation and destruction as well as the various responses to it. Because he does not adopt a systematic approach, which can only be gained from an immanent perspective, he can only concentrate on surface phenomena. For example, he reacts to the overt violence, but is blind to the deeper, far reaching yet less observable systemic violence he portrayed so carefully in *Desolation Row*.⁷⁷ And so it is not surprising that he takes reactionary positions on many issues.

Dylan seems 'condemned' to repeat the search for a higher, transcendental truth. This is indeed the only chance of 'salvation' for one who can no longer situate himself in the midst of Enlightenment society and open himself up to reveal its multiple, complex and yet, contradictory reality. Such a person has thus rendered himself incapable of perceiving whatever potentially progressive forces there might exist within it.

VI

Hopefully this discussion of Dylan's work has revealed the pitfalls of commitment for the artist. Dylan, through his relentless search for a positive reality that would secure the individual from the ravages of society, has given us convincing evidence of this. But at the same time Dylan's earlier work showed that it is indeed possible for a popular artist to produce a devastating and uncompromising critique of enlightenment society in spite of the latter's awesome cultural totalitarian tendencies (here I am perhaps more optimistic than the authors of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*⁷⁸). However it is true that few can rise to this level and to do so demands the most resolute refusal to embrace illusory though consoling positive doctrines.

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DISCOGRAPHY

This is not a complete discography. It does not include albums that are compilations of Dylan's songs or recordings of live performances.

- | | |
|---|-----------------------------------|
| <i>Bob Dylan</i> (1962) | <i>Planet Waves</i> (1974) |
| <i>The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan</i> (1963) | <i>Blood on the Tracks</i> (1975) |
| <i>The Times They Are A-Changin'</i> (1964) | <i>Desire</i> (1976) |
| <i>Another Side of Bob Dylan</i> (1964) | <i>Street Legal</i> (1978) |
| <i>Bringing It All Back Home</i> (1965) | <i>Slow Train Coming</i> (1979) |
| <i>Highway 61 Revisited</i> (1965) | <i>Saved</i> (1980) |
| <i>Blonde on Blonde</i> (1966) | <i>Shot of Love</i> (1981) |
| <i>John Wesley Harding</i> (1968) | <i>Infidels</i> (1983) |
| <i>Nashville Skyline</i> (1969) | <i>Empire Burlesque</i> (1985) |
| <i>Self-Portrait</i> (1970) | <i>Knocked Out Loaded</i> (1986) |
| <i>New Morning</i> (1970) | <i>Oh Mercy</i> (1989) |
| <i>Pat Garrett & Billy the Kid</i> (1973) | |

NOTES

1. B. Dylan, Interview, *Playboy*, Chicago: March, 1978), p. 80.
2. See for example, A. Scaduto, *Bob Dylan* (New York: Grosset and Dunlop, 1971), and R. Shelton, *No Direction Home: The Life and Music of Bob Dylan* (Sevenoaks: New English Library, 1986).
3. See especially M. Gray, *The Art of Bob Dylan* (New York: St. Martins, 1981), but also J. Herdman, *Voice Without Restraint* (New York: Delilah, 1982).
4. See *The Art of Bob Dylan* and W. Mellers, *A Darker Shade of Pale* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984).
5. M. Horkheimer and T.W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1982), p. xi.
6. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pp.3 ff.
7. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 27.
8. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 27.
9. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pp. 120 ff.
10. *Voice Without Restraint*, pp. 12–13.
11. Songs such as 'Just Like a Woman' (*Blonde on Blonde*) and 'Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues' (*Highway 61 Revisited*) are good examples. See B. Dylan, *Lyrics* (London: Paladin, 1988), pp.315, 345–346.
12. See *The Art of Bob Dylan*.
13. *Lyrics*, pp. 77, 81–83. This phase starts with the second album, his first, *Bob Dylan*, consists predominantly of covers of other artists, mainly blues.
14. *Lyrics*, pp. 81–83.
15. *Lyrics*, pp. 138–139.
16. *Lyrics*, p. 138.
17. *Lyrics*, pp. 142–143.
18. *Lyrics*, pp. 205–208.
19. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 16.
20. *Lyrics*, p. 209.
21. *Lyrics*, p. 209.
22. Quoted in A. Scaduto, *Bob Dylan*, p. 180.
23. T. W. Adorno, *Prisms* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1981), p. 32.
24. *Lyrics*, p. 208
25. *The Art of Bob Dylan*, p. 137.
26. T. W. Adorno, 'Commitment', in E. Bloch et al, *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: NLB, 1977), pp. 190–191.
27. *Aesthetics and Politics*, pp. 190–191.
28. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 13.
29. *Lyrics*, p. 277.
30. *Lyrics*, p. 276.
31. *Lyrics*, p. 277.
32. *Lyrics*, p. 278.
33. *Lyrics*, p. 276.
34. *Lyrics*, p. 276.
35. *Lyrics*, p. 311.
36. *Prisms*, p. 34.
37. *Lyrics*, pp. 313–314.
38. *Lyrics*, p. 311.
39. *Lyrics*, p. 314.
40. *Lyrics*, p. 311.
41. *Lyrics*, p. 312.
42. *Lyrics*, p. 313.
43. *Lyrics*, p. 312.
44. *Lyrics*, p. 314.
45. *Lyrics*, p. 278.
46. *Lyrics*, p. 337.
47. *Lyrics*, p. 337.
48. *Lyrics*, p. 337.
49. *Lyrics*, p. 331.
50. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 141.
51. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 141.
52. I am indebted to A. Scaduto, *Bob Dylan*, pp. 249 ff., for this analysis.

53. *Lyrics*, p. 387.
54. As was the case in 'Desolation Row'.
55. See *Discography*.
56. D. Anderson, *The Hollow Horn* (Munich: Hobo, 1981), pp. 145–146.
57. *Lyrics*, p. 494.
58. *Lyrics*, p. 494.
59. *Lyrics*, p. 494.
60. *Lyrics*, p. 494.
61. *No Direction Home* p. 444.
62. *Lyrics*, p. 570.
63. *Lyrics*, p. 568.
64. *Lyrics*, p. 568.
65. *Lyrics*, p. 569.
66. *Lyrics*, p. 569.
67. B. Dylan, 'When You Gonna Wake Up', *Slow Train Coming* (album: Columbia, 1979).
68. *Slow Train Coming*.
69. *Slow Train Coming*.
70. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 20. This kind of argument was originally made by Feuerbach in his critique of religion as well as Hegel's philosophy in general. See Marx's account in K. Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (New York: International Publishers, 1964), pp. 170 ff.
71. *Lyrics*, p. 680.
72. *Lyrics*, p. 659.
73. *Lyrics*, p. 660.
74. *Lyrics*, p. 659.
75. *Lyrics*, p. 660.
76. *Lyrics*, p. 665. Dylan is still prolific. He continued to produce albums throughout the eighties. We have not been able to discuss all of these. It is the author's opinion that on the whole these albums are an improvement over the strictly Christian albums: *Slow Train Coming* and *Saved*. On *Shot of Love*, for example, the lyrics are more versatile. On this album, there is a touching song about the famous subversive comedian, Lenny Bruce; and 'Heart of Mine', a song about the difficulties of loving someone and being betrayed, is particularly poignant. *Empire Burlesque* and *Knocked out Loaded* are less impressive. Aside from the long ballad 'Brownsville Girl', written with Sam Shepard, the songs on the latter are not very exciting. The lyrics on *Empire Burlesque* are particularly weak. The lines are not convincing, even when they seem to offer something; for example, in the song, 'When the Night Comes Falling from the Sky' Dylan sings: 'You will seek me and you'll find me/In the wasteland of your mind' (*Lyrics*, p. 691). This is hardly an original metaphor. *Oh Mercy* is of a different calibre, embracing what might be called a tinny Cajun blues style. This is an exciting album, instrumentally speaking, and there are some intriguing lyrics. Two especially interesting numbers are 'Man in the Long Black Coat' and 'Most of the Time'. The former contains penetrating material about the pain of loss, and the latter is an acute analysis of the confusions of self that a failed relationship can induce. This album is the most political since *Infidels*. The insecurity of life, property and the lack of justice in contemporary (that is, late eighties) America are forcefully articulated in the impressive number, 'Everything is Broken'. Yet the ideas here do not go beyond the condemnations in *Street Legal* and Dylan's criticism thus remains undialectical.
77. Even the song 'Union Sundown' (also on *Infidels*) which speaks of the decline of union power in the U.S. fails to take a systematic point of view. The 'causes' are not the *inherent* tendencies of capitalism to replace people by machines and to seek the cheapest labour it can find. The problem is due to the corruption of human beings: in this case, greed. See *Lyrics*, pp. 667–669.
78. *Dialectic of Enlightenment's* portrayal of the culture industry it is difficult to imagine a popular artist escaping what is in the author's eyes late capitalist society's almost infinite powers of co-optation.

Samuel Beckett

An Impression

Ari Sitas

It is futile to claim Samuel Beckett for any 'cause' or for any aesthetic movement: neither modernism nor post-modernism, the theatre of the absurd nor existentialism, a philosophy of withdrawal nor a fanatical moralism; each claim would have to face betrayals in Beckett's texts.

His death has finalised a complex literary work and has achieved the silence he so much hoped for in his later plays. Or, it has joined the silence of Krapp's 'last tape'¹ after all the vocal squeaks ended, after memory ceased. But instead of nothingness we are left with its language.

In this brief tribute/personal impression I shall sketch what I think we² have learned from a fine theatre practitioner and writer. I take therefore the debate between Adorno and Lukacs as closed, settled: the latter was wrong. The aesthetics of a mimesis or reflection are too restrictive, even for a narrow and harrowing vision like Beckett's.³

II

Beckett's work is not the reflection of a development of society, or its productive forces. Rather, with Kafkaesque precision, it is a product of some spasm in a productive force; but the spasm did not survive, nor has the force been found. There is rather an absence there, it is a non-space above or alongside historical time that makes for his theatre of language and linguistic pain.⁴

At first this non-space has trees and cities. It is a tactile world, material, harsh and painful. The words allude to these. But then, all these elements of 'reality' start disappearing, they become stage spaces, props or shades of darkness.

'I know what darkness is', insists Malone, 'it accumulates, thickens, then suddenly [it] bursts and drowns everything' . . . There is a 'dead world, airless, waterless . . . Here and there . . . the shadow of a withered lichen. And nights of three hundred hours.' Bleak.⁵

III

His works start from off-beat city streets and estates. In *Molloy* there is still movement, people have to carry out errands, they travel distances and cross countrysides. By *Waiting for Godot*,⁶ they stay put, or think they have been stayed put:

Estragon: I am asking if we are tied.

Vladimir: Tied?

Estragon: Ti-ed.

Vladimir: How do you mean tied?

Estragon: Down.

Vladimir: But to whom? By whom?

Estragon: To your man.

Vladimir: To Godot? Tied to Godot? What an idea! No question of it. (Pause.) For the moment.⁷

By *Endgame*⁸ they know they are stuck, despite Clov's desires to flee; and, in *Malone Dies* the protagonist is stuck in a bed with the world receding past the window to sink into an internal monologue: 'it is the same grey as heretofore, literally sparkling at times, then growing murky and dim, thickening is perhaps the word, until all things are blotted out except the window which seems in a manner of speaking to be my umbilicus . . . when it too goes out I shall know more or less where I am'.⁹

By *The Unnamable*¹⁰ we are left with the voice, and from then on with a total stasis.

Watt,¹¹ that infuriating novel, half of which is made up of absurd and quasi-philologicosophical syllogisms, marks a turning point in the characters Beckett litters his environments with. We meet Watt as a solitary figure scarcely distinguishable from 'the dim wall behind it'. People were, 'not sure whether it was a man or woman . . . that it was not a parcel, a carpet for example, or a roll of tarpaulin, wrapped up in dark paper and tied about the middle with a cord.' According to an observer in the book, 'a milder, more inoffensive creature does not exist, . . . he would literally turn the other cheek . . . if he had the energy.'¹²

And so the people too, energy-less, weak, disabled, seedy, slow down as Beckett's corpus develops to merge into the darkness, the 'nothingness', to become gestures, voices, memories and languages. In *The Company*, 'a voice comes to one in the dark. Imagine'.¹³ It comes to one lying flat on one's back, in the dark.

IV

His humanoids, in their struggle with living, confront profound

philosophical questions and recoil from them: 'some see the flesh before the bones, and some see the bones before the flesh, and some never see the bones at all, and some never see the flesh at all, never never see the flesh at all. But whatever it was Watt saw, with the first look, that was enough for Watt, that had always been enough for Watt, more than enough for Watt.'¹⁴

Although 'enough' the first look might have been, it was always also distressing, because, 'nothing had happened, with the utmost formal distinctness, and that it continued to happen.'¹⁵

Again, although 'it' was 'enough' and 'distressing', it was also not comforting, for one could not even say of a pot, 'Pot, pot and be comforted.'¹⁶

And, from the imprecise yet accepted monotony of things-in-themselves, Watt moves to self-reflection: 'As for himself, though he could no longer call it a man, as he had used to, with the intuition that he was perhaps not talking nonsense, yet he could not imagine what else to call it, if not a man. But Watt's imagination had never been a lively one. So he continued to think of himself as a man, as his mother had taught him.'¹⁷

To start with, the author presents us in his earlier works with philosophical dilemmas in *Watt*, in *Murphy*;¹⁸ the authorial presence is there pointing to them and demonstrating how his protagonists look at and recoil from the problems. Proust-like, Aquinas-like, Spinoza-like, Heidegger and Sartre-like, logical atomism-like questions are posed about being, time, memory, the object-world, propositional logic; the reader is drawn into these dilemmas which of course are abandoned, because of human weariness.

With the plays though, such an authority is broken and Beckett starts speaking through the many voices of his characters, through their dialogic duets: Clov and Hamm, Lucky and Pozzo, Vladimir and Estragon, Maddy and Dan Rooney and many more.¹⁹ Through them, the despair around meaning becomes profound. Simultaneously, the authorial voice disappears and the monologues that make the trilogy²⁰ of novels combine human and psychic weariness with a distorting relationship to life, death and significance. 'For to know nothing is nothing, not to want to know anything likewise, but to be beyond knowing anything, that is when peace enters in, to the soul of the incurious seeker'.²¹

V

The 'incurious seeker' is the demise of the Enlightenment individual. As opposed to the 'homo curiositas', or the man of calling (and I

mean, 'man') of earthly labour and achievement,²² Beckett's people accept their calling, their suffering and fate.

Watt, for example, enters Mr. Knott's employ, 'a good master, in a way . . .', taking the place of another who moves closer to the master, who in turn takes the place of another who has to leave. Watt then leaves his space to another at the right time and takes the chores closer to the master so the other leaves. Then, 'as Watt came, so he went, in the night, that covers all things with its cloak, especially when the weather is cloudy.'²³

Watt's servitude and suffering are taken as natural; so is Clov's, despite his urges of rebellion: to go.²⁴ Vladimir and Estragon, too, are caught in their 'calling': to wait for Godot. And, although they discuss suicide and flight, they stay, waiting, forever, in a place where, 'nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes', an awful place.²⁵

Molloy's 'calling' is to find his mother despite his disablements, on his bicycle: 'I fastened my crutches to the cross-bar, one on either side, I propped the foot of my stiff leg . . . on the projecting front axle, and I pedalled with the other. It was a chainless bicycle, with a free-wheel, if such a bicycle exists' . . . With this machine he travelled the 'accursed country' until he tired. Then, as he intimates, 'every hundred yards or so, I stopped to rest my legs, the good one as well as the bad, and not only my legs, not only my legs.' And with his feet on the ground, his arms on the handle-bars, his head on his hands he rested until the next hundred yard surge beckoned him on.²⁶

Molloy absorbs suffering, beatings, indignities. 'Insults, abuse, these', he assures us, 'I can easily bear, but I could never get used to blows. It's strange. Even spits still pain me. But they have only to be a little gentle, I mean refrain from me, and I seldom fail to give satisfaction, in the long run' . . . For the underdog, like Molloy, 'the salvation army is no better. Against the charitable gesture there is no defence, that I know of. You sink your head, you put out your hands all trembling and twisted together and you say, Thank you, thank you lady, thank you. To him who has nothing it is forbidden not to relish filth'.²⁷

When Lucky and Pozzo's relationship of cruel servitude changes into a decrepit one by the second act of *Waiting for Godot*, Pozzo, the once proud master, screams: 'one day we were born, one day we'll die, the same day, the same second . . . They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more'.²⁸

And so back to Watt, the exemplar of a human, physical and metaphysical fatigue and, suffering who

knew, as he did so, that it would not be easy to get up again, as he must, and move on again, as he must. But the feeling of weakness, which he had been

expecting for some time, was such, that he yielded to it, and settled himself on the edge of the path, with his hat pushed back, and his bags beside him, and his knees drawn up, and his arms on his knees, and his head on his arms . . . But this was a position that could not content him long, in the fresh night air, as soon as he stretched himself out, so that one half of him was in the road, and the other on the path. Under the neck and under the distant palms he felt the cool damp grasses of the ditch's edge. And so he rested for a little time, listening to the little night sounds in the hedge outside him, hearing them with pleasure, and other distant night sounds too, such as dogs make, on bright nights, at the ends of their chains, and bats, with their little wings, and the heavy daybirds changing to a more comfortable position, and the leaves that are never still, until they lie rotting in a wintry heap, and the breath that is never quiet.²⁹

Watt moves on though, through the sighs of the breath and over the rustle of leaves to join his master, Mr Knott, in whose employ nothing happens, and it happens with formal distinctness. Vladimir and Estragon continue to wait. Molloy shoves on, to find the woman, his mother, who gave birth to him through her arse,³⁰ as he intimates. On every page, pain, quiescence and a physical and metaphysical struggle: to complete a meaningless calling and then die.

VI

The intensity of Beckett's art is to be found also in the tragic combination of bleak, taut lines and comic subversiveness: dadaism, absurdism, vaudeville, gutter humour, all combine to make both text and performance a peculiar estranging experience. The vaudeville and absurd elements of his stage directions, the slapstick relationship between his theatrical duets, the sudden juxtaposition of contrary meanings in his 'novels', all intensify the sense of immediacy in the dark landscape. But also, the ability to switch from intellectual 'profundity' to Dublin's pub-talk in a single gesture, grates at one's visors.³¹

Vladimir: Charming evening we're having.

Estragon: Unforgettable.

Vladimir: And it's not over.

Estragon: Apparently not.

Vladimir: It's only the beginning.

Estragon: It's awful.

Vladimir: It's worse than being at the theatre.

Estragon: The circus.

Vladimir: The music hall.

Estragon: The circus.³²

The only curiosity, indeed obsession, that Watt achieves is whether the master communicates with the other servant through a bell in his sleeping quarters. A breath-taking operation to steal into the other servant's room discovers that, 'there was a bell in Erksine's room, but it was broken'.³³ Or similarly, Watt works out the permutations of series that haunt his logic:

Thinking then, in search of rest, of the possible relations between such series as these, the series of dogs, the series of men, the series of pictures, to mention only these series, Watt remembered a distant summer night, in a no less distant land . . . frogs.³⁴

Their croaking becomes the series' organising principle.

VII

The most sensitive moments of his craft are though the ones where intimacy and a tactile, pained, and brittle sexuality generate a remarkable sense of expressive pathos. In Watt for example we find the protagonist in a peculiar embrace with a Mrs Gorman, the woman delivering milk at his master's estate: 'Then he would have her in the kitchen, and open for her a bottle of stout, and set her on his knee, and wrap his right arm about her waist, and lean his head upon her right breast (the left having unhappily been removed in the heat of a surgical operation), and in this position remain, without stirring, or stirring the least possible, forgetful of his troubles, for as long as ten minutes, or a quarter of an hour. And Mrs. Gorman too, as with her left hand she stirred the grey-pink tufts and with her right at studied intervals raised the bottle to her lips, was in her own way at peace too, for a time'.³⁵

But such sexuality is and will always be limited in Beckett's cosmos by weariness and pain: 'Further than this,' Beckett informs us playfully, 'it will be learned with regret, they never went, though more than half inclined to do so on more than one occasion. Why was this? Was this the echo murmuring in their hearts, in Watt's heart, in Mrs. Gorman's, of past passion, ancient error, warning them not to sully not to trail, in the cloaca of clonic gratification, a flower so fair, so rare, so sweet, so frail? It is not necessary to suppose so. For Watt had not the strength, and Mrs. Gorman had not the time, indispensable to even the most perfunctory coalescence.'³⁵

In another sequence of pained brilliance, Watt and the narrator of the penultimate sequences relate with intense but weary sentiments. They faced each other in the garden:

Then our eyes meeting, we smiled, a thing we did rarely, when together. And when we had lain a little thus, with this exceptional smile, on our faces, then we began to draw ourselves forward, and upward, and persisted in this course until our heads, our noble bulging brows, met and touched, Watt's noble brow, and my noble brow. And then we did a thing we seldom did, we embraced. Watt laid his hands on my shoulders, and I laid mine on his (I could hardly do otherwise), and then I touched Watt's left cheek with my lips, and then Watt touched my left cheek with his (he could scarcely do less), the whole coolly, and above us tossed the over-arching boughs.³⁶

The climax of their relationship occurs by the fences of their respective residences/estates:

Then I reached out with my hand, through the hole, and drew him, through the hole, to my side, and with a cloth that I had in my pocket from my pocket I anointed his face, and his hands, and then taking a little hand comb from my pocket I straightened his tufts, and his whiskers, and then taking a little clothes brush from my pocket I brushed his coat, and his trousers. Then I turned him round, until he faced me. Then I placed his hands, on my shoulders, his left hand on my right shoulder, and his right hand on my left shoulder. Then I placed my hands, on his shoulders, on his left shoulder my hand, and on his right shoulder my left hand. Then I took a single pace forward, with my left leg, and he a single pace back, with his right leg (he could scarcely do otherwise). Then I took a double pace forward with my right leg, and he of course with his left leg a double pace back. And so we paced together between the fences, I forwards, he backwards, until we came where the fences diverged again. And then turning, I turning, and he turning, we paced back the way we had come, I forwards, and he of course backwards, with our hands on our shoulders, as before. And so pacing back the way we had come, we passed the holes and paced on, until we came to where the fences diverged again. And then turning, as one man, we paced back the way we had paced back the way we had come, I looking whither we were going, and he looking whence we were coming. And so, up and down, up and down, we paced between the fences, together again after so long, and the sun shone bright upon us, and the wind blew wild about us.³⁷

VIII

Darkness, pain, suffering, pathos, intimacy and estrangement within an ahistorical world are pivotal features of Beckett's 'bog'. So too is a servitude that is indeed as great a calling as any pilgrimage. Yet more than these features, or better, sparkling between the lines is also a subtle perseverance and defiance, an imperative to go on: and so in the *Unnamable* the monologue announces that its voice *must* go on and so it *will* go on narrating. 'Where I am I don't know', it states, 'I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on'.³⁸

There is also the imperative to screech out: 'I have always cried out, more or less piercingly, more or less openly. Let me cry out then, it's said to be good for you'.³⁹

This imperative finds its climax in *Molloy* where the comfort of a disabled man is not sufficient to thwart a deeper 'calling':

but I could not, stay in the forest I mean, I was not free to. That is to say I could have, physically nothing could have been easier, but I was not purely physical, I lacked something, and I would have had the feeling, if I had stayed in the forest, of going against an imperative, at least I had that impression. But perhaps I was mistaken, perhaps I would have been better advised to stay in the forest, perhaps I could have stayed there, without remorse, without the painful impression of committing a fault, almost a sin. For I have greatly sinned, at all times, greatly sinned against my prompters.⁴⁰

Instead of conforming with his 'prompters', Molloy struggles on and on. As he states,

flat on my belly, using my crutches like grapnels, I plunged them ahead of me into the undergrowth, and when I felt they had a hold, I pulled myself forward, with an effort of the wrists . . . and there are men who move about sitting, and even kneeling, hauling themselves to right and left, forward and backward with the help of hooks. But he who moves this way, crawling on his belly, like a reptile, no sooner comes to rest than he begins to rest, and even the very movement is a kind of rest, compared to other movements . . . And in this way I moved onward in the forest, . . . and I covered my fifteen paces, day in, day out, without killing myself. And I even crawled on my back, plunging my crutches blindly behind me into the thickets . . .⁴¹

This is echoed by Moran, the man who went out to find Molloy in the wilderness, but never did:

bent double, my free hand pressed to my belly, I advanced, and every now and then I let out a roar, of triumph and distress . . . perhaps I shall meet Molloy. My knee is no better. It is no worse either. I have crutches now. I shall go faster, all will go faster. They will be happy days.⁴²

In the last fifty or so years, Beckett has drawn for us a landscape that had some references to the world we knew. His pen allowed some rays of light to start with. At his most lyrical, he added a romantic touch of countrysides, forests and sounds. And then, he wrote in a human species (mostly with men in the foreground) which had some references to the world we knew. He made them speak of their frailty, their marginality and of their uncertain pasts, pasts they could not properly remember. And then, he dimmed the light and made them

frailer, loosing the light he was dimming. They continued crawling and talking – they become words, discourses, inventions. ‘Not-being’, ‘nothingness’ became unthinkable outside a non-story.

According to Molloy,

there could be no things but nameless things, no names but thingless names. I say that now, . . . now when the icy words hail down upon me, the icy meanings, and the world dies too, foully named. All I know is what the words know, and the dead things, and that makes a handsome little sum, with a beginning, a middle and an end as in the well-built phrase and the long sonata of the dead. And truly it little matters what I say, this or that or the other thing. Saying is inventing, Wrong, very rightly wrong. You invent nothing, you think you are inventing, you think you are escaping, and all you do is stammer out your lesson . . . to hell with it anyway.⁴³

But the Molloyes, sucking stones, the Vladimirs and Estragons playing games, are still left struggling on in our imagination. Imagination dead, imagine.

IX

Beckett’s struggle has to be located between ‘being’ and ‘saying’, ‘nothingness’ and ‘silence’. His emotional compass is simultaneously ancient and post-modern, with the enlightenment persona a memory lost, somewhere, somehow.

‘We’re inexhaustible’ says Vladimir to Estragon and the two burst into what must be one of the most lyrical duets in the play:

Estragon: It’s so we don’t think.
Vladimir: We have that excuse.
Estragon: It’s so we don’t hear.
Vladimir: We have our reasons.
Estragon: All the dead voices.
Vladimir: They make a noise like wings.
Estragon: Like leaves.
Vladimir: Like sand.
Estragon: Like leaves . . .⁴⁴

Godot’s is a place where pained and exhausted people come to rest. As a species we are doomed if this is outside the boundaries of speech, of language.

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NOTES

1. *Krapp's Last Tape and Embers*, London, 1959.
2. By 'we' I mean quite a few of us in and around the cultural life of Johannesburg in the mid-1970s, beginning to cohere as a left alternative to the dominant forms of theatre. For most who had studied, Beckett's plays offered a refreshing alternative to the drabness being taught at Universities. For example during the making of *Fantastical History of a Useless Man* (Johannesburg, 1978 with intro by L. Abrahams) in 1976, a central debate at the time of the burning of some school facilities and a library in Soweto, there was consensus in the Junction Avenue Theatre Company that a case could be made for the saving of a few books: Beckett, Brecht, Genet.
3. The debate on aesthetics is partly captured in F. Jameson's (ed.) *Aesthetics and Politics*, (London, 1978). For T. W. Adorno's high estimation of Beckett, as perhaps the only exemplary modern writer, see the *Aesthetic Theory*, (London, 1988). See also G. Lukacs' *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, (London, 1963) and *Die Eigenart Des Aesthetischen*, (Frankfurt, 1978).
4. For historical materialists who operate with a reductionist notion of ideology, aesthetics and broadly speaking the superstructure, all this is problematic.
5. *Malone Dies*, (London, 1979), p. 185.
6. *Waiting for Godot*, (London, 1955).
7. *Godot*, p. 20.
8. *Endgame*, (London, 1958).
9. *Malone Dies*, p. 205.
10. *The Unnamable*, (London, 1979).
11. *Watt*, (London, 1969). Written in the 1930s, this book is transitional: a mix between the comic absurdism of *Murphy* and the bleakness of what was to follow, e.g. *Molloy* etc.
12. *Watt*, p. 14, p. 18.
13. *The Company*, (London, 1980), p. 7.
14. *Watt*, p. 70.
15. *Watt*, p. 73.
16. *Watt*, p. 78.
17. *Watt*, p. 80.
18. *Murphy*, (London, 1938).
19. I feel that the plays *Godot* and *Endgame* mark a highpoint of achievement; I tend to prefer them to the prose pieces as units of literature. Nevertheless, some of the prose works contain passages, so taut and lean in their construction, that are nothing short of breathtaking experiences for a reader.
20. The Trilogy: *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*, written between 1947-50, constitute one of the most creative and intense periods of Beckett's life. From then on, and for reasons clearly enunciated in the last of the three, Beckett's voice diminishes, his works become shorter, terser and fragmented.
21. *Molloy*, p. 54.
22. P. Gay, *The Science of Freedom*, (London, 1970). H. Blumenberg, *Die Legitimat die Neuzzeit*, (Frankfurt, 1977). See also M. Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, (London, 1930).
23. *Watt*, p. 214.
24. Such a vision presents problems for historical materialists too: it calls for defensive affirmation of orthodoxy and a dismissal of Beckett.
25. *Godot*, p. 41.
26. *Molloy*, p. 17.
27. *Molloy*, pp. 22, 24.
28. *Godot*, p. 89.
29. *Watt*, p. 31.
30. *Molloy*, p. 17.
31. Such a zany sense of humour, and the sudden mixing of the 'profound' and gutter-talk, are features of Joyce and Flann O'Brien; to a lesser degree of Brendan Behan too. Irish perhaps?
32. *Godot*, p. 34.
33. *Watt*, pp. 135, 137.
34. *Watt*, p. 138-139.
35. *Watt*, p. 140.

36. *Watt*, p. 152.
37. *Watt*, p. 161.
38. *The Unnamable*, p. 382.
39. *Molloy*, p. 25.
40. *Malloy*, p. 79.
41. *Malloy*, p. 82.
42. *Malloy*, p. 161.
43. *Malloy*, p. 31.
44. *Godot*, p. 62.

'Quy the Pentangel Apendes . . .'

The Pentangle in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

Eugenie R. Freed

Then thay schewed hym the schelde, that was of schyr goules
Wyth the pentangel depaynt of pure golde hwes . . .
And quy the pentangel apendes to that prynce noble
I am intent yow to telle, thof tary hyt me schulde . . .
[619–20, 623–4]

In order to expound the meaning of the pentangle device on the shield of Sir Gawain, the narrator of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*¹ deliberately stays the swift pace of the narrative in the lines quoted above. The explication begins at line 625 – the square of five squared – a number significantly related to the pentangle.² In this essay I will try to assess the importance of the pentangle in the poem as a whole, though not strictly in its numerical aspect.³ In undertaking this enquiry I am exploring what Judson Boyce Allen called the poem's 'profound doubleness . . . [in that] for every element there is a balancing other' (146)⁴ – a quality the poem shares with the pentangle itself.⁵ My own sense of this extends to that which the pentangle 'bitokyn[es]' (according to the specific interpretation put upon it by the *Gawain* poet): it is first presented as a symbol of man's aspirations to perfection, but is shown ultimately to represent man's flawed nature. The link between the two antithetical meanings of the symbol is provided by a word used by the Green Knight both on his first appearance at Camelot [309–12] and at the dénouement at the Green Chapel [2457–8] in relation to the brotherhood of the Round Table: *surquidré* – pride. The painstaking craftsmanship invested in the poem itself, its self-conscious artistry, is related to the same theme of 'surquidré' as it applies ultimately to the poet who created it.

In MS Cotton Nero A.x, the unique British Museum manuscript source for *Pearl*, *Cleanness*, *Patience* and *GGK*, the stanza describing Gawain's 'schelde' and its 'syngne' has been made to stand out from the surrounding text.⁶ Not only did the scribe begin it with a large ornamental initial T at line 619, but he made that initial unique within the text of this poem by enclosing in it a sketch of a tonsured human face, looking solemnly leftward into the line in which the pentangle is first mentioned [620].⁷ Evidently the scribe was lending his support to

the poet in his emphasis on the significance of the symbol in the detailed interpretation that follows in lines 625–65.

The pentangle (pentacle, pentalpha, or pentagram) is an ancient symbol, but, according to R. H. Green, of very rare occurrence in the Middle Ages (81). Although it appears on Babylonian pottery, and was amongst the Pythagoreans in ancient Greece a symbol of health and perfection, the sole medieval association between the Biblical King Solomon and the 'syngne' attributed to him in *GGK* is to be found in books of magic.⁸ And, as Green points out, 'the poet could hardly have chosen a more ambiguous patron for Gawain's virtue' (82).⁹ In *Cleanness* the poet stresses only the 'coyntyse' of Solomon, attributing to him the splendid workmanship of the vessels of the holy Temple in Jerusalem [*Cleanness* 1286–90]. But in *GGK* the reference that implicitly accords with that in *Cleanness*, linking Solomon with the knightly 'trawthe' symbolised by the pentangle, is counter-balanced by another that places him, along with Adam, Samson and David, in a catalogue of men who 'were biwyled / With wymmen that they used' [2425–6]. The stanza containing this denunciation [2406–28] uses the verb 'bigyled' three more times at line-endings [2413, 2416, 2427], the first time with the adverb 'koyntly' [2413]. The application of the phrase 'koyntyse of clergie' to the magical lore of Morgan la Fay [2446–8] seems to imply that such 'coyntyse' as Solomon's can serve the ends of deception as well as those of 'trawthe'.

Green notes, however, that during the sixteenth century the pentangle was linked with the five wounds of Christ, an association that may have been made earlier (88). Piero Valeriano in a sixteenth-century work expresses orthodox Christian reservations concerning the 'praeternatural power and symbolic meaning of the pentagram in antiquity', but adds that nevertheless

we can accept as signifying true salvation (*verae salutis*) the five wounds of Christ . . . which appropriately constitute a pentalpha. (351)

The continuity of the pentangle was related through this interpretation to the scriptural verse 'Ego sum alpha et omega, principium et finis' (*Apoc.* I, viii) in a seventeenth-century commentary on the Apocalypse by Cornelius à Lapidé. Again, this connection may have been made considerably earlier:

. . . this pentalpha is God, who is alpha and omega: and Christus Salvator; whence Valeriano justly adapts the figure to the five wounds of Christ. (ad 1.8, p.18)

The well-known Vitruvian diagram of the 'pentagonal man', showing a man lying on his back with arms and legs extended and parted in such a way that, with the head, they form five extremities touching the circumference of a circle centred upon the navel, seems to have been known to this poet.¹⁰ This configuration can, in turn, be seen as related to a view of Gawain's pentangle as a symmetrical figure with the centrally placed pentad of the five wounds of Christ as the 'head', and the other four pentads symmetrically placed, two on either side. Since five is the number of the bodily senses, it is especially associated with the life of the body as well as its proportions;¹¹ and the equilibrium or moral proportion of the soul corresponds with the divinely created symmetry of the body.¹² It seems appropriate, therefore, that a five-fold figure should be used to symbolise life, its preservation, and its continuance, in a complexity of senses in which the powers of man's body in a state of health are extended to correspondances reflecting the well-being of the human spirit in harmony with its Creator. Nevertheless, it was unusual in the fourteenth century to employ the pentangle for this purpose. Even if the *Gawain*-poet was not entirely original in Christianising the figure, he was certainly aware that the interpretation he had chosen to give it in the poem was not traditional, for he calls it 'the pentangel *nwe*' [637].

The pentangle passage is the climax to the account of Gawain's preparations for the 'anious vyage' he must make to seek out the Green Chapel and keep tryst with the Green Knight. The display and presentation of the shield with its symbolic device – 'Then thay schewed hym the schelde' [619] – is a conventional romance 'topos', and completes the formal arming of the ideal Christian knight. Gawain's opponent, in his turn, will display *his* 'scheldes' – 'He schewes hem the scheldes . . .' [1626] – the shoulders of the great boar killed by Sir Bercilak on the second of the three days of hunting [1626–8].¹³ The boar's 'hoge hed', severed by Sir Bercilak's sword and borne in triumph before the homeward-bound hunters [1616], is shown separately to Gawain after the 'scheldes' [1633]. When the lord presents it to Gawain, assuring him that 'this gomen is your awen' [1635], and receives in return two kisses, he swears laughingly 'By saynt Gile!' [1644]. If he is hinting in a pun that trickery is afoot, it is Gawain who is later to find himself 'bi-gyle-d'. The head of the boar reminds the poet's audience – as the axe placed over King Arthur's dais [476–80] reminded his courtiers – of the marvellous feat performed by the Green Knight in the King's hall at New Year. The poet's claim that the pentangle has the indisputable right to symbolise the concept of 'trawthe', 'by tyle that hit habbes', echoes the phrase applied to the astonished company which witnessed the phenomenon of a decapitated green trunk groping for and retrieving its green head,

after Gawain had beheaded the Green Knight with his own axe. These men and women can point to that implement, displayed (by royal command) over the dais in the King's hall, and 'bi trwe tytel telle the wonder' [480]. It is placed 'abof the dece on doser to henge' [478], in a position where any visitor to Camelot would expect to see King Arthur's personal coat-of-arms, probably the principal motif on the 'doser'. Like the pentangle, the axe is a device identified with the man who displays it: it is a token of something powerfully opposed, literally and figuratively, to that which the poet declares Gawain's device represents. The Christianised 'pentangle nwe' is Gawain's identification, openly displayed on his shield. Analogously, an axe and a severed head – respectively, and interactively, represented by those of the Green Knight himself and of the boar slain by his *alter ego* Sir Bercilak – may be called the 'syngne' of this representative of 'fantoum and fayrye' [240]. They form a kind of device which serves to identify the Green Knight even though, as the narrator notes and the 'aghlich mayster' himself stresses [205, 267–71], he bears *no* shield, and thus no formal identification, when he appears in the hall at Camelot.

The poet defines aspects of Gawain's chivalry through five pentads, presented in a significant sequence. The first two apply to the powers of the body, the lower faculties: Gawain is 'fautles' in his five senses, and 'fayled neuer' in the use of his five fingers [640–1]. R. W. Ackerman suggests that this 'fautlesnesse' extends beyond sharpness of perception and bodily strength and co-ordination to mean that Gawain has never sinned either through his five senses or by any act of the body. The third and central pentad of the five, the five wounds of Christ [642–3], combines body with spirit, reminding Gawain (and the poet's audience) of Christ's compassionate assumption of the frailty of human flesh when He descended to earth in order to die for the redemption of mankind. The nature of the remaining two pentads indicate that the focus has moved, using the wounds of Christ's mortal body as a transition, from the lower of man's faculties to the higher, the powers of the soul; from the symbolism of the pentangle in its pagan usage to its Christian significance. The five joys of the Virgin Mary (whose image is painted on the *inner* face of Gawain's shield, backing the *outwardly*-facing sign of the pentangle) [644–50] and the five most notable qualities of Christian chivalry [651–5] provide Gawain with spiritual ideals, the former inward for contemplation, the latter outward for translation into action. The Virgin Mary is herself frequently invoked as a 'shield against the fiend' or against temptation,¹⁴ and is called upon to help or to protect Gawain at crucial points in the narrative, both by the protagonist himself and by the narrator (for instance, lines 736–9 and 1768–9).

The final pentad, consisting of 'fraunchyse . . . felawschyp . . . clannes . . . cortaysye . . . and pité, that passes alle poyntes' [652–4], requires more detailed consideration.

'Clannes', the purity of both body and soul in which Gawain is so thoroughly tested in the castle of Sir Bercilak, is clearly a theme of great importance to this poet, and one to which he repeatedly returns.¹⁵ Accordingly, he places it centrally amongst the virtues of knighthood, and links it alliteratively with the virtue of 'cortaysye' [653]. As John Burrow remarks, Gawain's possession of the virtues of 'fraunchyse', 'felawschyp' and 'cortaysye' are all already evident from his conduct of himself in the earlier part of the narrative (47). But 'fraunchyse' (generosity) is the virtue that Gawain is himself to attribute to his fair hostess [1264], in the course of the refusal he so tactfully frames to her breathtakingly generous offer (which would have proved fatal if he had accepted it) ' . . . Ye ar welcum to my cors, / Yowre awen won to wale . . . ' [1237–8]. 'Felawschyp' is refused Gawain by the serving-man Sir Bercilak sends to guide him to the Green Chapel [2150–1]. This man, who urges Gawain to save his own life by escaping from the Green Knight, offers to swear falsely so as to protect Gawain's reputation if he should follow his advice and flee from the encounter [2118–25]. When Gawain rejects this cover-up offer of a false oath, Bercilak's servant brusquely withdraws his 'felawschyp'; once again, to have accepted it would irreparably have damaged Gawain's 'trawthe'.

The concept – so fundamental to chivalry – embodied in the noun 'cortaysye' (together with its adjective and adverb, 'cortaysye' and 'cortaysly'), is repeatedly mentioned within the poem.¹⁶ The noun is twice used during the opening scene [247, 263]. The line in the pentangle passage – 'His clannesse and his cortaysye croked were neuer' [653] – is its third occurrence. After this, it occurs only within the context of Sir Gawain's exquisitely polite parrying of the advances of his hostess as she lays siege to him within the privacy of his bedchamber in her castle, at 1298, 1300, 1491, and 1773. In the course of this perilous action it is she who first mentions the word, twice within three lines, the first time linking it (as in the pentangle passage) with the virtue of 'clannesse':

'So god as Gawayn gaynly is halden,
And cortaysye is closed so clene in hymselfuen,
Couth not lyghtly haf lenged so long wyth a lady
Bot he had craued a cosse, bi his cortaysye . . .'

[1297–1300]

Gawain's 'clannesse and cortaysye [that] croked were neuer' may become somewhat skewed if he accepts this view.¹⁷ The lady uses

'cortaysye' again in an exactly similar context on her second visit [1489–91]. The final occurrence of the noun falls within the account of the lady's third visit, when the narrator, having invoked the Virgin Mary to protect her knight, describes the perturbation of Gawain's mind as his sense of honour and of duty to his hospitable host war against his sensual awareness of the undeniable attractions of his overly-accommodating hostess:

For that pryncece of pris depresed hym so thikke,
 Nurned hym so neghe the thred, that nede hym bihoued
 Other lach ther hir luf, other lodly refuse.
 He cared for his cortaysye, lest crathayn he were,
 And more for his meschef, if he schulde make synne,
 And be traytor to that tolke that that telde aght.

[1770–5]

And indeed, at this crucial moment on the occasion of the lady's third visit, it seems that the original clarity of Gawain's conception of the virtues of chivalry may indeed be blurring. He has already had time to reflect upon his hostess's persuasive rephrasing, at their second encounter, of the pentangle's '*bitokynyng of trawthe, bi tytle that hit habbes*' [626]:

'I woled wyt at yow, wyghe,' that worthy ther sayde,	1508
'And yow wrathed not therwyth, what were the skylle,	
That so yong and so yepe as ye at this tyrne,	1510
<i>So cortayse, so knyghtly, as ye ar knowen oute –</i>	
And of alle cheualry to chose, the chef thyng alosed	
Is the lel layk of luf, the letrure of armes;	
For to telle of this teuelyng of this trwe knyghtes,	
<i>Hir is the tytelet token, and tyxt of her werkkes . . .</i>	1515
<i>And ye, that ar so cortays and coynt of your hetes,</i>	1525
Oghe to a yonke thynk yern to schewe	
And teche sum tokenes of trweluf craftes . . .	1527
Dos, teches me of your wytte,	1533
Whil my lorde is fro hame.'	1534

The lady twice in this speech described Gawain as 'cortays', linking the adjective first with 'knyghtly', then with 'coynt'. (Gawain's subsequent complaint that the lady 'koynntly bigyled' him [2413] is a point well taken.) In her version of 'cortaysye', it is both chivalrous ('knyghtly') and wise ('coynt') to do as she urges him in this passage – to entertain her with love-making while her husband, his host, is out hunting. Se-ductively, she replaced the pentangle, that

token of 'trawthe, bi tytyle that hit habbes', with her own 'tytelet token', that is, the 'layk of luf'. For the entwined virtues originally attributed to Gawain and his 'cler armes' [631], the lady substituted her own 'lettrure of armes', in which the 'armes' are obviously not weapons but the embraces of entwined lovers. As with 'fraunchyse' and 'felawschyp', when translated into the terms of Hautdesert, 'cortaysye' is fraught with hazards which may compromise a knight's reputation and imperil his soul. 'Clannesse', that central virtue linked by the poet especially to 'courtaysye', can remain unblemished only if Gawain keeps his original conception of the other knightly virtues clearly in focus.

'Pité', the final virtue of the knightly pentad, 'passes alle poyntes' (surpasses all virtues). As 'piety', it is constantly in evidence in Gawain's habitual conduct. In its other sense of 'compassion',¹⁸ it is the most Christ-like of the chivalric virtues. The 'poynt' or virtue of 'pité' overcomes even the 'poynt' of the Green Knight's axe, since that worthy accepts Gawain's 'confession' and 'penaunce', and grandly forgives him for slicing off his head [2389–94]. It is not, I believe, arbitrary to associate 'pité, that passes alle poyntes' with Christ's 'croun of thorne', of which, I suggest, the pentangle itself is a stylised representation. Hence, when the poet extends the poem five lines beyond the point¹⁹ where its end joins and echoes its beginning [line 2525] in the prayer addressed to 'that bere the croun of thorne' [2529], it is the crown and seal of all virtues, Christ's 'pité' for man's flawed nature (symbolised not only by the crown of thorns, but also by the central pentad of the five wounds), that literally 'passes alle poyntes' and extends beyond the bounds of the poem's enclosed form in its concluding prayer. Christ's compassion is the final 'poynt', the ultimate resolution beyond the termination of Gawain's quest and the formal numerical perfecting of the poet's work, and beyond time: 'ego sum alpha et omega, principium et finis.' And well may the poet, speaking for himself as well as his audience in that final 'wheel', beg the 'pité' of Christ for the sin of pride, the 'surquidré' of men who – forgetting their fallen condition – presumptuously aspire in earthly life to perfection, whether in chivalry (like Sir Gawain) or in art (like the poet himself).

The pentads of virtues are 'fettled' about the knight [656], a word which in this context can be rendered 'set' or 'arrayed' (cf. *Cleanness* l.585). Its source is, however, O.E. *fetel*, a girdle or belt. The poet in *Patience* speaks of the Beatitudes 'fettled in on forme, the forme and the laste' [*Patience* l.38], 'the beginning and the end girdled up into one form', and this phrase is especially descriptive of both the pentangle and the structure of *GGK*. The notion that Gawain is 'girdled' with these clusters of virtues accords with the verb applied to

the last pentad, 'happed' [655]. Elsewhere in the poem 'happed' is used of a robe or of bed-clothes, and means 'wrapped around' [864, 1224]. Gawain's hostess suggests that her green girdle may be 'halched aboute' the man who desires to save his own life [1851-4] in the same way as each of the virtues of the pentangle is said to be 'halched in other' [657]. Indeed, a green 'lace' not dissimilar to the lady's 'luf-lace' (of which the Green Knight is himself later to claim ownership [2358-9, 2395-6]) is described in detail by the narrator 'halched' about the head and haft of the Green Knight's axe on both occasions when he appears [217-20, 2225-6]. That Gawain should wear the pentads of virtues like a girdle suggests another resolution, that of the opposition distinguished by A. Kent Hieatt between the pentangle of 'trawthe' and the 'luf-lace' that Gawain adopts as 'the token of untrawthe that I am tan inne'. Implicit in the poet's use of 'feted' is the acceptance by the brotherhood of the Round Table of the 'luf-lace' as a mark of honour instead of a 'bende of . . . blame'. It means that the last and greatest of the chivalrous virtues, 'pité', in the form of compassionate tolerance for human frailty, is extended both by the company of the Round Table and by the poet, to Sir Gawain himself.

The poet calls the continuous line, five times angled, that constitutes the pentangle 'these fyve sythes' [656]. One of the principal senses of 'sythe' is 'a going, journey, path, way . . . one's pilgrimage on earth'.²⁰ The narrative line in this poem traces the quest typical of the medieval romance, and five changes of direction can be distinguished in it. Its linear course creates a five-sided figure by no means symmetrical, yet characterised by the pentangle's quality of intersecting itself ('uche lyne umbelappes and loukes in other' [628]) by means of parallel situations and verbal echoes.²¹ It is also, in a certain sense, 'endeles', since Gawain's journey ends with his return to the court from which he set out, and the work itself closes upon an echo of its first line.

In the first phase, which *ends* at line 490, Gawain's quest is initiated: a train of events is set inexorably into motion. The relentless succession of the seasons described in the opening stanza of the next narrative development, as 'uche sesoun serlepes sued after other' [498], brings the year to the point where 'wynter wyndes ayayn, as the worlde askes' [530], when Gawain must needs recall his 'anious vyage' [535]. In this second phase of the narrative, the narrator warns Gawain and his auditors that 'the forme to the fynismnt foldes ful selden' [499], and prepares them for this arduous journey. Having armed and received his shield after the formal explication, Gawain sets out in search of the Green Chapel, travelling by 'gates straunge' [708]. The tracing of the pentangle of 'trawthe' was called by the poet

a 'gomen' [661]. But this 'sythe', undertaken in the bitter depths of the winter, is 'no gomen' [692]. After long and dangerous travel Gawain, cold, lonely and longing for shelter, 'sayne[s] hym in sythes sere' [761] and calls upon the Virgin and the cross of Christ to help him in his plight.²² As he crosses himself, in a line marked by another initial capital [763], Gawain catches sight of the 'chalkwhyth chymnees' and clustering 'pynakles' of Hautdesert. A third phase of the quest begins at this point. Thrice welcomed within one stanza [811–41], Gawain gratefully pauses in his journey, spending Christmas and the three days following enjoying the warmth, comfort and hospitality, not to mention the admiration, accorded him in the castle. When persuaded by his host to remain until New Year's Day [1070–8], Gawain finds himself involved in a 'gomen' of a different kind. A major development in the narrative is perceptible as Gawain is drawn into the exchange-of-winnings bargain at the behest of his host [1105–25]. On three successive days, Gawain is wooed by his lovely and importunate hostess while her husband is out hunting in the woods. It is during the course of this third, and in fact *central*, narrative development that the pentad of chivalrous virtues is diversely and 'croked'-ly reflected back to Gawain by members of the household of Hautdesert. Literally in the middle of all this, the lady gives her (distorted) disquisition upon chivalry on her second solo visit (1508 ff.: see above) and the 'scheldes' and severed head of the boar are displayed to Gawain by his (disguised) adversary after the second hunt. It is a curious and numerologically noteworthy fact that if the 2525 lines that cover the poem's return to its echoing closure are divided into five equal sections, then the *third* and central point of the theoretical pentad thus obtained culminates at line 1515, at the moment during the lady's second visit when she asserts that 'the lel layk of luf' is the true purpose of chivalry

'... Hit is the tytelet token and tyxt of her werkkes. . .'

[1515]

The significant numerological emphasis placed upon this line (which also echoes lines 480 and 626 – referring respectively to the Green Knight's axe and Gawain's pentangle) suggests that the poet perceived this distortion of the pentad of chivalry as both figuratively and literally central to the poem's concerns, and therefore gave it *structural* prominence as well.

With the dawning of New Year's day [1998] Gawain rises and arms himself once more, preparing (as he did when he left Camelot) for the fulfilment of his 'trawthe' with the Green Knight. Since he has so creditably weathered the trials of Hautdesert, the poet notes with

conscious symbolism that Gawain's armour and his horse are in pristine condition – 'al was fresch as vpon fyrst' [2019].²³ As the knight resumes his interrupted journey, Bercilak's servant tries one last time to pierce the only metaphorical 'chink' that events at Hautdesert have revealed in Gawain's armour of virtue: the desire to save his own life, which led him to commit his sole 'faut' – accepting the green 'luf-lace' from his persistent hostess and concealing it from his host. When his guide abandons him, Gawain, and with him the narrative line, 'gederes the rake' [2160] ('picks up the path') and rides on to keep tryst with his adversary. The account of that meeting, up to the moment of truth when the Green Knight lifts his axe to deliver the stroke he owes Gawain, completes the fourth 'sythe' of the narrative.

When all has been revealed to Gawain, and he has reconciled himself with his extraordinary opponent, they part company. The Green Knight goes his mysterious way, 'whiderwarde-so-euer he wolde' [2478], but Gawain returns whence he came, riding back to 'the kynges burgh' [2476]. In this fifth and final 'sythe' the narrative gathers up speed, the narrator refusing to pause for details 'that I ne tyght at this tyme in tale to remene' [2483]. Within one stanza Gawain has returned to Camelot and made his full and frank confession before the King. In one more stanza – the final, hundred-and-first stock – the poet has brought the poem to its closure in the echoing line 2525. He extends it beyond this perfect number by one last 'bob-and-wheel', a further five lines, in a prayer to Christ 'that ber the croun of thome'.

It is worth noting that the above postulation of five 'sythes' of the narrative line can explain the positioning of the nine ornamented initial capitals that appear in the manuscript of the poem. The first and second (lines 1 and 491) mark respectively the inception of the story at Camelot and the beginning of its second phase, Gawain's setting-out upon his quest. The third decorated majuscule, at line 619, initiates the explication of the significant device identified with Gawain which also governs the development of the narrative; this may be one reason why it was uniquely elaborated by the scribe. The fourth initial (763) marks a point at which, upon sighting the castle of Hautdesert, Gawain's journey takes a new and unexpected turn, and a new narrative 'sythe' begins. The fifth, sixth and seventh ornamented capitals (1126, 1421, 1893) all fall *within* this third and central major narrative development: each marks one of the three hunting episodes during which Gawain is, in effect, the prey. The lady stalks him in the bedroom in a triple parallel which in each case is completely enclosed within the account of a hunt. The eighth ornamented initial (1998) marks the resumption on New Year's Day of the interrupted quest for

the Green Knight with which the fourth 'sythe' of the narrative begins, while the last initial (2259), falling at the point where the Green Knight lifts his axe to deliver the long-dreaded 'dunt', marks the beginning of the final 'sythe', the *dénouement* which will enable Gawain to return, chastened in spirit though physically almost unscathed, to Camelot.

Situational parallels, verbal echoes, and superimpositions of images throughout the poem represent the two principal senses – physical and moral – in which Gawain is tested. These coincidences (some of which have been referred to above) emphasise the ambiguity of the pentangle's traditional associations, tending ironically to juxtapose the ambitious moral ideals embodied in Gawain's device with the unequivocally physical symbolism of the Green Knight's axe and severed head.²⁴ They can also be seen (as already suggested) as intersections of the narrative line as it shifts direction. An obvious example is Gawain's thankful arrival at the gate of Sir Bercilak's castle, where he is received with warmly courteous words and gestures of welcome by his retainers [807–19]. Behind it echoes hollowly the grim welcome given Gawain in similar words by the Green Knight at the place of assignation [2239–40]. Another is Gawain's graceful and diplomatic declaration that he is at the lady's mercy –

'. . . For I yelde me yederly and yeye after grace . . .'

[1215]

a speech which ironically echoes the words uttered by the severed head of the Green Knight, that his 'dunt' is 'to be yederly yolden on Nwe Yeres morn' [453]. The same phrase is to be used again by Gawain in his triumphant re-assertion of his right to defend his own life against his monstrous opponent:

'. . . And if thow reches me any mo, I redyly schal quyte
And yelde yederly ayayn . . .'

[2324–5]

In the stanzas that follow Gawain's departure from Camelot, he searches for the Green Chapel in strange and wild country. He has to contend with enemies of many kinds, but his most formidable opponent is not a 'worme', a 'wodwo' or an 'etayne'; it is the winter weather by which he is 'ner slayn':

. . . werre wrathed hym not so much, that wynter was wors . . .
Ner slayn wyth the slete he slepde in his yrnas
Mo nyghtes then innoghe in naked rokkes . . .

[726, 729–30]

The poet notes how piteously the birds 'unblythe upon bare twyges . . . ther piped for pyne of the colde' [746–7]. The freezing winter, the common enemy of every form of life in this fallen world almost puts an end to Gawain's quest before it has well begun. The desire that Gawain shares with all other creatures instinctively to preserve his life is the *only* reason, as the poet makes clear, for the failure of his 'trawthe'. Gawain agrees to take the girdle only when the lady assures him that the man who has it 'hemely halched aboute' his body 'myght nat be slayn' [1853–4]. Against the winter's icy cold, mortal man can scarcely defend himself. Analogously, neither Gawain's 'yrnes' nor his weapons will be of any use to him at the Green Chapel because, according to his 'trawthe', he may not defend himself; and even were he permitted to do so, Gawain's arms may avail him little against an adversary who, apparently defying the laws of nature, can pick up his own severed head from the floor and gallop off with it under his arm. It is not clear from the text whether the Green Chapel, when Gawain actually comes to it, is an old, abandoned relic of pagan worship or merely a feature of the natural landscape; but whatever it is, this 'oriture' is not a structure Gawain can identify from his own cultural background (in the way that he joyfully recognises the comely castle of Hautdesert). Though completely armoured for a warlike encounter and 'feteled' with physical and moral excellences, the knight in his extremity feels understandably vulnerable. His faith faltering as the time of the assignation approaches, Gawain is tempted to grasp the magical weapon the lady appears to be offering, to use against the obviously magical powers of his opponent. And so he 'fetels' himself with the lady's 'lace', which is linked by verbal echoes with that monstrous and deadly axe, the Green Knight's weapon and special identifying device – 'fowre fote large . . . bi that lace that lemed ful bryght' [2225–6]. Its 'lace' is 'lapped aboute . . . louked . . . [and] halched' [217–8] around its head and haft much as each side of the pentangle 'umbelappes and loukes in other . . . uchone halched in other' [628, 657]. The pentangle finally becomes one with the 'lace': it too is a noose or snare.²⁵ Gawain was able to reject the 'starande ston' of the lady's rich ring, but her girdle appears to him as 'a juel for the jopardé that hym jugged were'. She has finally made the offer that for any son of the fallen Adam, even 'Gawain the gode', is the hardest to refuse. Gawain's only obvious flaw is his creaturely love for life; but at a more profound level, the poet suggests that any flesh-and-blood man who aspires to the perfection symbolised by the pentangle – in act, in thought, in art – is guilty of presumptuousness. Hence the pentangle of virtues is displayed ultimately, in the 'supernumary' hundred-and-first stanza which itself is the poet's gesture of humility,²⁶ as a spiky crown, Christ's 'croun of thorne'.²⁷

The view offered above of the pentangle in *GGK* claims that it has extensive significance in the poem. The pentangle, though retaining its *form*, alters its *meaning*, and is linked by the poet with the universal human fault of 'surquidré' – pride in one's own virtue and talent – which the poet himself quietly acknowledges as a failing of his own. The pentangle also turns out to have an unsuspected analogue in the lady's 'luf-lace', whose 'döppelganger', in turn, is found inexplicably wound around the axe of the Green Knight. The Green Knight may alter and conceal his form, and even his identifying device (presenting his axe incidentally, and as a real weapon, rather than as a heraldic symbol openly displayed on a knight's shield), but his significance, unlike that of the pentangle in the poem, does *not* change. Whether he appears as 'an aghlich mayster' [136] in King Arthur's hall and at the Green Chapel, or as 'the bolde burne that the burgh aghte' [843] at the castle of Hautdesert, or even in the beauteous form of his appointed agent, his lady wife whom Gawain thought 'the fayrest . . . of alle other' [943–4], the purpose of the Green Knight is always 'to assay the surquidré, yif hit soth were / That rennes of the grete renoun of the Rounde Table' [2457–8]. He concludes that Gawain 'lakked a lyttel', but only a very little, and only 'for ye lufed your lyf' [2366–8]. The poet implies that all men who set out to achieve perfection will have in the end to confess themselves lacking; and he does not exclude himself. The geometrical qualities of the pentangle provide the poet with a structural model for the quest of Sir Gawain. And finally, the pentad of the five wounds of Christ, who is 'principium et finis', links the pentangle in a formal sense with the crown of thorns that the poet leaves in the minds of his auditors in a concluding pentad of lines:

. . . iwysse,
 Mony aunteres here-biforne
 Haf fallen suche er this.
 Now that bere the croun of thorne,
 He bryng uus to his blysse! AMEN.

[2526–30]

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like especially to record my great debt to the late Professor Morton Bloomfield of Harvard University, for his guidance in my research on *Gawain*, his immense personal kindness, and his inspiring example of humane scholarship. My thanks are due as well to three respected scholars who read and constructively criticised this article in earlier drafts some years ago: Prof. Laurence Besserman (Hebrew University, Jerusalem), Prof. John Leyerle (University of Toronto) Prof. A. Kent Hiatt (University of Western Ontario).

NOTES

1. The title of the poem is abbreviated hereafter as *GGK*. All citations are from the edition of the poem by A. C. Cawley.
2. W. Bryant Bachman puts forward an argument, based on the indisputable fact that the scribe of MS Cotton Nero Ax never gives the 'bob' of a stanza a line to itself, that editions of the poem which count each 'bob' as one line may be falsifying the poet's intention. According to Bachman's count, *GGK* has in fact 2424 lines (twice the 1212 lines of *Pearl* in the same ms.) from its opening to its closing reference to the fall of Troy. The possibilities of this view are attractive, but it is probably more plausible to suggest that the explication of the pentangle was *intended* to fall on line 625 (25 x 25) in this highly-wrought poem, rather than on line 600 (24 x 25) as it would according to Bachman's scheme. Examination of the manuscript shows that the scribe actually placed the 'bobs', which almost never contain more than two words, wherever he found space near the end of the 'stock' of each stanza, sometimes a line or two above, or even below, the last line of the 'stock'. Every editor after Sir Frederick Madden (who reproduced this lineation in his edition of the poem in 1839) has – not unreasonably, in view of the unvarying *ababa* rhyme-scheme of 'bob' and 'wheel' – assumed that this was a routine space-saving device adopted by the scribe, and has silently amended the lineation so that each 'bob' follows the stock on a separate line. (I am indebted to Prof. J. B. Goedhals, of the University of South Africa, for bringing Bachman's article to my attention.)
3. The poet's interest in numerology, self-evident in this poem and even more so in *Pearl*, has repeatedly provided material for critical speculation and enquiry. A. Kent Hiatt suggested that the poem has a numerical structure based on units of five, or a multiple of five, plus one, with one extra stanza added at the end to give the desired total of 101 stanzas. Hans Käsmann perceived a balanced symmetrical structure in Fitt III, but concluded that although the *Gawain*-poet used techniques of numerical composition, he did not use symbolic numbers related to the content of the poem. W. Bryant Bachman (see note 2 above) postulates a numerological relationship between *GGK* and *Pearl*.
4. As Allen points out, critics with very diverse interests have shown a common awareness of this characteristic of the poem.
5. The asymmetry of the pentangle resolves itself if one takes as its central element the five wounds of Christ, with two pentads on either side counterbalancing one another. See discussion below.
6. Although the Gollancz facsimile was used in the preparation of this article, details have repeatedly been verified by reference to the original manuscript in the British Museum.
7. Human heads, playfully sketched, appear enclosed within ornamented initial capitals in three other places in MS Cotton Nero A.x, all within the text of the first poem written out by the scribe, *Pearl*. As far as the present writer is aware, this fact has not been commented upon before.
8. See especially Thorndike (280).

9. '[Solomon] was for the Middle Ages a figure of Christ, the exemplar of wisdom and kingship, of power over demons. But in the Bible, and everywhere in the exegetical tradition, he is a gravely flawed figure, remarkably wise, but in the end guilty of follies that cost him his kingdom: though he had power over demons, he was ultimately their victim, for his weakness for women turned him away from God and he built temples to the powers of darkness (III Kings 11:1-9).' Green (82-3).
10. The form taken by the configuration of the body in the poet's version of St. Paul's image of the Church in *Pearl* corresponds to the Vitruvian diagram:

... as says Saynt Poule,
 Al arne we membres of Jesu Kryst:
 As heved and arme and legg and naule
 Temen to hys body ful trwe and tryste . . . [Pearl 457-60]

11. According to Plutarch, the number five stands for the perpetuation of the species, a property supported by its 'circular' nature - i.e., it continually re-appears when multiplied by itself. ['Of the word EI engraved over the gate of Apollo's temple at Delphi' (485-6)] In this connection Edgar De Bruyne describes the importance of the number five according to the interpretation of St. Hildegarde of Bingen (d. 1179):

La beauté morale résident surtout dans l'équilibre, le juste milieu, l'égalité d'âme, c'est l'égalité que, suivant le principe chartrain, nous retrouvons dans les proportions du corps. Celles-ci rapellent en partie la tradition vitruvienne mais s'inspirent par ailleurs d'un principe propre à Hildegarde, le principe du nombre cinq. (p.351)

De Bruyne refers especially to passages drawn from Hildegarde's *Liber diversa opera*, P.L. 197, Lib. I, cap. 14-8.

13. The reading of 'scheldes' as 'shoulders' at this point in the text is confirmed by its sense at line 1456, when it is applied to the live animal. At l. 1611 the word means 'thick slab (of meat)', as it does in *Cleanness* l.58.
14. The Five Joys of Mary were usually given as: the Annunciation, Nativity, Resurrection, Ascension, and Assumption. Both Geoffery of Monmouth and Giraldus Cambrensis place the image of the Virgin on the shield of King Arthur himself (see note to l.649 in the edition of Tolkien and Gordon). R.H. Green (77) quotes a passage from a commentary on the apocryphal book of Wisdom by the English friar Robert Holkot, a near-contemporary of the Gawain-poet, referring to this tradition. Holkot adds: 'So, too, if we wish to triumph in the warfare of this present life, we should bear on the shield of our faith the image of the Virgin with her Son . . .'

Two fairly well-known hymns to the Virgin in which she is invoked as a shield against the fiend are 'Ubi sount qui ante nos fuerount' (Oxf. MS Digby 86, f.126v-127; before 1282) and 'Edi beo thu, Heuene Quene' (Oxf. Corpus Christi Coll. MS E 59, f.113v; mid-13th century).

15. 'Clannes' is the principal subject of the homiletic poem known as *Cleanness* or *Purity*, the second of the four in MS Cotton Nero A.x; but the theme is also significant in the other two poems in the manuscript, *Pearl* and *Patience*.
16. I have here made use of the Kottler and Markman concordance.
17. Burrows comments that at Sir Bercilak's castle 'members of the household reflect back at [Gawain] his own values a little distorted, as it were a slightly lopsided pentangle.' (63)
18. Cf. Chaucer's '... pitee renneth sone in gentil herte . . .' [*The Knightes Tale*, A1761]. See, for instance, the note to line 654 of *GGK* in the edition of Andrew and Waldron (232).
19. To the sense of 'poynt' as virtue (as in the echoing first and last lines of *Patience* [1 and 531]) may be added that of the 'full point', or full stop; metaphorically, the end of a work. Cf. Chaucer, 'Chanoun's Yemannes Tale' G1480: 'And ther a poynt: for ended is my tale . . .'
20. O.E.D. 'sihte', sb. I 1, 1 and 3.
21. John Leyerte (51) comments that '... the fabric of the poem . . . is, like the pentangle, an endless knot, such that each point is connected to all the others and has positional significance in the whole design . . .'

22. Hopper (123–5) notes that the cross too was regarded in the East as a five-pointed figure, the intersection of the arms forming the fifth point. Both cross and pentangle were anciently regarded as powerful magical symbols, but whereas the cross came through its association with Christianity to have the connotations of Christ's power, the pentangle remained almost exclusively a magical symbol during the Middle Ages.
23. Cf. *Ephesians* vi, 13–16:
- '. . . take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand, therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness . . . above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked . . .'
- See also quotation from Robert Holkot in note 14 above. The horse is a common Christian symbol for the powers of the flesh; the rider represents the rational soul.
24. Judson Boyce Allen perceptively, though somewhat reductively, labels the Green Knight 'corporalities'. (p.116)
25. O.E.D. *lace*, sb. 1. One of the illustrations cited is from Chaucer, 'Knights Tale' A 2389.
26. Charles Muscatine takes this to be the significance of the hundred and first stanza in both *Pearl* and *GGK*. (p. 69)
27. Andrew Marvell develops a similar theme in brief in his poem 'The Coronet'.

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Proust Among the Cannibals

Should Marcel be Consumed?

S.D. Ménager

Translated by V.M. Everson

To Nadine Gordimer, with my respectful admiration.

Yesterday I attended a lecture given by Nadine Gordimer.¹ I enjoy her comments because when she speaks about literature, she always does so with such excitement that it is readily understood that literary creation is still the great passion in her life. I must say that I was rather surprised when she started to speak to us of Proust. I was comfortably ensconced in my chair, thousands of miles from the beloved treasures of my French culture, expecting to be addressed on South African literature when, unannounced, I could see reappearing the Narrator and behind him a frail teenage girl. Indeed I had no difficulty in recognising myself in the young girl who one day, on going into the little library in Springs, stopped in her tracks before a rare magical object; in that cut-off South African dorp was an English translation of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. The words used by Nadine Gordimer yesterday recounted her emotion and explained to her audience how she was bowled over by a discovery so totally unexpected that, after reading the book, the world would never again be for her what it had been in the past; the very meaning of life was forever altered. Yes, I too might have said those things, so true it is that the unveiling of Proust's universe happens in the same illuminating flash of light in a little central French village, as it does in a dorp in the Transvaal or in a coloured suburb of Cape Town.

Nadine Gordimer, whose words were still dancing in my head, had also brought to mind a statement made by another writer – French in this instance – and so different from her that I could not but be amazed at the enthusiasm shared by them both for an author who should have kept them worlds apart. I thought back to what Jean Genet had confided about his early literary experiences:

I read *Within a Budding Grove* in prison, the first volume. We were in the prison courtyard swapping books surreptitiously. It was during the war and as I was not particularly taken up with books. I was one of the

last and they said to me: 'Here, you take this.' And I saw it was Marcel Proust. And I said to myself: 'But this has to be shit.' And then . . . I read the first sentence of the book; it's the introduction of Monsieur de Norpois at a dinner at Proust's mother's and father's. And the sentence is very long. And when I finished the sentence, I closed the book and said to myself: 'Now I'm at peace, I know that I'm going to go from triumph to triumph.' The first sentence was so full, so beautiful; it was an adventure, a great game that heralded a fire. And I took nearly the whole day to get over it. I only opened the book again in the evening and indeed I have quite simply gone from triumph to triumph. (Genet, pp. 23–27)

By what extraordinary coincidence could the criminal, hardened by years in prison and reformatory, lover of pimps locked in the same cell with him, be united in his delight with the girl already ill at ease in the provincial desert of an apartheid-torn society? So there was a common bond, apparently invisible, linking two human beings seemingly so totally unlike that nothing could ever bring them together; a unifying line was drawn through them just as it was through me, since I found in their enthusiasm what had likewise shaped my own.

Yet I could still think that beyond our social, existential and geographical differences, we had something in common. I could define it very hazily as a racial identity, coupled with a collective cultural heritage that I shall call European for want of a more appropriate word. Thus a shared passion for an author like Proust, he too influenced by his milieu, was perhaps not such a great mystery after all, since I could explain it in terms of its historical and cultural context.

However, a little later that same evening an article brought to mind the same issue. Jean Chevrier, in a study of Ferdinand Oyono's novel, *Une Vie de Boy* (*A Boy's Life*) introduced the Cameroonian author with these words: 'A reader of Balzac and Zola, but also of Guy de Maupassant . . .' (Chevrier, p. 33) So reading the great classics was not, as I had concluded somewhat too hastily, restricted to a group that might recognise itself in a literature whose heroes would have the same skin colour as their own, so that the identification phenomenon necessary for reader enthusiasm and pleasure could play its part. Was not the link, the burning passion that erupted between Oyono and the Baroness of Nucingen,² even more astonishing than what Genet might have felt for the Baron de Charlus, to whom he might after all have been attracted because of a shared homosexuality? What could have induced the little black boy, whose mother, riveted to her sewing machine, worked herself to death paying for her son's education, to devour the adventures of characters like the wife of a great nineteenth-century banker so seemingly foreign to the child's daily cares? Two totally heterogeneous worlds appeared to have come together around the books that a boy read deep in the bush.

The thought of that young man recalled another passion: my discovery of the daily life of a coloured child in South African society at the beginning of the twentieth century. The revelation had come to me through reading Peter Abrahams's autobiography *Tell Freedom*, from which I had retained the following amazing lines, product of a first reading aloud undertaken for him by the young secretary and accountant at the forge where he worked:

She looked at me then began to read from Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare*.

The story of Othello jumped at me and invaded my heart and mind as the young woman read. I was transported to the land where the brave Moor lived and loved and destroyed his love. (Abrahams, p. 149)

Captivated by Shakespeare, the young labourer was to concentrate all his efforts on studying. He learned to read himself so that he could one day come to know, after the Elizabethan theatre, black American writers up in arms against white oppression, later to become an incentive to his own questioning of the inimical system under which he lived. What amazed me yet again about this new example was the heterogeneity of disparate elements and the similarity of the outcome: the birth of a passion and of a literary vocation:

Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare* was my favourite reading matter. [This book] and the Everyman edition of John Keats, were my proudest and dearest possessions. my greatest wealth . . .

With Shakespeare and poetry, a new world was born. New dreams, new desires, a new self-consciousness, was born. I desired to know myself in terms of the new standards set by these books. I lived in two worlds, the world of Vrededorp and the world of these books. And, somehow, both were equally real. Each was a potent force in my life, compelling. (Abrahams, p. 161)

The attraction felt by the coloured adolescent was also felt by another author, from a totally different part of Africa; talking of his literary vocation, he confided in an article in the journal *Notre Librairie*:³

Writing only came to me later. when I had studied Molière, Corneille etc . . . I acknowledge my debt to the authors I read and studied.' (Zinsou, p.25)

It is now Molière who has taken Shakespeare's place but the debt to the great classics is the same, independent of place, time and the cultural framework in which they were approached. Writing is reached first through reading.

However, it was then that I thought again of something else Nadine Gordimer had said, that might appear to contradict the conclusion I had just drawn from all this evidence. That same afternoon she had also claimed during her lecture that: 'Books are not made out of books but out of life'.⁴ By this she seemed suddenly to reduce to practically minor proportions the importance of emulation that is precipitated by the great adventure each author has when he is initiated to literature through reading and which, up until then, had struck me as being vital for creating a literary work.

Then I remembered someone else, also torn apart, one of those writers who has shattered for ever the calm of the self-satisfied reader: Bessie Head. In one of her novels which portrays with the most desperate acuteness the torment of the author at the crossroads of different cultures rarely easy to reconcile, she describes her heroine's crucifixion:

There was nothing on earth that was not human, sensible and beautiful that had not been fearlessly thrown into the mind of the pupil, from Plato to W. B. Yeats. It was W. B. Yeats who had made the pupil cry: she could not grasp him.

'Damn it!' her educator had exclaimed, impatiently. 'You can't understand him because you can't hear and see the lake water lapping.' . . . Yeats had to be there too even though he spoke of a land other than her own arid surroundings. (Head, p. 20)

If Margaret, the heroine of the novel *Maru* has so much difficulty in entering Yeats's world, it is because it is imposed on her by her British mentor and does not naturally enter her world. What stands between Yeats and Margaret are the surroundings in which the young girl lives, her life itself which does not manage to slip between the lines of the British poet's verse. The heroine's adoptive mother attempts the transition by means of a culture made unattractive by its very imposition upon a soul that all of a sudden becomes refractory through lack of consideration for the components of its essence. What facilitates the young girl's enthusiasm in the small town of Springs is the dusty old library with the yellowed volumes of *Remembrance of Things Past* on its shelves. What prompts the Cameroonian child's wonderment is the rhythm of the sewing-machine pedal frenetically worked by his mother's feet as it keeps time with the pages he turns; what favours the amazement of the young blacksmith's assistant is the grease and the dirty oil, the unknown world of the secretary where for the first time he hears of *Othello*. Yes, 'books are made out of life' and they are so integrated into it that they are inextricably linked to everything that surrounds their first reading and which contributes to

according them their value. Does Proust himself not emphasise this link which, it would seem, is to be prolonged indefinitely through the reader's existence like a memory impossible to erase:

Beautiful Sunday afternoons beneath the chestnut tree in the garden at Combray, painstakingly emptied by me of the mediocre incidents of my personal life and replaced by an adventurous life full of strange aspirations in the heart of a land irrigated by running streams. Indeed you contain it for you have gradually circumscribed and enclosed it, while I was going on with my reading and as the heat of the day lessened within the slowly changing, successive crystal of your silent hours shot through with foliage, sonorous, fragrant and limpid. (Proust, *Tome I*, p. 87)

Just as the countryside of the small village of Combray has inscribed within a living, daily context the novels discovered by the Narrator, thereby eternally imprisoning its trees, sun and flowers within its pages, so have the details of their daily lives, perfectly foreign to the works discovered by Gordimer, Genet, Abrahams and so many more like them, brought those books back from the world of the dead to the land of the living after a long journey sometimes spanning several centuries, coming from far-off societies seemingly extinguished and permanently overthrown.

It would be extremely difficult to define with any exactitude the basis for the common attraction which the great classics continue to have on readers and writers of all persuasions and all races, without having recourse to humanist principles. It might be possible to detect in all this the outstanding expression of universal human qualities present in each of these works, capable of persisting throughout the passage of time despite historical changes in the world, keeping value and strength intact and thereby enabling identification in defiance of the erosion of time. However such reasoning, too often used for cultural domination, is scarcely convincing nowadays. If pressed to find an explanation for this longevity phenomenon, one would undoubtedly have to search for it in the unique contribution each of these artistic adventures brings to the functioning of the historical process of evolution of literary creation.

My thoughts had let me wander far indeed, when I came back to Proust, wondering what the interest of such an author could possibly be within the context of teaching literature in South Africa in 1990. Among our cannibalistic students famished by apartheid, what on earth could this precious aesthete do, witness of a bygone era, so far from the crucial debate taking place at this very moment around Albie Sachs, Cronin and Lionel Abrahams on the fundamental issue of the immediate future of literature in a country in a state of crisis?

The first answer to come to mind was the exceptional character of Marcel Proust's work. *Remembrance of Things Past* is a unique novel in that it is the first to go beyond, and to do so by leaps and bounds, the stringent framework of traditional narrative form. Beyond the Narrator's memories, the adventures he has us live through side by side with his innumerable characters, who make up, as so many stones in the hands of masons, that cathedral that is his mission's long quest, Marcel Proust's work is above all the fantastic recreation, through the ebb and flow of time and the events of his hero's life, of the gestation period and birth of a work of art. Beneath the reader's mystified eyes, the stages of artistic creation are unveiled one by one: hesitations, trials, failures and the first successful attempts at completing, in a miraculously subtle fusion, that very piece of work that the reader holds in his hands. At the end of the novel, after his last social evening at the new Princess de Guermantes' salon, the Narrator, to whom has finally been revealed the meaning of his work and the direction it would take, discovers simultaneously the daily danger threatening its accomplishment and remarks to himself:

Yes . . . this idea of Time that I had just formed told me that it was time to get to work. It was high time . . . The mind has its countrysides for which contemplation is but an allotted span of time. I had lived like a painter climbing a path overlooking a lake, the sight of which is hidden from him by a veil of rocks and trees. He glimpses it through a gap, he has it all before him, he picks up his brushes. But darkness is already falling and painting is no longer possible; day will never break on it again. (Proust, Tome III, p.1035)

What is unique in Proust's artistic conception, is that, right in the middle of what later came to be known as 'la belle époque' ('the Golden Age'), he should be the first to use and orchestrate the concept of creation thought of in terms of work. It is no longer the romantic bourgeois vision in vogue at that time, culminating as it did in the image of the artist leading an easy Bohemian life, producing works of art as his fancy took him. The work that the Narrator is to undertake will be a labour of love, demanding sweat and effort. He will have to become the artisan bent on accomplishing a piece of work that he will perpetually feel is at risk:

I might be anxious, even if I thought that there still lay before me a few years, because of my age, my time could be up a few minutes hence. In fact I had to start from the premise of having a body, that is, I was perpetually threatened by a double danger, both from without and within. (Proust, Tome III, p. 1035)

The fragility of the writer's body, receptacle of the creation to be executed, mirrors metaphorically the vulnerability of the body of work he must complete. The danger from within emanates from the structure itself which changing fashion and stylistic turnabouts can make obsolete; the danger from without is the reader's interest which can progressively diminish as time goes by.

The second answer that occurred to me was that, like all great works to have marked a decisive moment in the history of literature, Proust's has provided technical discoveries of the utmost importance. There is a uniqueness in a Proustian sentence that is his alone, like snatches of a tune recognisable from the very first notes, identified among a thousand others by the reader's attentive ear, just as the unique musicality of the structure of Joyce's novels is recognised, or Shakespeare's special luminosity of verse, or the shadowy and troubling use James mysteriously makes of words that compel us to search for a secret never fully grasped.

When Proust sets about decribing the style of his master Saint-Simon,⁵ whose influence on him was extremely important, he gives us a first key, by means of flowers, to unlock the reading of *Remembrance of Things Past*, that 'complicated, flowery manuscript':

True diversity lies in the fullness of real and unexpected elements, in the branch weighed down with blue flowers which, (contrary to all expectations), bursts forth from the springtime hedge which already seemed full, whereas purely formal imitation of diversity (and this could be argued for all other stylistic features), is but emptiness and uniformity, that is everything which is at total variance with diversity and which can only create illusion in the hands of imitators and recall its memory to those who have not understood it in the hands of the masters. (Proust, Tome I, p.541)

Just as the Marchioness of Villeparisis, one of Proust's secondary characters and a mediocre amateur painter, can only copy roses, Proust might only have been the author of *Pastiches et Mélanges*;⁶ the temptation was very strong and Saint-Simon's style, here being the object of a floral metaphor, greatly influenced him.

However, more important than capturing the tone, there was a lesson to be learned. Saint-Simon was not to be rewritten, despite the overwhelming desire to do so. According to the creative process that the author was able to extract from his models, personal originality had to be expressed. That unexpected flower, capricious and wild, burgeoning forth from the springtime hedge of the Saint-Simonian text, is found again in Proust, growing for our pleasure. It is perfectly

portrayed through truly floral language, in which precious, rare bouquets of Proustian style blossom, as Madame Swann appears in the Bois de Boulogne:

All of a sudden, on the driveway sand, tardy, dallying and as luxuriant as the most beautiful flower only to open at noon, Madame Swann would appear, with an ever different outfit blooming around her, although I recall it as being mainly mauve; she would then raise and open out on the end of a long peduncle, at the moment of its fullest irradiation, the silken pavilion of a wide parasol, the same shade as the blossoming petals of her dress. (Proust, Tome I, p.625)

Over the metaphor which makes Madame Swann a flower is a parasol in full bloom: an unexpected and very personal image characterising Proust's style and emphasising the utmost importance of originality that any effort at writing must always seek to achieve and which remains for each and every reader the ultimate lesson of his work.

Should Marcel Proust be consumed? Is he still edible? This question, which my mind had not stopped asking since hearing Gordimer's words, could unhesitatingly be answered in the affirmative. At a time when everyone still excited by literary adventure and the incalculable riches it can still afford us, is pondering on the direction it might take in the present South African context, Proust and along with him everything that questioning literature fosters, invents, explores and discovers, are still the essential food needed by famished minds too long deprived, longing to be satiated and to speak out at last. Art is not put on ice by revolution; it is regenerated, rejuvenated, enriched by it. For a socialist realism which kills and reduces to the banal all forms of expression, there will always be a thousand and one voices that will be raised, to follow the path that for thousands of years has been trodden in the unextinguishable quest for artistic creation, whose earliest manifestations, let us not forget, were linked to magical practices. If Proust is to be consumed, it is better by far to devour him so that, as Albie Sachs fervently urges on behalf of the ANC, 'the doors of learning and culture shall be opened' (*Weekly Mail*, 28 February 1990). Who knows what delights are in store for us, the fruit of new talent, born of the unforeseen encounter between the masters of the past and the warriors of the future? 'The more fists and spears and guns, the better' (*Weekly Mail*).

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NOTES

1. 'References: The Code of Culture', College Lecture given by Nadine Gordimer at the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg on 28 March 1990.
2. The Baroness of Nucingen appears in several novels by Balzac.
3. *Notre Librairie*, 'Aux sources de la création', Senouvo Agbota Zinsou p. 25.
4. Gordimer.
5. Saint-Simon, the famous seventeenth century chronicler at King Louis XIV's court.
6. *Pastiches et Mélanges*, one of Proust's first essays in which he happily indulges in pastiches of great French authors.

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THE PRISONERS OF TRADITION AND THE POLITICS OF NATION BUILDING*

by CHARLES SIMKINS

The Prisoners of Tradition and the Politics of Nation Building is the title of a small book which grew out of a research project undertaken for the S.A. Institute of Race Relations and which was published at the beginning of this year.¹ However, my main concern is not to summarise an already compressed book, but to present some of the further developments in my own thinking and to comment on some recent events — as Harold Wilson once observed, a week is a long time in politics.

Accordingly, I shall concentrate on one major theme: the problem of constructing a new political framework which will both permit the further economic growth required to wipe out mass poverty and which will allow all — or all but the most recalcitrant — South Africans 'to feel free in their own country'. I must say at the outset that I use the phrase 'prisoners of tradition' because I believe that our history means that meeting both conditions will be formidably difficult, though not impossible: 'history may be servitude, history may be freedom', wrote T.S. Eliot. Passing from the former to the latter requires an uncompromising confrontation with what holds us in bondage — no matter how much it appeals to deep-rooted conservative instincts, no matter how fashionably it may be dressed up as attractive but deluded promises of liberation.

What is it that holds us in bondage? Perhaps the place to start is with the highly inegalitarian form of capitalist development in South Africa. In its earlier and weaker phase, it took a mercantile and monopolistic form under the aegis of the Dutch East India Company. By the late eighteenth century, South African development was stagnating as the Company stagnated, itself a consequence of Holland's decline. British rule did not bring a great deal of change until the minerals revolution, which certainly speeded up economic growth but also concentrated wealth. Adelman, Morris and Robinson in their studies of income distribution concluded that, as a general rule, mining-led development tends to be inegalitarian. In South Africa, this tendency was powerfully reinforced by the need for a concentration of capital to undertake the expensive work of deep level gold mining. But, while inegalitarian, South African capitalism has not been of a narrow, enclave kind. It has progressively transformed the entire society and has raised absolute living standards for nearly everyone. Merle Lipton has

* This is the text of a University Lecture delivered in Pietermaritzburg on 4 October 1989.