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All contributions in this issue, literary criticism as well as an article on the role of the Press, are concerned in some degree with humanity in a social setting. We cannot, then, discern an imbalance — a stress on one discipline rather than others. Products of research in these pages have bearing on a centre which every branch of the arts, humanities, and social sciences can share.

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THE CITY AND THE COUNTRY: BOOKS VII AND VIII OF WORDSWORTH'S 'THE PRELUDE'

by FRANÇOIS HUGO

T.S. Eliot's perception of London as an 'Unreal City' comes as a confirmation of many preceding indications in *The Waste Land*. By contrast, Wordsworth's account of London in the seventh Book of *The Prelude* evolves unpredictably. Wordsworth's protagonist, his youthful self, finds himself carried along by a stream of experience which for the most part suggests one broad interpretative theme, only to find himself exposed to two unexpected interruptions which convey an alternative, severely admonitory image of the city. So we come also in Wordsworth's account to a condition of alienation but we retain a sense of the city as a complex phenomenon, open to more than one interpretation.

Wordsworth at first presents his impressions as though he were simply a traveller passing through, and the city had no power to hold him or even bring him to a pause. He registers the endless activity as a centrifugal force which spreads unchecked from the centre. The city does not lie 'Open unto the fields',[1] but all its activity seems to point that way. The drayman who cuts into the congested traffic to 'veer round with punctual skill' (1805, VII, 170) reveals the underlying drive of commercial distribution in the general outward movement. When the protagonist, after a time, seeks refuge from the throng by turning into a 'sequestered nook' (1805, VII, 186), he still does not pause or come to rest. The entertainments he comes across along this quieter way — dromedaries, monkeys, minstrel Savoyards — continue to refer his imagination outward. The secluded inns of court which he takes in on his route, are 'privileged Regions' (1805, VII, 202) and therefore unrepresentative of the city at large. At last he finds himself following a 'broadening Causeway' (1805, VII, 215) into the suburbs where he meets figures which are already familiar to him from his experience of other regions: the travelling cripple, the military idler, and the dame walking 'field-ward'. (1805, VII, 226) This last figure takes us to the transitional zone where the city dissolves into the country, apparently giving up its claim to separate identity.

As though the protagonist senses that the radiating streets and roads have diverted his attention from the city's own peculiar identity, he retraces his steps into the 'thickening hubbub' (1805, VII, 227). His attention, 'tired of random sights' (1805, VII, 233), becomes more selective, and the city now presents itself as a

microcosmic version of the world's peoples. He sees 'all specimens of Man' (1805, VII, 236):

> The Swede, the Russian; from the genial South,
> The Frenchman and the Spaniard; from remote
> America the Hunter-Indian; Moors,
> Malays, Lascars, the Tartar and Chinese,
> And Negro Ladies in white muslin gowns.
> (1805, VII, 239–243)

In the light of this representative conception of the city, various indoor exhibitions can be viewed as providing further material and greater detail. Wordsworth explains that he is referring to literally imitative, Panorama exhibitions rather than to the art of landscape painting, and thereby perhaps hints a reservation regarding the microcosmic notion of the city. A simply imitative function is still more evident when he turns his attention to scale models, miniatures of 'famous spots and things' (1805, VII, 268). They might represent St Peter's church, the falls of Tivoli or the Temple of the Sybil:

> and high upon that steep
> The Temple of the Sybil, every tree
> Through all the landscape, tuft, stone, scratch minute,
> And every Cottage, lurking in the rocks,
> All that the Traveller sees when he is there.
> (1805, VII, 275–279)

The account of theatrical shows which now follows deals with less literal forms of imitation, and so in extending its scope quietens doubts regarding the representative conception of the city. The ascent from simple imitation is quite gradual: beginning at the level of giants, dwarfs, clowns, conjurors, it rises to the level of Jack the Giant Killer and then, further, to the sad story of Mary of Buttermere. In this last subject the city's imitations refer intimately to Wordsworth's own native region. Wordsworth recalls how he and Coleridge observed the actual Mary in her country setting and noted that she remained unaffected by the widespread interest shown in her experience:

> Not unfamiliarly we since that time
> Have seen her; her discretion have observed,
> Her just opinions, female modesty,
> Her patience, and retiredness of mind
> Unsoiled by commendation, and the excess
> Of public notice. (1805, VII, 334–339)

In spite of a hint at the incongruity of the presentation of Mary's story at Sadler's Wells (which Mary Lamb described in a letter to Dorothy Wordsworth as 'the lowest and most London-like of our amusements')[2] Wordsworth has so far in Book Seven brought out the continuity between the city and the world beyond. The touch of incongruity, however, foreshadows the first of the deliberate interruptions which Wordsworth creates in the theatrical parade so as to indicate conflict between the city and the country. He describes two figures, a mother and her child, against a theatre background. The mother's appearance of 'painted bloom' (1805, VII, 373) merges with the background, whereas the child's freshness seems entirely alien:

> the Boy had been
> The pride and pleasure of all lookers-on
> In whatsoever place; but seemed in this
> A sort of Alien scattered from the clouds.
> (1805, VII, 374–377)

The contrast between painted falsity and innocent freshness is not imagined very originally, but the magnetic quality of the boy's beauty-in-isolation strikingly conveys that the theatrical mode of city existence in fact implies a longing for an extraordinary descent on to the urban stage, an intervention as though by super-natural means of innocent vigour. That conception, we discover later, is developed in the passage relating the encounter with the blind beggar.

In the meanwhile the ascent from the humbler forms of imitation continues, as Wordsworth refers to plays which aim at some stateliness of effect. He acknowledges that standard theatrical devices are capable of producing impressions of genuine beauty or grandeur:

> some beauteous Dame
> Advanced in radiance through a deep recess
> Of thick-entangled forest, like the Moon
> Opening the clouds . . .
> (1805, VII, 445–448)

A theatre audience must always reckon, however, with the reductive influence of exaggeration and facile illusion, as evident for example in the

> mumbling Sire,
> A scare-crow pattern of old Age, patched up
> Of all the tatters of infirmity . . .
> (1805, VII, 454–456)

For Wordsworth, then, disbelief was never wholly suspended; and he claims his essential imagination was not affected, unless fitfully through the unpredictable workings of counter suggestion:

> If aught there were of real grandeur here
> 'Twas only then when gross realities
> The incarnation of the Spirits that moved
> Amid the Poet's beauteous world, called forth,
> With that distinctness which a contrast gives
> Or opposition, made me recognise
> As by a glimpse, the things which I had shaped
> And yet not shaped . . . (1805, VII, 507–514)

Wordsworth ignores personal acting skills not necessarily because he is unaware of their imaginative value, but perhaps more because he is concerned to prepare the way for a severe intervention of imagination and so feels it necessary to assume a certain selective austerity.

Wordsworth's frequently light manner in this book becomes markedly so in his account of the fashionable London parson who leads his voice, after beginning in a tone 'elaborately low (1805, VII, 549), through a 'minuet course' (1805, VII, 551). A sombre modulation soon follows, however, as Wordsworth at last distinguishes a feeling, and by implication an identity, which belongs to the city 'by exclusive right' (1805, VII, 593). From this moment he is no longer able to enjoy the colourful parade from the vantage point of a detached observer; instead he feels drawn into the overflowing streets and finds himself carried along by a current which he is powerless to resist. He expresses a perception similar to Blake's in his poem *London* that the city, though presumably organised by human volition, actually generates a power of its own, capable of oppressing the whole community within it:

> How often in the overflowing Streets,
> Have I gone forward with the Crowd, and said
> Unto myself, the face of every one
> That passes by me is a mystery.
> (1805, VII, 593–597)

In the encounter with the discharged soldier, related in Book Four, the protagonist had been faced with an 'uncouth shape' which represents an extreme resistance to the interpretative power of imagination. The distorting effect produced by the soldier's desolation was gradually overcome, but in the present instance the protagonist is faced with a condition of human falsity which remains quite intractable. The imagination has not been cheated of a purpose, as in the experience of crossing the Alps in Book Six, and

so does not recoil upon itself: it produces instead an intense recognition of dislocation and unreality. This, the first lasting experience of the disjunction of seeing and being, foreshadows the yet more serious sense of 'Death-like' desertion (X, 414) which characterises Wordsworth's response to the Reign of Terror related in the books on France.

> Thus have I looked, nor ceased to look, oppressed
> By thoughts of what, and whither, when and how,
> Until the shapes before my eyes became
> A second-sight procession, such as glides
> Over still mountains, or appears in dreams . . .
> (1805, VII, 598–601)

In a context in which men seem voluntarily to participate in creating a structure which prevents them from knowing either themselves or one another, the appropriate image of the human condition seems to be that of a blind beggar, helplessly staring into darkness. With the acceptance of this symbol, the oppressive power of the city felt from the start as an irresistible current, reveals itself climactically as the disruptive force of a vortex:

> And once, far-travelled in such mood, beyond
> The reach of common indications, lost
> Amid the moving pageant, 'twas my chance
> Abruptly to be smitten with the view
> Of a blind Beggar, who, with upright face,
> Stood propped against a Wall, upon his Chest
> Wearing a written paper, to explain
> The Story of the Man, and who he was.
> My mind did at this spectacle turn round
> As with the might of waters . . .
> (1805, VII, 607–616)

Wordsworth feels 'admonished from another world' (1805, VII, 622) since the human mind bent on self-destruction appears in desperate need of external invervention, as already indicated in the passage depicting the radiant child.

Raymond Williams offers a valuable commentary on this passage and Book Seven generally. He argues that Wordsworth's country experience shapes his vision, enabling him to perceive the city as a 'new kind of alienation'.[3] He analyses the relation between Blake's and Wordsworth's view of the city in the following way:

> Blake saw a common condition of 'weakness and woe'. Wordsworth saw strangeness, a loss of connection, not at first in social but in perceptual ways: a failure of identity in the crowd of others which

> worked back to a loss of identity in the self, and then, in these ways, a loss of society itself . . . No experience has been more central in the subsequent literature of the city.[4]

Besides his country experience, Wordsworth's experience of the French Revolution should be taken into account as a possible shaping influence. In the blind beggar encounter Wordsworth, to my mind, presents perceptual confusion not as a separate experience, but as an expression of the oppressive momentum of the city. In this way his vision supplies direct support for Blake's political sense of the oppressive structure of the city. Where Wordsworth's account differs significantly from Blake's is in the perception expressed in the image of the blind beggar himself. Wordsworth is not simply falling back on a 'received idea: the mystery of all human life'[5] as Williams contends; he seems to me rather to be suggesting that, in the context of the city, the human mind suffers a deprivation of the liberating power of imagination.

The account of St Bartholomew's Fair which concludes Book Seven becomes the occasion for a re-interpretation of the great metropolitan parade in the light of the experience with the blind beggar. Raymond Williams regards the following passage, a part of that re-interpretation, as a 'denunciation of the "crowd", the "masses" ', and as an example of 'contemptuous blocking':[6]

> Oh, blank confusion! and a type not false
> Of what the mighty City is itself
> To all except a Straggler here and there,
> To the whole Swarm of its inhabitants;
> An undistinguishable world to men,
> The slaves unrespited of low pursuits,
> Living amid the same perpetual flow
> Of trivial objects, melted and reduced
> To one identity, by differences
> That have no law, no meaning, and no end . . .
> (1805, VII, 695–704)

At this point Williams stops short,[7] omitting to quote the following lines, which to me appear crucial, especially in view of the accusation of mental blocking:

> Oppression under which even highest minds
> Must labour, whence the strongest are not free . . .
> (1805, VII, 705–706)

My own impression is that Wordsworth experiences shock and dismay, rather than contempt, as he contemplates an oppressive structure which subjects even the strongest to its power. If any

doubt remains regarding the centrality Wordsworth attributes to the threat he recognises, reference should be made to the earlier lines in which he speaks of the Fair as a work:

> that lays,
> If any spectacle on earth can do,
> The whole creative powers of man asleep!
> (1805, VII, 652–654)

In the event the creative powers are not laid asleep: the dislocating experience retains imaginative significance as a consequence of the background the protagonist brings to it, enabling him to see the experience in 'order and relation' (1805, VII, 729):

> But though the picture weary out the eye,
> By nature an unmanageable sight,
> It is not wholly so to him who looks
> In steadiness, who hath among least things
> An under-sense of greatest; sees the parts
> As parts, but with a feeling of the whole.
> (1805, VII, 707–712)

The eighth Book begins with an account of Helvellyn fair which is clearly intended as a contrast to St Bartholomew's Fair in the seventh Book. Wordsworth conveys how it was possible for the rural gathering to contribute in a variety of ways to 'a feeling of the whole'. The passage begins with one of Wordsworth's most subtle effects of dual scale or ambiguous perspective. The people are viewed from the high vantage point of Helvellyn's head, but their voices seem amplified by the intervening 'depth of air' (1805, VIII, 2), making them sound closer than they appear to the eye. The plenitude of space these people enjoy both magnifies and diminishes them, and so helps to reveal 'order and relation.' The gathering, for example, is at one and the same time a crowd and a little family, an expression of human diversity and of human interdependence.

> What sounds are those, Helvellyn, which are heard
> Up to thy summit? Through the depth of air
> Ascending, as if distance had the power
> To make the sounds more audible: what Crowd
> Is yon, assembled in the gay green Field?
> Crowd seems it, solitary Hill! to thee,
> Though but a little Family of men . . .
> (1805, VIII, 1–7)

The close view, moreover, yields that round each individual man in this 'Family of Men' clusters a wife and children. The long-distance view, contributing its part, yields that the fair gradually rotates round the mountain, as it passes annually from one 'tributary' vale (1805, VIII, 12) to the next: in this way another human cluster relation is formed; and the mountain, that earlier seemed to attract all voices to itself, emerges more clearly still as a symbolic centre.

The double perspective returns in the concluding lines of the paragraph, but in the meanwhile Wordsworth enters into a close, more detailed account of the gathering and its activities. Wordsworth brings out how these activities imply both constancy and change and so exemplify the rotational movement of the fair itself around a centre. The uneasy lowing of the heifer, as it hears the voice of its new master, suggests change. On the other hand the old woman who sells books, pictures, combs and pins finds her way back to the fair again:

> Year after year a punctual Visitant!
>
> (1805, VIII, 31)

The most important figure in this respect is the 'sweet Lass of the valley' (1805, VIII, 37) who, poised between youth and adulthood, represents a turning-point all recognise and all respond to.

> who that sees her would not buy?
> Fruits of her Father's Orchard, apples, pears,
> (On that day only to such office stooping)
> She carries in her Basket, and walks round
> Among the crowd, half pleased with, half ashamed
> Of her new calling, blushing restlessly.
>
> (1805, VIII, 38–43)

In the concluding lines of the description the double perspective dramatically returns. The scale of comparison in which the human gathering is now set reaches, far beyond Helvellyn, to the vast recession of elemental space. However, though space recedes, the 'circumambient World' (1805, VIII, 47) embraces them, providing a 'soft green field' (1805, VIII, 49) for their activities. The Miltonian echo in 'circumambient' strengthens the paradoxical recognition of space, fused in the double meaning of 'Recess' (1805, VIII, 47), as being both recessive and supportive. It is worth recalling, for the reflected light it casts, the similar perspective from 'this green earth' (1. 105), and its inversion, in *Tintern Abbey*. In the meantime here are some of the concluding lines of the present passage:

> Immense
> Is the Recess, the circumambient World
> Magnificent, by which they are embraced.
> They move about upon the soft green field:
> How little They, and their doings seem,
> Their herds and flocks about them, they themselves,
> And all that they can further or obstruct!
> Through utter weakness pitiably dear
> As tender Infants are: and yet how great!
> For all things serve them . . .
>
> (1805, VIII, 46–55)

We, as readers of *The Prelude*, have been Wordsworth's travelling companions since he left his northern home for Cambridge, recorded in Book III, and we have observed, as they manifested themselves, the effects on him of various encounters and experiences. The sense of being a companion is suspended in the eighth Book: instead we attend as Wordsworth recalls various isolated memories from his boyhood in response to the dislocating impact of the meeting with the blind beggar. The retrospect is selective, distancing both the protagonist and ourselves and giving prominence to newly significant country figures and events. A good deal of the book, not simply the opening passage which has just been discussed, carries a reminder of *Tintern Abbey*, in that it is marked by a quality of rediscovery. That quality, it should be noted, is far less evident in the 1850 version of the poem. Wordsworth shifts the emphasis in the later version to the traditional literary status of shepherds and away from his need as a younger man to recover the value of early experience. In fact one gains the impression that he lost sight of that value in revising the book and becoming conscious, instead, of the humble nature of the material, tried to put a rather artificial 'literary' flavour to parts of it.

In the 1805 version of the poem, the image of a group set against the background of Helvellyn yields to an image of an individual shepherd set against a background of clouds. An architectural conception of solid compared with airy volume yields, it might be said, to a painterly conception of fluid atmospheric change. In more literary terms the transition is from Milton's circumambient to Spenser's clouded heaven:

> Sweet Spenser moving through his clouded heaven
> With the moon's beauty and the moon's soft pace . . .
>
> (1805, III, 281–283)

Wordsworth describes a 'day of exhalations' in which vision is not directed and concentrated but roves freely, settling momentarily on particular details as they are briefly revealed by the moving clouds.

> It was a day of exhalations, spread
> Upon the mountains, mists and steam-like fogs
> Redounding everywhere, not vehement,
> But calm and mild, gentle and beautiful,
> With gleams of sunshine on the eyelet spots
> And loop-holes of the hills, wherever seen
> Hidden by quiet process . . .
>
> (1805, VIII, 84–90)

It is an evanescent, Spenserian world of changing qualities and subtle suggestions, a world in which man himself appears to be an exhalation of the earth:

> Emerging from the silvery vapours, lo!
> A Shepherd and his Dog! in open day:
> Girt round with mists they stood and looked about
> From that enclosure small, inhabitants
> Of an aerial Island floating on,
> As seemed, with that Abode in which they were,
> A little pendant area of grey rocks,
> By the soft wind breathed forward.
>
> (1805, VIII, 94–101)

The difference from the encounter with the blind beggar is clear. There is nothing forbidding or admonitory about this image: in this childhood experience man seems to be a natural spirit, blending with the earth and clouds in the same attactive and harmless way as Spenser's 'Daughters of the Flood'[8] blend with their river landscape.

The image which follows, in order to reinforce and balance the image just noticed, presents the shepherd not as an exhalation, but as an earthbound man. He stands near the centre of a valley, signalling to his dog how to direct the sheep amongst the 'mazes of steep crags' (1805, VIII, 109):

> 'so the Brute
> Dear Creature! with a Man's intelligence
> Advancing, or retreating on his steps,
> Through every pervious strait, to right or left,
> Thridded a way unbaffled; while the Flock
> Fled upwards from the terror of his Bark
> Through rocks and seams of turf with liquid gold
> Irradiate, that deep farewell light by which
> The setting sun proclaims the love he bears
> To mountain regions.
>
> (1805, VIII, 110–119)

The child's amenable notion of the shepherd's life is extended here as he watches him, through his proxy the sheep-dog, weave an

intricate course up the surrounding heights. The shepherd experiences an intimacy, perhaps comparable to that of a miner, with the texture of the earth; but the seams of turf are liquid gold in the setting sun, and so he experiences a simultaneous intimacy with the texture of light and air. The 'deep farewell light' sums up the bond existing in his experience between earth and heaven. The conception of space as both recessive and supportive, which appeared in the opening passage of the eighth Book, now re-appears in a textural version.

We have been following until this point in the Book some of Wordsworth's most subtle poetry, but something more dramatic is needed to countervail the reductiveness of the meeting with the blind beggar. In the following passage Wordsworth provides, especially in the 1850 version, a dramatic setting for the life of the shepherd:

> Yet, hail to you
> Moors, mountains, headlands, and ye hollow vales,
> Ye long deep channels for the Atlantic's voice,
> Powers of my native region! Ye that seize
> The heart with firmer grasp! Your snows and streams
> Ungovernable, and your terrifying winds,
> That howl so dismally for him who treads
> Companionless your awful solitudes!
>
> (VIII, 215–222)

The impression of grand scale created earlier in the Book is here associated for the first time with power. In this passage Wordsworth's native region appears to draw to itself, in order to direct and intensify, the inexhaustible reservoir of power which the Atlantic represents, However, though the Atlantic may be the common source, many powers, 'Many gods and many voices'[9] declare themselves as separate identities. These powers, like T.S. Eliot's river, are 'Ungovernable'. The context defined by Helvellyn revealed both the smallness and the greatness of man; the present context reveals an elemental power in man, corresponding to the natural forces around him.

Wordsworth, with explicitly philosophical intention, traces the day's march of the shepherd. It begins in a promethean aura of fire and light:

> no sooner doth the sun
> Begin to strike him with a fire-like heat,
> Than he lies down upon some shining rock,
> And breakfasts with his dog.
>
> (VIII, 235–238)

There is, of course, no hint of mythological hostility, only the need to observe the strict discipline implied in the sun's course and the nature of the elements generally. As the shepherd keeps in step with that discipline, the mountain world unfolds the 'livelier fragrance' (VIII, 242) of thyme and the smoke (VIII, 245) of morning dew. Wordsworth describes himself in the first Book as fostered by both beauty and by fear; the shepherd, fostered by a similar combination of beauty and discipline, grows in stature until he seems to stride like a giant from hill to hill:

> from hill to hill he hies,
> His staff protending like a hunter's spear,
> Or by its aid leaping from crag to crag,
> And o'er the brawling beds of unbridged
> streams. (VIII, 245–248)

The personal and human growth enacted in the cycle of the day's march culminates in the shepherd's realisation of himself as a 'freeman' (VIII, 253). That sense is confirmed and substantiated in the consistent, enduring qualities of his experience: for example, the balanced simplicities of 'hope' and 'hazard', 'hard labour' and 'majestic indolence'. The last phrase 'majestic indolence' (VIII, 255), it is important to note, raises itself above the others to some extent in referring us back to the promethean image of the shepherd:

> himself he feels,
> In those vast regions where his service lies,
> A freeman, wedded to his life of hope
> And hazard, and hard labour interchanged
> With that majestic indolence so dear
> To native man. (VIII, 251–256)

The phrase, we find, proves to be transitional to a yet larger conception of the shepherd, as it reveals his least directed moment as his most god-like. The words 'majestic indolence' in fact precisely capture a leading quality of Michelangelo's *David*. It is that aspect of the figure which especially dramatises latent power, and Wordsworth, as though prompted by a similar association, proceeds to suggest the correspondence between the shepherd and natural forces.

> A rambling school-boy, thus
> I felt his presence in his own domain,
> As of a lord and master, or a power,
> Or genius, under Nature, under God,
> Presiding... (VIII, 256–260)

John Danby in his book *The Simple Wordsworth*[10] suggests that Wordsworth ought to be grouped with Renaissance poets and it might be said, by way of support, that Wordsworth's 'freeman' reflects a Renaissance grandeur and simplicity. That those qualities may be assimilated to the power of an ideal symbol becomes clear once again in the following lines:

> as he stepped
> Beyond the boundary line of some hill-shadow,
> His form hath flashed upon me, glorified
> By the deep radiance of the setting sun:
> Or him have I described in distant sky,
> A solitary object and sublime,
> Above all height! like an aerial cross
> Stationed alone upon a spiry rock
> Of the Chartreuse, for worship. (VIII, 267–275)

Wordsworth acknowledges that the shepherd must have suffered like other people from 'vice and folly, wretchedness and fear' (VIII, 291), but the reality of human weakness cannot undermine the value of the symbolic shepherd, since it is prompted by another reality: the shepherd's heroic independence, demonstrated by actual encounters in his mountain context.

It is possible to suggest indeed that the symbol of human helplessness, the blind beggar, and the contrary symbol of human indpendence, the shepherd, imply one another. Neither can be fully significant or fully grasped without the other. In a similar way, Serote in portraying the precarious, fringe existence of a township dweller may be said to assume the validity of Wordsworth's symbolic shepherd. So far from English Wordsworth being irrelevant in an African context, as it is now fashionable to believe, any significant image of human dignity and independence is re-affirmed by suggestion in Serote's *Alexandra* poems.[11] It is worth adding that Wordsworth explores the implications of the two figures, beggar and shepherd, in an explicitly political context as he goes on to relate his experiences in France during the Revolution in the books that follow.

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NOTES

Line numbers throughout refer to the parallel text in William Wordsworth, *The Prelude, or Growth of a Poet's Mind* ed. E. de Selincourt, revised H. Darbishire (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1959). Where the date is not given, a quotation is from the 1850 version.

1. Wordsworth, *Composed upon Westminster Bridge, Sept. 3, 1802.*
2. *The Prelude* ed. de Selincourt. Notes, p. 564.

3. Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1973, p. 150.
4. Williams, p. 150.
5. Williams, p. 151.
6. Williams, p. 151.
7. Williams, p. 151.
8. Spenser, *Prothalamion*, 1.21.
9. Eliot, *Dry Salvages*, 1.25.
10. John Danby, *The Simple Wordsworth*: (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1960), pp. 146–152.
11. Mongane Wally Serote, *Yakhal' inkomo* 1972, *Tsetlo* 1974, and other volumes (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker).

THE PRESS'S RESPONSIBILITY IN A POLARISED SOCIETY*

by RICHARD STEYN

Not long ago the Bureau for Information took out an advertisement in many of the country's newspapers to explain the restrictions imposed on the media under the Emergency Regulations. It contained the following assertion: 'The current struggle in South Africa is not between Whites and Blacks, or between the Government and the Opposition, but between moderates and radicals. It is between those who advocate negotiation and evolutionary change and those who advocate violence and revolutionary change: it is between those who are working for a plural society with a free economy in which everyone will have a say, and those who are working for a single party state with a socialist economy, in which no-one but the party elite would have a say. The media would do well to decide which side they're on'.

It is always tempting to divide men into two lots: Greeks and barbarians, Muslims and infidels, believers and non-believers, moderates and radicals. Was it Woody Allen who said that the world consisted of two groups of people: those who believe that the world consists of two groups of people and those who do not . . .?

The advertisement referred to was cunningly worded, devised by a skilled propagandist. Here are two options, it implied. One leads to peace and stability; the other to disaster and darkness. Anyone who does not support the first option must therefore be inviting or supporting the second. The argument was simplistic, misleading and wholly uncomprehending of the media's role in a democratic society, which is *not* to take sides in its news coverage, but to report the news to the very best of its ability and let the public make up its mind. No medium is entirely objective, but any medium which takes sides too vehemently is a medium which has forfeited its most precious attribute — its credibility. The South African Broadcasting Corporation is a prime example.

I want to talk today about the situation in which the press finds itself, trying to carry out its traditional role of purveyor of information, opinion-former and watchdog in a climate of siege, of ever-tightening restrictions and, in some cases, outright censorship. As Raymond Louw wrote recently in the IPI's *World Press Freedom Review*: 'Each year conscientious newspapermen have to ask themselves the same question — has press freedom [in South

* This is the text of a University Lecture delivered in Pietermaritzburg on 4th March, 1987, by the Editor of *The Natal Witness*.

Africa] become so eroded that it is no longer possible to produce a newspaper worthy of its name?'

Now, in 1987, the question is asked with more concern than ever.

Let us look very briefly at the background to the present restrictions on the press. For almost 40 years now there has been an inexorable procession towards Government control of the media. Confronted by the findings of various Government-appointed commissions, the media, or to be specific, the press, have been forced to enter into a series of agreements consenting to greater discipline, more responsibility, more control over the reporting of sensitive matters, in the hope of warding off the ultimate evil — a government-licenced press. It has been like feeding a crocodile. As the beast has become more and more unpopular, it has become more tetchy and uncomfortable, until in 1986, when it perceived its very existence to be at stake, it threw caution to the wind and imposed such sweeping restrictions on the press as to make normal reporting impossible.

You may ask yourself why it took Government so long to extend its control over the media, given the fact that the 'total onslaught' — that mythical bogey used in one form or another by every political-military establishment to justify its existence — has been a long time a-coming. The answer is that up to now the Government stood to lose more than it gained by shackling the press. One of the things for which the West gave South Africa credit was the liveliness of its press and its tolerance of a certain amount of dissent. I can recall, for example, President Carter's Ambassador William Edmondson commenting admiringly at the end of his term of duty here, on the vigour of the press. Ambassador Nickel made similar observations, as indeed have leading Western politicians from time to time.

The reluctance of Government to be seen to be acting against or undermining one of this country's few redeeming features in Western eyes was exemplified by the clandestine manner in which *The Citizen* was set up. The Government understood that credibility was essential to any newspaper, and that an English-language paper funded by it would lack that vital ingredient. Hence the use of 'front' men and the deception of Parliament.

This concern for international approval has been sacrificed on the altar of survival. Intensification of the international sanctions campaign has concentrated the Government's mind on survival and made it determined to control the dissemination of unpalatable facts. The survival impulse has a long history. '*Salus republicae suprema lex*', the Romans said. 'The survival of the State is the highest law'. The problem is that ever since the Caesars, governments have confused their own interests with those of the state. In the present South African context, after forty years in

power, the survival of the National Party Government has become the highest law.

I should also add here that the selectivity of the world media vis-a-vis South Africa has given the Government a ready made excuse to take action against the domestic press. One need not be a defender of apartheid to find odd the amount of attention given by leading foreign newspapers, e.g. *The New York Times*, and television networks, to events in South Africa. I give you one example — on the Day of the Covenant last year, Dr Andries Treurnicht made a run-of-the-mill speech which went almost unreported in South Africa. Yet it ended up on the front pages of *The New York Times*. The acres of news-space devoted to South Africa's iniquities, and the prominence given to scenes of unrest on overseas television until the clampdown last year, were disproportionate to South Africa's importance in the world — or degree of delinquency for that matter. Of course, apartheid puts us in a special category, but one reads far more about South Africa in the Western press than about many more repressive societies. There are various reasons for this, one being that South Africa claims to be part of the West and is judged by Western standards. But this selectivity has provided the Government with a plausible excuse — note that I said excuse, not justification — for intensifying its control over what is reported from and about this country.

What are the restrictions which impinge most heavily upon the press? They fall into three broad, overlapping categories and were well described by Benjamin Pogrund in an article in *The New Republic* recently.

1. Laws that curtail *individual* freedoms in South Africa and drag the press along willy-nilly. Most notable of these is the Internal Security Act, formerly the Suppression of Communism Act, used since the 50's to stifle not only Communism, but liberal non-Communist opposition to apartheid. The effect of this Act has been to silence and banish hundreds of opponents of apartheid and to drive most genuine Black opinion, save for that which Pretoria is prepared to tolerate, out of the public prints.
2. Laws preventing the press from publishing too much factual information: Defence, Police, Prisons, Nuclear Energy, Oil, Key Points and Trade are all subjects on which press coverage is strictly controlled. Even the publication of reports about corruption in the Civil Service is now subject to statutory control. The categories mentioned above have been considerably extended by the Emergency Regulations which make it an offence to publish any matter relating to unrest, security force action, strikes, boycotts, detentions etc, without Government permission. As one of my fellow-editors remarked dryly: 'In the

old days it used to be publishing untruths which landed one in trouble. Nowadays it is illegal to publish the truth'.

3. Laws which create 'grey' areas within which individual editors have to decide whether to risk publication on pain of being hauled before the courts, or much more seriously, of having their newspapers taken off the streets or shut down. It is an offence, for example, to publish any statement which might incite violence, or foster racial hostility, or contain information prejudicial to the interests of the Republic, whatever that may mean. The Emergency Regulations, before the courts pronounced upon them, were equally vague. The problem with much of this legislation is that editors often have to try to weigh up, not what a court might interpret the law to be, but what the Commissioner of Police or one of his minions might think. Does a statement about the African National Congress advance its cause or not? Is reporting the fact of an unlawful strike inciting people to support it? Does a report about the End Conscription Campaign imply support for the undermining of military service? More and more newspapers are having to adopt the easy way out: when in doubt, leave out — which is precisely what the authorities want. As far as they are concerned, the ideal situation would be for the press to censor itself. As George Orwell put it, 'Circus dogs jump when the trainer cracks his whip, but the really well-trained dog is the one that jumps when there is no whip'.

Compounding the situation is the way in which news is now being carefully managed and controlled by the Bureau for Information. Reporters have to rely, like everyone else, largely on official bulletins for news, say, of township unrest. The widespread nature of the unrest and the prohibitions upon entry into the unrest areas now make it very difficult for journalists even to gather the relevant information, let alone publish it. The result is a press which is failing in its primary duty of keeping the public informed of what is happening around it.

Some years ago, when he was Prime Minister, Mr P W Botha warned the Newspaper Press Union that, in the situation in which South Africa faced a total onslaught, it was necessary for the press to be disciplined. The year before that, Mr Louis le Grange, now Speaker of the House, told the same gathering that press freedom 'is not a civil liberty, but a privilege which carries responsibility. The public only had a right to be informed when this was in the interests of the State'. On another occasion, the State President — whose power is such nowadays that we have to pay careful heed to what he says — had this to say: 'We are interested that the news media should not write or talk in such a way as to encourage people to irresponsible deeds or which create an impression that the State is weak and can not maintain order'. Since then he has frequently

demanded that the press be 'responsible'. Responsible, that is, to the authorities. His idea of responsibility manifested itself again towards the end of last year when he offered the established newspapers an extraordinary deal in terms of which, if they agreed to censor themselves, he would absolve them from the restrictions of the Emergency Regulations then about to be enforced. His suggested guidelines boiled down to the press voluntarily absenting itself from scenes of unrest and not publishing information, without permission, about security force actions, strikes, boycotts, meetings and the like. When the press told him that it was not prepared to betray its own calling, Mr Botha implied that it was being obstructive and unpatriotic. There seemed to be no appreciation on his part that self-censorship of the kind proposed would strip the press of the last vestiges of its credibility.

There are other influences which are taking their toll of the press. As the country's economy stagnates, so is the economic base of newspapers being undermined. It is one of the iron laws of journalism that a newspaper which remains consistently unprofitable does not survive (unless it is backed by a charitable organisation or a church). Crusading journalism costs money and newspapers like the *Rand Daily Mail* and *The Sunday Express* which couldn't pay their way have disappeared. Faced with a declining balance sheet last year, the morning group South African Associated Newspapers went cap in hand to The Argus Company and struck a deal whereby the two groups rationalised their resources, closed down some of their newspapers and reduced their staffs. Journalists found themselves out on the street. The impact of this rationalisation on the quality, flavour and flow of news has been noticeable to those of us in the business, especially the news provided by South African Press Association, which relied heavily on the *Rand Daily Mail*.

It goes without saying that newspapers operating off shaky financial bases are far less willing to risk the losses involved when an issue is taken off the streets or banned or closed down for a short time. Overseas, the bravest newspapers are either the poorest, those with nothing to lose, or more often those with the most money — who can afford the expense of fighting the government in court, as *The New York times* did over the Pentagon Papers, *The Washington Post* over Watergate and the London *Sunday Times* over thalidomide.

As the country has polarised politically, so the press has come under increasing pressure from the public it serves. Gideon Samet, visiting Israeli editor, spoke some years ago of the kind of militant vigilance demanded of the press in societies with a siege mentality: 'When the wagons are in a circle, the people in charge get annoyed at those constant irritant voices behind, calling for an improvement

for this or of that. But, worse still, such sentiments may prevail among the public itself. How many times as managing editor of a paper have I encountered solid middle class readers lashing us for being too investigative, too critical, for not offering a brighter picture of Israel. A danger not less than government pressures is, therefore, the demand of the readership itself — that their papers put in front of them a nicer picture. Or else they are ready to shatter the mirror that does not produce a snow-white image'.

Clearly, those sentiments are growing among the South African public — among Whites who consider that newspapers are not 'loyal', or 'responsible' enough — and among Blacks who believe that the mainstream press is far too neutral and uncommitted, that 'objective' journalism should be replaced by the kind of committed journalism that 'advances the struggle', whatever that might mean. I hear criticisms almost daily from White readers who accuse us of concentrating on the bad news, of never printing anything good about the government, of not offering a brighter picture than we should. There was a classic example in my own newspaper a few weeks ago. I quote: 'Daily the newspapers add to the self-pity instead of concentrating on the opportunities open to people who now mingle equally with us, instead of stepping off the pavement as they did just ten years ago. The progress was right, but the means by which it is being accomplished is all wrong. It is being carried along on a negative momentum instead of on a positive force of mutual goodwill. The violence is the visible manifestation of the inner negative momentum created by newspapers. It is time for all thinking people to rise up and demand that the newspapers change their policy of reporting. To stress the positive at all times, the goals, the right means of the future rewards'. This is the cast of mind that produced the Bureau for Information's multi-million rand pop song.

The divisions in Black society are a cause of even greater concern. Black journalists trying to do their job diligently are faced with the most appalling dilemma. If they report on the activities of Black radical organisations, they are likely to fall foul of organisations like Inkatha. If they report favourably on Inkatha, the flack comes from the other side. Black colleagues who try to refrain from party politics have become physical targets for attack from right and left. Even from those who might be expected to know better come insinuations that 'if you're not for us, you must be against us', which is exactly the same sort of attitude manifested by the Bureau for Information in the advertisement referred to earlier. Perhaps this is inevitable in a society so politicized and polarised that the act of doing one's shopping or catching a bus to work are often themselves a form of political statement; but it makes reporting the news in a

balanced, measured manner and keeping a clear sense of direction very difficult indeed.

In this situation of increasing restriction and polarisation, what then are the *responsibilities* of the press? I would say they include the following:

1. **To Survive.** Let me remind you that the predicament in which our press finds itself is no novel situation. Press freedom no longer exists in three quarters of the nations around the globe. As Harvey Tyson often reminds us, in South American countries in particular, survival is an accomplished art. In Ecuador for example there is an independent, quality newspaper that has belonged to one family for generations and managed to operate under socialist, marxist and fascist military governments. When the publisher was asked how he managed it, he shrugged and said: 'You trade, you manoeuvre, you fight'.

   Unfortunately the press does not have many weapons with which to fight. There comes a time when one can retreat no further but say to Government, 'do your damndest'. In the past, notably with Connie Mulder's Newspaper Bill, Government has backed off. It may not do so again. Of course, survival is not an absolute. There is no point in surviving to become a mouthpiece for the Bureau for Information. But in deciding where to take one's stand, one must bear in mind that defiance and martyrdom, while they might win admiration in international media circles, do not serve the public interest here. The closure of a newspaper represents a triumph for those who seek to suppress news and silence criticism.
2. **To Uphold and Defend the Right of Free Speech**. Just as the press cannot fulfil its role if it is hedged about with restrictions, so free speech cannot survive in a society without a free press. Journalists, by the very nature of their profession, are best placed to exercise the right of free speech and it is their duty to exercise this right to the best of their ability. By so doing they uphold the right of their readers to express their views and to choose between conflicting and competing views on public issues.
3. **To Uphold and Strengthen the Rule of Law**, by respecting the law and trying to remain within it, yet testing its limits where necessary. There may be times when the law operates so manifestly against the public interest that defiance is defensible (as *The Cape Times*' decision to publish an interview with Oliver Tambo), but these are rare. A paper which deliberately sets out to defy the law undermines its own foundations and the foundations upon which press freedom rests. Critics may argue, with some justification, that it is all very well to talk about the

rule of law in a country where, to quote Professor Tony Mathews, there has been a 90 per cent destruction of the rule of law, and a state of permanent emergency prevails. But this does not, to my mind, absolve the press from its duty to defend the rule of law as the very basis upon which a more open and democratic society might be built.

4. **To Maintain Standards**. The press has to try to maintain the highest possible standards in its reporting and its comments. Despite the provocations of an antagonistic regime and the pressures from vested interests in our society, our task is to try to be as accurate, fair, credible and responsible as possible. Responsible, not to authority, nor to those who rebel against authority, but to the truth. We have to try to reason, to explain, to cajole, to persuade, not merely in our own interests, but in the interests of society as a whole. Freedom of the press depends in the end upon the support and understanding of the public and if that support is lost, then the fight for press freedom will be lost also. The need to emphasize repeatedly that press freedom is not a right belonging to journalists, but a right belonging to each and every member of the public, is the reason that I am standing here today.

   Who is the public and how does one define the term in a compartmentalized, fragmented society such as ours? Each newspaper has to answer that question for itself. Newspapers have different audiences; but the press as a whole must seek to present, and allow the expression of, all forms of opinion if it is to maintain its credibility and the support of the public at large. This becomes more difficult as each regulation is promulgated and attitudes harden. I am continually surprised by the number of intelligent people, from both the right and left of the political spectrum, who hold no brief for a newspaper publishing views at variance with their own. Intolerance of opposing viewpoints is by no means the preserve of those in power; it is one of the characteristics of society under siege.

5. **To Guard Against the 'Monopolisation' of Truth**. This point was well made by John Grogan in an address to the English Academy of Southern Africa some years ago when he charged the press with the responsibility of ensuring that the market place of ideas remains open. Where powerful, state-controlled media such as radio and television claim a virtual monopoly over truth, it is the function of the press to deny that claim, and to deny anyone else the right to monopolise the truth for themselves. It is up to the press to keep the public from meekly accepting the decisions of those in authority in the belief that the government must know what it is doing, because government very often does not know what it is doing and public opinion is often based on facts and

assumptions that are wrong. It is the task of the press to make people aware of what the decisions of public authorities and politicians could mean for them. A vigorous press is a press that is sceptical of all conventional wisdoms and the certainties of officialdom.

6. **To Act as a Channel of Communication**. In this compartmentalized society, the press represents the main channel of communications between races, languages and classes. Pause for a moment and consider how much you know of conditions in the townships, about how the other 80 per cent live, other than what you read in the newspapers? No other institution bridges the divide in our society — inadequate and flimsy though that bridge may be — as does the press: not the churches, not cultural institutions, not the universities, certainly not the electronic media. This puts an enormous responsibility on the press — a responsibility that can only be discharged adequately in a society thirsty for knowledge about what is happening in and around it. A responsible press seeks also to communicate upward with those in power, to make the authorities aware of what the people are thinking. This is a particularly vital function in a society like ours in which a large section of the population is unrepresented in Parliament.

   Which brings me to the next point — more controversial, but just as important.

7. **To Hold Up the Vision of a Better Society**. A truly responsible newspaper, I believe, seeks not to nourish the prejudices of readers, but to break down prejudices and stereotypes and to emphasize the values and ideals that bring people together, not those that drive them apart. This is particularly important in a society where liberal and democratic values have been under assault for decades.

As Charles Simkins observed in his recent thesis on *Reconstructing South African Liberalism*, 'Liberal principles should be capable of defence everywhere; in the urban suburbs of townships, on the platteland, or in the Black territories. Not only should they be capable of defence, but they should actively be defended. No amount of constitutional engineering, no amount of secret dealing between the powerful can create what is needed: legitimacy based on consent and an ability and willingness to work out and use political methods appropriate to the achievement of a just society. Only open, popular debate will do'.

I would say that a responsible newspaper has a duty to promote open and popular debate, to interpret the fears and hopes of one section of society to another in an attempt — as Simkins puts it — 'to remove misunderstandings and misreadings of motives. Of course such interpretation will not remove real conflict, but it will serve to

distinguish real from imaginary conflict and so to focus debate on areas where it is really needed'.

Let me make it clear that I am *not* saying that a newspaper must colour news and opinion to fit its own preconceptions of what society should look like — though, to be frank, a degree of coloration is inevitable. What I am suggesting is that in a plural yet divided society such as ours, newspapers — in their general outlook — should place emphasis on the factors that unify people rather than those that divide them. I believe that a newspaper has a responsibility to build up its community; community being defined in the widest sense of the word.

I go further. I think that newspapers should actively resist contributing to what Professor Johan Degenaar of Stellenbosch refers to as 'the polarisation syndrome'. Degenaar argues that polarisation politics, the politics of 'us' and 'them', distort our thinking and limit our alternatives. They reduce our options to a choice between the National Party and the African National Congress–South African Communist Party Alliance. This way of thinking, he says, does not do justice to the complexity of the political situation. It is used by both White rulers and Black revolutionaries and ignores facts, arguments, nuances and complexities in order to dramatise the situation for selfish reasons. It is a well-known strategy used by right and left to mobilise followers, but does not contribute to the politics of negotiation.

There are, unfortunately, still newspapers in this country which contribute daily to the polarisation syndrome. They make no contribution to a general understanding of the fact that politics should not be a zero-sum game in which one side wins all at the expense of the other, but a matter of negotiation and compromise. Wittingly or unwittingly, their stridency reduces the chances of a negotiated settlement to our constitutional problems.

So much for the *responsibilities* of the press in our polarised society. I should now like to say something about the *need* for a free press in our society. Thomas Jefferson, who harboured mixed feelings of admiration and hostility for the press, wrote that the only security for ALL lies in a free press. This is is not mere rhetoric; it happens to be true.

There is a feeling among many Whites that shutting up the media and keeping television out of trouble spots helps to dampen down unrest, and is therefore a justifiable counter-measure to revolutionary violence. One hears the same argument about much of our security legislation i.e. that, while it may be unpalatable, it is necessary for ensuring peace and stability in the country. Both these arguments are based on wishful thinking. As Professor Tony Mathews points out in his excellent book *Freedom, State Security and the Rule of Law*, our security legislation has not succeeded in

containing the violence; quite the opposite. The extent of violent opposition to the Government over thirty years has increased in direct proportion to the application of harsh security measures. The same may be said about muzzling the media and keeping facts and opinions from the people and driving political organisations underground. Governments, in order to govern properly and make sensible decisions, and react appropriately to discontent, need an early warning system; they need to discover facts quickly and accurately in order to respond to them. A government in a closed society finds it very difficult to discover what is going on around it, and is frequently caught unawares. Soweto in 1976 was a classic case in point. No economy functions efficiently either, without access to information which only a free press can provide.

Tony Bloom is one of the few businessmen who is prepared to say this in public: 'An informed public depends on accurate and effective reporting by the news media. In today's complex world it has become impossible for us to obtain for ourselves the information which is needed for the intelligent discharge of our responsibilities, political or otherwise'.

No-one knows how long the State of Emergency will last, or whether we will ever return to what one of my fellow editors referred to as a state of 'normal abnormality', but we will pay an increasingly heavy price for the Emergency Regulations the longer they last, even though the bill may not come in for some time.

A free press provides a necessary safeguard for individuals, also. People have short memories: they forget the Information Scandal, when our most powerful security policeman, a senior Cabinet Minister and top civil servants had to fall back on the press, and the English press at that, to protect them from establishment forces determined to deny them a hearing. There may come a time when some of you who are listening to this lecture today, and who indeed may be reporting these words to your superiors, may need the protection of the rule of law and the free press. 'When official power becomes unfettered, no-one is safe', in the words of Professor Mathews.

The prospects of the press preserving what is left of its freedom and tattered dignity are not good, and not only in South Africa. Worldwide, there is a trend towards the licensing of journalists — a tactic employed ironically by both proponents of the New World Information Order in the Socialist countries and many right wing regimes. Licences, it is claimed, are a means of protecting journalists and of raising standards in the profession. But journalism is not a clearly defined profession like medicine, law, accounting, etc and licences are restrictive. The Steyn Commission into the Mass-Media suggested a licensing system for South Africa, and I have no doubt that consideration is still being given to some

sort of official accreditation of our press. The problem with a licence is that, once given, it can be taken away. Who should issue licences — governments or journalists? The first would lead to a tame press; the second to a 'closed shop'. In both cases, the result of a system of licensing would be to give a restricted number of people freedom of expression. In this country, a register of licensed journalists would open the door to more restrictive regulation of the press. I know that many of my fellow-editors and journalists would not be prepared to apply for a licence and I hope that the Government will consider very carefully before making a move which will do more to undermine press standards and press credibility in this country than any it has taken thus far.

I go back to the question I posed at the beginning of this lecture: is it still possible to produce a newspaper worthy of the name in South Africa? I would argue that it is, but that it is becoming increasingly difficult. Yet the door to a freer society is still ajar and the press must continue to keep its foot in that door, just as civil rights workers must keep on keeping on, lawyers speaking up for the rule of law, and university lecturers for the ideals of academic freedom, and so on. But of all these freedoms, press freedom is perhaps the most precious attribute of any society that has claims to be free because, as Donald Trelford, Editor of *The Observer* told the IPI: 'No matter what is wrong with a society, if the press is free, the facts cannot be concealed forever. That is why press freedom — a branch of freedom of speech — is the key to all other freedoms'.

Press freedom is still being exercised pretty vigorously in this country by some mainstream newspapers, by papers such as *The Weekly Mail*, by journals like *Frontline* and *Work in Progress*, and by many smaller publications in what is known in journalistic shorthand as 'the alternative press'. As Ken Owen remarked recently: 'the fact is that publishing . . . is now beyond the capacity of any but a totalitarian government to control. The methods of the Soviet Union are necessary to enslave the word, and even in the Soviet Union, those methods no longer succeed . . .'

Far from not having enough to print, newspapers have plenty of material that can be printed. We cannot provide a full or balanced picture, we cannot give a banned person's response to a ministerial attack on him, we cannot tell you exactly what is happening in the townships or in the schools, but we can still criticise and comment and try to make reason prevail. History may be suppressed, but it cannot be stopped. Pointing this out in an editorial after the Steyn Commission had produced its report, *South African Outlook* made this pertinent comment with which I shall close:

'Journalists are nothing more than contemporary historians, recording the events, facts, beliefs, values and opinions of their

time. If they're prevented from doing so, history will carry on without them, and without the society of which they form a part.'

Pietermaritzburg.

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THE GATES OF ZION AND THE DWELLINGS OF JACOB

Zion and Zionism in the work of Isaac Bashevis Singer*

by JOSEPH SHERMAN

Like the Psalmist (Psalm 87:2) who differentiated 'the gates of Zion' from 'the dwellings of Jacob', Singer distinguishes between the Holy Land as spiritual Zion, the eternal hope of Redemption; and the State of Israel as secular Zionism, the contemporary realisation of Restoration. In all his stories set in the vanished world of *shtetl* Poland, dreams of 'the Holy Land', as it is always called there, are clearly linked to the coming of the Messiah and the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth. The obsession which, in 'Passions',[1] drives Leib Belkes painstakingly to construct a model of the Temple out of matches is an expression of an unassuageable yearning for Redemption at which all the worldly folk around him, including his own wife, brazenly scoff. When they destroy his model, the way materialistic people always destroy spiritual visions they cannot share, Leib Belkes leaves his wife and walks all the way to the Holy Land, on a pilgrimage which stills his longings and is sanctified by God who, as the narrator assures us, 'preserves the simple'.[2] In 'The Little Shoemakers',[3] one of Singer's most overtly allegorical tales, the patriarch of the family whose name — Abba Shuster — denotes his mythic status,[4] imagines that the rise of Hitler is the last battle before the End of Days, and dreams that soon he and his family will sit 'sewing golden sandals for the daughters of Zion and lordly boots for the sons'.[5] But the 'tremendous crash' which the old man takes to be 'the blast of the Messiah's trumpet' is in reality the Nazi bombardment of Frampol,[6] and Abba is resurrected not in the Holy Land but in America, to a way of life that is entirely alienating.

Individuals throughout Singer's work tend to find that the easy Messiahs they follow invariably turn out to be false, and the Zions in whose restorations they rejoice remain illusions. The reports of Sabbatai Zevi's triumph which so excite the inhabitants of Goray are meant to bear a striking resemblance to the expectations of our own time:

* This was originally a paper for an international conference, 'The Holy Land and its relations to the world outside', held at the University of the Witwatersrand, December 1986. It will be included in proceedings of the conference, *Pillars of Smoke and Fire*, edited by Moshe Sharon and published later this year (Leiden: E.J. Brill).

> At first the kings and princes of the earth had dispatched hosts of giants with drawn swords against Sabbatai Zevi, that they might take him prisoner. But a torrent of great stones rained from heaven as had been promised for the day of Gog and Magog, and all the giants perished. The world was astounded. The people of Judea were now in high repute. Princes and kings came to honor them and prostrated themselves before them.[7]

The glories of this promise shine more brightly by contrast with the bitter sufferings which precede it; the disillusionments of their inevitable failure are concomitantly more crushing. For Singer, 'the gates of Zion' open inwards to individual spiritual regeneration; 'the dwellings of Jacob', by contrast, since they are founded on worldliness, are all alike.

All his stories set in modern Israel are told in the first person by a narrator who bears a striking similarity to Singer himself.[8] This device is typically ambiguous: on one hand, it serves as a valuable hedge to protect the author from accusations of anti-Zionism, since personal observations about particular people need not reflect a general condition; on the other hand, it is only from the particular that the general may be understood, since men do not live in isolation but in community.[9] The locale of the action is always Tel Aviv, a city whose outward appearance reflects its origin in, and commitment to, secularity; its shabby air of transience is a physical correlative of its spiritual vacuity:

> Although Tel Aviv was a new city, the houses looked old and dingy. The telephone didn't work properly, the bathtub seldom had hot water, and the electricity often went off at night. The food was bad.[10]

The *khamsin* is always blowing desert sand into the city's faces and places, not only making life uncomfortable, but serving as a subtly constant significator of impermanence.[11] Like the weather, insect and bird life is almost unremittingly hostile.[12] There is always a clinging smell of decay caused by garbage and rotting fish which blends with the stench of asphalt, the surfacing material of the new roads.[13] Though Hebrew is the tongue spoken and written everywhere, the narrator finds it 'strange' and artificial: there seems to him to be a profound and destructive tension between the sacred roots of the language and the secular uses to which it is being put:

> I read the signs over the women's clothing stores. The commission for modernizing Hebrew had created a terminology for brassieres, nylons, corsets, ladies' coiffures, and cosmetics. They had found the sources for such worldly terms in the Bible, and Babylonian Talmud, the Jerusalem Talmud, the Midrash, and even the Zohar. It was already late in the evening, but buildings and asphalt still exuded the heat of the day. The humid air smelled of garbage and fish.[14]

All these details developed a picture of a reality rather than a dream, of a country built not by the Messiah but by men. A modern state, it is indistinguishable from all other modern states, sharing their preoccupations and imperfections. Reading the daily account of 'thefts, car accidents, border shootings' in a Hebrew newspaper ironically called *Haaretz*,[15] the narrator of one tale muses, 'No, the Messiah hadn't come yet. The Resurrection was not in sight . . .'[16] In another, on the corner of Ben Yehudah and Allenby Streets in Tel Aviv, he turns abruptly to his companion, who happens also to be his Hebrew translator, with a challenge:

> 'In what way is this the land of Israel? If it were not for the Hebrew signs it could just as well be Brooklyn — the same buses, the same noise, the same stench of gasoline, the same movie houses. Modern civilization wipes out all individuality.'[17]

This common social and cultural denominator is what for Singer transmogrifies a sacred trust into a secular travesty. The modern political realisation of Zionism has rendered ambiguous the Messianic promise to re-establish Zion, because it has sundered the spiritual from the material, and has substituted the Gentile culture of two hundred years of *Haskalah* Enlightenment for the Jewish culture of two thousand years of *Golah* Exile. Consequently, it has intensified rather than resolved the modern crisis of Jewish identity. Throughout their long exile, the Jewish people dreamed devotedly of the spiritual restoration of the Biblical Holy Land; after their emancipation, they worked energetically towards the material reconstruction of a political homeland. What emerged was inevitably founded on principles which, for Singer, appear more profane than sacred. His *chalutzim,* pioneers, all develop attitudes and mouth slogans identical in essential respects to those of all other radicals and revolutionaries; they discard a traditional identity as Jews to assume a modern self-conception indistinguishable from that of Gentiles. Thus Joziek, in *The Estate,* sends his father 'photographs of himself working at a wine press, riding horseback, standing near a tent holding a gun';[18] Tobias Stein, in 'The Mentor', 'wore a blouse with a sash, and a white-and-blue cap embroidered with the Star of David . . . [and] learned to shoot a rifle . . .'[19] The process of becoming 'like the nations' is extended by the pursuit of worldly rather than religious learning. Those who enjoy positions of leadership in modern Israel, therefore, are of necessity the descendants of *maskilim* rather than of *tzaddikim*.[20]

A clear instance is Freidl in 'The Mentor'. The past in which she grew up was entirely cut off from traditional Jewish values; the present in which she works is wholly governed by secular opportunities and material rewards: 'Worldliness, energy and

resolution emanated from her.'[21] The permissiveness of an 'enlightened' world enables Freidl to gratify desires which Jewish Law once rigorously restrained. She openly admits that 'There are monogamous women and even men, but I don't belong to them'. Inevitably, of course, she suffers from all sorts of emotional neuroses;[23] in Singer's work, sexual abandonment leads automatically to emotional instability, the characteristic symptom of a world sick with *Haskalah*. It is typically ironical also that Freidl should have neurology as her field of medical specialisation: she can help neither herself nor others.[24] Modern Jews, cut adrift from religious mores which regulated human conduct and so gave it meaning, now float in an emotional limbo in which the most profound of human feelings cannot be defined because they are no longer experienced:

> Exactly what love is I don't know and probably never will know. Everyone understands it in his own way. I've heard countless stories from my patients. But there isn't any explanation for human behaviour — there are only patterns.[25]

Rooting herself firmly in the Darwinian doctrine of the survival of the fittest, Freidl vehemently rejects the narrator's belief that 'someone takes charge of this world'; she insists not only that life has no ultimate purpose, but that death is a welcome end. Quite appropriately, therefore, she describes herself as 'a complete hedonist'.[26] It is part of Singer's artistic purpose to test glib theories of this kind against the pain of lived experience. If Freidl is right, then centuries of Jewish tradition must be wrong; licence should consequently reveal itself as more life-enhancing than restriction. Yet Freidl is profoundly disturbed by the fact that her daughter hates her, and that contrary to all her powers of reason, she cannot persuade herself 'that a child is nothing more than an accidentally fertilized egg and that all the love and loyalty one feels towards it are only blind instinct'.[27]

The thrust of the tale suggests that she should not be surprised by her daughter's behaviour. The girl's models, after all, have been the mother's promiscuity and the father's radicalism; the Torah she has learnt has been 'the Torah of revolution'. In describing the degree to which her husband and daughter are alienated from Jewish values, Freidl reveals the extent to which she herself has lost her identity in modern Israel. Though she speaks eight languages, not one of them is capable of transmitting the resonances of her heart in the novel she wants to write — partly, no doubt, because such resonances no longer exist, but also because, for all her worldly and professional success, she no longer has any real roots; belonging nowhere, she has indeed been 'actually left without a language'.[28]

When she finally discovers that her sixteen-year old daughter is regularly spending the night with a man who is ironically designated by the girl's father as her 'mentor', Freidl's outraged response springs from instinctual depths which can neither be eliminated by modern conditioning nor theorised away. It vindicates the Law even as it demonstrates its necessity:

> Freidl . . . stood openmouthed. This was no longer the doctor who had spoken those clever words this night but a shocked Jewish mother.[29]

The details which the narrator notices about the kibbutz as he follows Freidl back to her car serve as visual correlatives of the bleak emptiness of that life lived there which has just been so dramatically exposed:

> We passed the empty dining hall. Naked bulbs lighted the room. A girl was spreading paper on narrow tables. A boy washed the stone floor with a rag mop. The air was pungent with disinfectant.[30]

Reflecting on this vision in the car back to Tel Aviv, the narrator, conscious that Freidl's double standards are also his own, recalls the prophet Isaiah's denunciations of wickedness and is forced to a sobering conclusion:

> The powers that rule history had brought us back to the land of our ancestors, but we had already defiled it with abominations.[31]

Earlier in the story, when the narrator had confided to Freidl that 'the history in this land doesn't let me sleep', she had assured him that 'you get accustomed to it'. In time, she promises, he will cease to hear the warnings of the prophets just as she has ceased to be inhibited about going to the toilet in Jerusalem; modern day-to-day living in Israel, she implies, is a steady process of desensitization to holiness and its associations.[32] For the author-narrator, however, the past shapes the present. As much as modern secular consciousness might wish to block out the experiences of that past they lie buried very near the spiritual surface of the collective subconscious. From age to age, as much as from day to day, it is a condition of man's existence that he must choose, and the experiences of the past must inform that choice. The Jews both chose and were chosen; their election transformed their freedom to choose into a categoric imperative. In the land so redolent with their history and their tradition, they are forever torn between their nature and their Covenant:

> Somewhere below lay hidden golden calves, the jewelry of temple harlots, and images of Baal and Astarte. Here prophets foretold

> disasters. From a nearby harbor, Jonah had fled to Tarshish rather than prophesy the doom of Nineveh. In the daylight these events seemed remote, but at night the dead walked again. I heard the whisperings of phantoms.[33]

The Zionist dream, however, has often misrepresented the nature of these phantoms and dishonestly traded on them. Singer explores some of Zionism's secular distortions in a story ironically entitled 'The Captive'. In 1940, its chief character, a refugee painter named Tobias Anfang, could demand, 'In a world where human beings are burned in gas ovens, what point is there in art?'[34] He settles in the newly-founded State of Israel, however, 'first of all to be a Jew, and perhaps to find a way to Jewish art'.[35] For him, 'being a Jew' simply means living in Israel; his 'way to Jewish art' is forging paintings in the style and under the name of his friend, another charlatan called Zorach Kreiter, who died in the camps. In Israel, Tobias becomes a captive of a vision which, since it is utterly cut off from spiritual reality and makes no demands for moral choice, is nothing more than a grandiose mirage:

> I have fallen in love with Israel . . . I stroll along the sea and literally hear the words of the prophets . . . I'm surrounded by the old Israelites and even the Canaanites and the other nations that preceded Joshua, the son of Nun . . . This land teems with saints and heroes. Although I do not believe in God, I hear His voice.[36]

Tobias is also, more literally, 'the captive' of Kreiter's widow Sonia, who pays him to paint the forgeries which she markets. Both Tobias and Sonia feel themselves to be 'reincarnations' in Israel of Zorach Kreiter, who embodied the anarchic spirit of *Haskalah* formerly so much praised as the creative antithesis to the repressive ethos of *halakhah*.[37] Zionist fervour seems to demand this kind of spirit as the artistic counterpart of political independence, as the number of sales of these forgeries appears to testify:

> She has already sold more Kreiters than he could have produced in his lifetime. But neither the art dealers nor the customers seem inclined to investigate.[38]

This kind of work is in no way creatively original, artistically independent, or indigenous to the country: it is simply churned out to meet the demand for instant Israeli culture. Ironically, Sonia's own home is decorated with shadows long vanished:

> We entered a large hall, its walls full of pictures — like a museum . . . In the dim light I recognized scenes of Poland, Paris, a Warsaw market, bewigged women, yeshiva boys, musicians playing at a wedding, Hasidim dancing.[39]

The spirit of piety and the unquestioning faith which informed the ritual garments and actions of the subjects of these paintings now appear as cultural curiosities, relics of the past; they are no longer universally in daily existence in the new land of Israel. Sonia's demand that the narrator become the ghost writer of her dead husband's memoirs, as Tobias is the ghost painter of his pictures, suggests that all branches of this new national art are synthetic. The Zionist cause appears to demand of artists that they adapt to the new ethos or die; as Sonia tells it, 'The artists who settle here seem to go through a process of resurrection or they become paralyzed'[40]

Singleminded and cunning, Sonia Kreiter exploits the Zionist myth even as she builds it up in a manifestation of spiritual deformity amply bespoken by her physical ugliness. Accurately described by Tobias as 'a witch ... possessed by a dybbuk', she embodies in her own person the ruthless combination of driving energy and blatant hypocrisy which, the story suggests, is typical of that kind of secular progressiveness before which all other considerations must give way. Even as she is perpetrating in large-scale fraud, she is busy 'hobnobbing with professors, writers, politicians'.[41] She urges the narrator to leave America where 'there are thousands of Jews being discriminated against'[42] to come to an Israel where, as the narrator frequently notices, Arabs and Yemenite Jews are treated as second-class citizens.[43] A momentary recognition of the falseness of all this moves the narrator to flee Sonia's house: outside, in the sweltering heat, he has 'the sensation that [he] had just managed to escape from a great danger'.[44] But there he is trapped between Tobias, who shuffles helplessly towards him, and Sonia, who stretches out her arms laughingly to call him back. Tobias becomes an image of the shattered remnant of the Jewry of the past, Sonia the image of its triumphant survival in the present; both lay claim to a part of the narrator. If Tobias is a swindler, it is through impotence; in Sonia's black eyes 'a mysterious darkness gleamed' which fills the narrator with a 'sudden lust for that ugly creature'.[45] At the end, while fierce storms rage outside, cutting Tel Aviv off from the rest of the country, the narrator 'sat down with Sonia before the fireplace, and from the ouija board she dictated to [him] the first chapter of Zorach Kreiter's memoirs'.[46] For all its fraudulence, the story finally suggests, the Zionist myth exercises a well-nigh irresistible attraction for all Jews.[47]

If it is to have any moral or social significance, however, this attraction must be rooted in the awareness that over all Creation there is established both a judge and judgment. Tart criticisms of the shortcomings of the Jewish state in Singer's work are all informed by that other teaching of the Psalms: 'Except the Lord

build the house, they labour in vain that build it' (Psalm 127:1). It is with this very quotation that the rabbi officiating at Simon Bendel's wedding brushes aside the enthusiasm of the bridegroom and his fellow *chalutzim* in *The Family Moskat*,[48] a novel in which passionate and highly emotive Zionists like Abram Shapiro have no doubt about a Jewish future conceived exclusively in terms of secular learning and modern progress:

> Just let us be a nation in our own land and we'll show them what we can do. Ah, the geniuses'll tumble out of their mothers' bellies six at a time — like in Egypt.[49]

For Rabbi Dan Katzenellenbogen, the book's most powerful representative of traditional orthodoxy, however, there can be no Jews without Judaism, no homeland without Holy Land:

> If, he insisted, [Jews] had no further belief in the Bible, then why should they have any longing for the Biblical land of the Jews? Why not some other country? Any country?[50]

Once he throws aside all traditional restraints, man is shown to be as ludicrous as the narrator of 'Brother Beetle' who is trapped stark naked on the rooftop outside the Tel Aviv apartment of a former mistress by the sudden return of her current lover. From this helpless and humiliating position, he looks up to 'the numberless stars that hovered strangely near' and down to where 'A huge beetle crawled at [his] feet'[51] and he is overwhelmed by a sense of his own insignificance, and the impossibility of ever comprehending the meaning of human history. Inscrutably part of the Divine plan, man can only acquiesce with complete faith and total obedience. Without these, there is neither purpose nor significance:

> I found myself in infinite space, amid myriads of galaxies, between two eternities, one already past and one still to come ... I asked God's forgiveness. For instead of returning to His promised land with renewed will to study the Torah and to heed His commandments, I had gone with a wanton who had lost herself in the vanity of art.[52]

As long as human nature remains unredeemed, the places in which people dwell will all be the same. Poland and Israel, Warsaw and Tel Aviv merge before the narrator's eyes. In one story, a café in Dizengoff Street frequented by merchants, where a stone is passed from hand to hand and scrutinised through loupes, becomes indistinguishable from an earlier café on old Krolewska Street;[53] in another story, the *Shook Ha-Carmel* converts a side-alley into the Krochmalna Street of his boyhood. The past is bound to the present by the unchanging nature of human desires which no education or

philosophy can eradicate. Having lost his companion in the crush, the narrator of 'Two Markets' suddenly sees her at a stall:

> Apparently she had forgotten that she was a modern writer, a disciple of Kafka, a commentator of Joyce, and that she was writing a book about Agnon. She stood at a stand, rummaging through a heap of female underclothing, absorbed in the ancient feminine lust for bargains . . . She picked up a pair of black velvet panties with golden stars and silver dots, studied them, patted them, and measured them against her thighs. I approached her, put my hand on her shoulder, and said, 'Take them, Meirav. These panties were worn by the Queen of Sheba when King Solomon solved all her riddles and she showed him all her treasures.'[54]

Since human nature does not change, there can be no possibility of moral progress without an acknowledgment of the transcendent. Indeed, for Singer, modern life may even be said to have regressed morally, since human viciousness is no longer restrained by adherence to the Law. Man left without a prescribed round of duties, replacing ethics with politics, and the fear of God with the fight for independence, loses all sense of identity. In 'The Little Shoemakers', only when the patriarch Abba and his seven sons can once again sit down with last and leather at a workbench can they feel that life in America has reassumed its proper significance. He and his sons once again take up that trade which the story makes paradigmatic with service to the Creator:

> No, praise God, they had not become idolaters in Egypt. They had not forgotten their heritage, nor had they lost themselves among the unworthy.[55]

In Singer's work, the Holy Land, like Egypt, is not a geographical entity but a spiritual condition. The true question is not that of Tobias Anfang, 'How can a Jew be illegal in Israel?'[56] but that of Abba Shuster, '*Nu*, and the shoes? Who will mend them?'[57] Without a proper sense of spiritual purpose, Singer finally suggests, the modern Gates of Zion merely open on to yet another dwelling of Jacob.

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NOTES

1. Translated by the author and Dorothea Straus, this is the title story of the collection *Passions and Other Stories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979), pp. 257–271.
2. 'Passions', p. 260.

3. Translated by Isaac Rosenfeld, this story is found in *Gimpel the Fool and Other Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), pp. 89–119.
4. The name means 'Father Shoemaker' from *abba*, father, in Hebrew and *shuster*, shoemaker, in Yiddish. Just as the father becomes a paradigm for the Patriarch Jacob, and his sons for the generations of Israel, so his trade becomes equated with the service of God.
5. 'The Little Shoemakers' p. 108.
6. 'The Little Shoemakers'.
7. I.B. Singer, *Satan in Goray*, translated by Jacob Sloan (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981), p. 97.
8. He is a Yiddish writer who was born and grew up in Poland, but who is now an American citizen visiting Israel, generally for the first time. Sometimes he is called by a form of Singer's own name, like 'Itche the rabbi's' in 'The Mentor', translated by the author and Evelyn Torton Beck, in *A Friend of Kafka and Other Stories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books), 1975, pp. 93–106. The visit is always clearly specified as being made during the 1950s, when the State of Israel was only a few years old, and the author-narrator (like Singer himself) is in his fifties.
9. Singer has been at pains in several interviews to insist that he is not a propagandist for any cause. He has told Richard Burgin that 'the moment the writer begins to dabble with masses, with generalizations, he's already out of his profession'. ('Isaac Bashevis Singer Talks ... About Everything,' *The New York Times Magazine,* November 26, 1978, p. 38, col. 3.) To Diana Cooper-Clark, he has insisted that 'Fiction is always about a few people. You cannot write fiction about the masses.' ('Living on the Edge: An Interview with Isaac Bashevis Singer,' *London Magazine,* vol. 23 no. 12, March 1984, p. 75)
10. I.B. Singer, *Shosha,* translated by Joseph Singer *et al.* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1980), p. 238.
11. Thus in 'The Mentor' (p. 96), the narrator 'saw women covering their faces with kerchiefs to keep from breathing in the fine desert sand that the wind carried', while in 'Brother Beetle' (*Old Love,* translated by the author and Elizabeth Shub (London, Jonathan Cape: 1980, p. 123), 'in the one moment it took me to get out on the balcony, the thin sand carried by the khamsin wind managed to cover the linens of my bed.'
12. In 'The Captive' from *A Crown of Feathers and Other Stories,* translated by Alma Singer and Ruth Schachner Finkel (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books: 1977) p. 48, 'The sun poured dry fire'; in 'Brother Beetle' p. 124, 'the moths beat against the walls with unbelievable strength, as if in preparation for the final war between man and insect'; while in 'The Mentor' p. 105, at dawn on the road back to Tel Aviv, 'In the east, a cloud spread out like a huge bed of fiery coals. A long row of birds flew by screeching.'
13. Thus in Hadar Joseph, the Tel Aviv suburb in which Haiml lives, 'Outside it stank of garbage, asphalt, and something else sticky and sweetish that was hard to identify' (*Shosha,* p. 248), while in the hot night of a Tel Aviv summer, 'Gasoline fumes mixed with the smell of softening asphalt and with the freshness that drifted in from the fields, the hills, the valleys.' ('The Mentor' p. 96)
14. 'Brother Beetle', p. 129.
15. Literally 'the land' in Hebrew. But the phrase has traditionally come to denote The Promised Land.
16. 'The Captive,' p. 48.
17. 'Two Markets,' translated by the author and Hannah Koevary, *Passions and Other Stories*, p. 201.
18. I.B. Singer, *The Estate*, translated by Joseph Singer, Elaine Gottlieb and Elizabeth Shub (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975), p. 72. Horses, guns and dogs, as much as the practice of hunting, always denote for Singer — as they did for the orthodox Jews of Eastern Europe amongst whom he was raised — the violence and cruelty of the Gentile world.
19. 'The Mentor,' p. 94.
20. Of 'enlightened ones' rather than 'righteous ones'. To orthodox Jews, these Hebrew generic terms carry powerful emotive connotations.
21. 'The Mentor,' p. 95.
22. 'The Mentor,'p. 99.

23. 'The Mentor,' p. 102.
24. *Haskalah*. See note 37.
Freidl entirely resembles Ezriel Babad, the chief character of *The Manor* and its sequel, *The Estate*. But where Freidl, educated in modern secularism, is supremely self-confident, Ezriel, trying vainly to escape the values of his traditional upbringing, has an acute and saving sense of his own limitations. He prescribes hydropathy to cure a young husband suffering from impotence, in an ironic modern application of the traditional orthodox prescription of ritual baths to cleanse impurity, *vide The Manor*, translated by Joseph Singer and Elaine Gottlieb (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975), p. 365.
25. 'The Mentor,' p. 99.
26. These remarks appear in 'The Mentor,' between pages 98–100.
27. 'The Mentor,' p. 100.
28. 'The Mentor,' p. 102.
29. 'The Mentor,' p. 105.
30. 'The Mentor'.
31. 'The Mentor,' p. 106.
32. 'The Mentor,' p. 100.
33. 'Brother Beetle,' p. 129.
34. 'The Captive,' p. 46.
35. 'The Captive,' p. 49.
36. 'The Captive,' p. 53.
37. *Haskalah* is the Hebrew word for the Jewish Enlightenment; *halakah* the Hebrew word for the Laws of the Torah.
38. 'The Captive,' p. 50.
39. 'The Captive,' p. 55.
40. 'The Captive,' p. 56.
41. 'The Captive,' p. 52.
42. 'The Captive,' p. 55.
43. Sonia herself, for instance, has been 'given the large house of an Arab who fled' (p. 51); Tobias, by contrast, lives in 'a half-ruined hut surrounded by Yemenites and paupers' (p. 51). The narrator notices that the maids in both his hotel and Sonia's house are Yemenites (p. 49/p. 56); Sonia's garden is being tended by 'A short, dark-skinned man who might have been an Arab or a Yemenite Jew' (p. 55). The street vendor with a donkey outside the narrator's hotel is an Arab (p. 48) while Tobias takes it for granted that 'you know the miserable conditions of the Arab workers' (p. 51). Ironically, in Israel, the Arabs now fill the roles which in Eastern Europe were filled by Jews: in becoming nationally independent, the Jews have also become part of the master class. The realisation of the Zionist dream in Israel has by no means produced a classless society.
44. 'The Captive,' p. 59.
45. 'The Captive,' p. 57.
46. 'The Captive,' p. 59.
47. My reading of this story is in most essential respects supported by that of Julian C. Rice, given in his seminal article, 'I.B. Singer's "The Captive": A False Messiah in the Promised Land.' *Studies in American Fiction*. vol. 5, no. 2, Autumn 1977, p. 269–275.
48. I.B. Singer, *The Family Moskat*, translated by A.H. Gross (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1980) p. 488.
49. *The Family Moskat*, p. 53.
50. *The Family Moskat*, p. 254.
51. 'Brother Beetle', p. 131.
52. 'Brother Beetle', p. 125. The description, identical but in expanded detail, of old Krolewska [Krulevska] Street is given in *The Family Moskat*, p. 409.
53. 'Two Markets', p. 201.
54. 'Two Markets', p. 204.
55. 'The Little Shoemakers', p. 119.
56. 'The Captive', p. 48.
57. 'The Little Shoemakers', p. 107.

THE PROBLEM OF FORM AND THE ROLE OF THE DUKE IN *MEASURE FOR MEASURE*

by A.M. POTTER

It has often been said that in order to solve a problem, one must ask the right questions. Similarly, if we take the wrong expectations to a literary work, if we ask the wrong questions of it, we will see and judge that work unfairly, our judgments resulting from the inadequacies of our expectations rather than any intrinsic qualities in the work itself.

Measure for Measure, of all of Shakespeare's plays, has suffered from the problem of distorted expectations. The play, despite the sombre tone of its earlier stages, has been seen as an attempt to write a comedy, largely because of the 'happy' comic ending created in the last scene, and has been judged accordingly. Philip Edwards, for example, a representative of this sort of approach, speaks of the 'discomfort' at the heart of the play, believing that this springs ultimately from a 'question of form'.[1] He asserts that the 'graft of comedy on to tragedy half-way through the play' and the 'impossibility of moving grave crimes towards a fortunate conclusion without giving a feeling of awkwardness' is the prime cause of our uneasiness with the play, and concludes that the play 'fails' as a result.[2]

Recent attempts to look afresh at *Measure for Measure* have started to see the 'problem' of the play in a rather different light. Harriet Hawkins, for example, makes the following point: '... unanswered questions and unsolved problems seem ... to have been built into the text of *Measure for Measure* by Shakespeare himself, and these problems and questions are immeasurably more interesting than the solutions to them that have been propounded by modern scholars. For after all, the duty of the artist ... is not to try and provide us with solutions, but, rather, to make certain that the problems under consideration are accurately posed ...'. She concludes: '... it seems impertinent to consider it the duty of criticism to solve problems that Shakespeare himself refused to solve. What remains pertinent are the problems posed'.[3]

I would like to attempt to look at the play, and particularly the problem of form, in the spirit of this attitude. It must be accepted that the form of the play is problematic — such a glaring fact is impossible to ignore. What will be suggested, however, is that rather than being a failure on the part of the playwright to control his material, this problematic quality is a deliberately created factor and is therefore one of the problems built into the play of which Ms Hawkins speaks. In other words, the problem of dramatic form

becomes one of the issues with which the play deals, and in that sense the play is self-analytical in that it is not merely a vehicle for exploring certain themes or ideas, but is also examining itself and the way in which issues can be dealt with in a particular dramatic form. Specifically it does this by presenting a morally complex world, and then questions whether the comic form as the author had come to envisage it at the time, is capable of containing within its rather narrow bounds the complexities of life as they are presented and explored within the play.

Comedy to Shakespeare was not an arbitrarily chosen form: its use implied an attitude to and a belief about the essential nature of life, particularly in relation to the ability of people to shape their own destinies. Helen Gardner, summarising Suzanne Langer, has succinctly defined this attitude: 'the essence of comedy is that it embodies in symbolic form our sense of happiness in feeling that we can meet and master the changes and chances of life as it confronts us'.[4] C.L. Barber, in a full-length study of Shakespearean comedy,[5] extends this basic point. He finds that Shakespearean comedy is based on a view of life fundamentally medieval in origin, its basic premise being the same as the one expressed by Gardner, that life is tractable, malleable, and in the final analysis, subject to the working-out of a divine plan, the final object of which is the establishment of a state of order on earth. The traditional happy ending of the comedies is not therefore a superficial feature of comedy, but rather the organic result of its rationale, a statement in symbolic form of belief that just such a state of order can be created. Provided man applies his reason and his better nature to life's problems, his happiness is assured. This basic belief was the impulse behind most of Shakespeare's early work, for the history plays, which he wrote over almost exactly the same period as the comedies, are based on the same premise: that history is a divinely-organised and sanctioned process, leading, no matter the extremity of the degree of chaos at any particular stage in a nation's history, to a state of harmony and order in human affairs.[6]

I would suggest, without bringing any evidence to bear in support of the assertion — since this would require a full-length study — that Shakespeare's insight into the complexity of life had grown as time went by, to reach a position where such an idealistic and ultimately simplistic view of life was no longer tenable. As the full potential for evil in human nature grew more apparent, any belief that such a violent, irrational, and destructive force would easily be contained in so narrow a form inevitably began to give way.[7] Shakespeare came to realise that comic form of the traditional type could only be maintained if large areas of human potential were either distorted, or excluded from the plays altogether. What I would like to try and show is that in *Measure for Measure* Shakespeare expresses and

explores his awareness of this problem, the strange form of the play, the grafting of comedy on to tragedy, being one of the results.

The play deals with an eternally problematic area of human experience, namely the perpetual conflict between human sexual drives, and the need of a society to control these and other similar drives so that their indulgence does not lead to social chaos. Characters of the play present a widely-ranging response to this problem, moving from Isabella's desire to control ever more rigidly all human weakness (an attitude which Angelo seems to share in the initial stages of the action) to Pompey's belief that sexuality cannot be controlled unless you forcibly alter human anatomy: 'Does your worship mean to geld and splay all the youth of the city?'[8]

But if the play is one in which there is a wide movement between extremes of response to an essentially problematic basic situation, it is, if we think of it, no more complex than any of the great tragedies, so this feature does not in itself give it the self-analytical quality which I have mentioned. But the presence of the Duke in his covert role of the Friar, weaving in this way in and out of the entire course of the action, adds a most striking sense of contrivance, of deliberate and calculated experimentation which no other of Shakespeare's plays (except possibly *The Tempest*) possesses so completely. It is the Duke's role, then, long a puzzle to critics, that is the key to this particular view of the play.

Before going into a detailed examination of the role of the Duke it is worth noting just how puzzling this role *has* been to critics. C.K. Stead, editor of the Casebook on the play, sums up this feeling in a series of questions about the puzzling actions of the Duke: he asks 'Why does this prophet of mercy tell Juliet that her contracted husband . . . is to die "tomorrow", when in fact he has no intention of allowing the execution to occur? Why does he load more pain on the already suffering Isabella by letting her believe Claudio has been executed? Why does he sententiously urge Juliet to repent of her "mutual entertainment" with Claudio, and then urge Mariana into Angelo's bed (assuring her it is "no sin") — when the contract of *neither* pair has been blessed by the church?'[9] It is with a broad answer to these questions that this paper will be concerned.

From the outset the Duke's role (or one of his roles) is strongly established as that of an experimenter. His apparent withdrawal from Vienna is seen as a test of Angelo's ability to impose the law; but it is also a test of his nature, an attempt to see whether the cold, inhuman front he presents to the world is in fact as it appears:

> Therefore, indeed, my father,
> I have on Angelo impos'd the office;
> Who may, in th' ambush of my name, strike home
> And yet my nature never in the fight

> To do in slander. And to behold his sway,
> I will, as 'twere a brother of your order,
> Visit both Prince and people . . .
>
> . . . Moe reasons for this action
> At our more leisure shall I render you.
> Only this one: Lord Angelo is precise;
> Stands at guard with envy; scarce confesses
> That his blood flows, or that his appetite
> Is more to bread than stone. Hence shall we see,
> If power change purpose, what our seemers be.
>
> (I.iii.39–54)

Already we see a structual similarity between the problem of comic form — too idealised to support the extremes of human behaviour — and the personal test which the Duke is running on Angelo. Is the extreme appearance of order that he presents to the world also simply a cramping structure, too narrow to contain the wider potential for evil within his nature?

The issues which the Duke's experiment in human nature deals with, then, are essentially very similar to the sort of problems the comic playwright might be confronting as his awareness of the limitations of comic form grows. A link between the role of the Duke and the function of the playwright has already been noted by critics. Ann Righter, for example, refers to him as an 'actor-dramatist', and speaks of his 'managerial role',[10] while Wilson Knight feels that the Duke can be 'equated in a unique sense with the poet himself'.[11] The core of this paper will be the suggestion that in the role of the Duke, Shakespeare has objectified the functions of the comic playwright to invite a critical examination of his function and the assumptions about human nature upon which that function is based.

Superficially there are broad similarities between the functions of the comic playwright and the activities of the Duke. Both direct the action of the play, moving it towards the traditional happy ending which concludes the comedy, by creating a state of order and harmony among men. Both begin with a potentially tragic situation, and move it towards a fortunate conclusion (compare, for example, the opening scenes of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *The Comedy of Errors*, each of which is charged with tragic potential). Both work behind the scenes, directing character and situation in order to create the desired effect, but without seeming overtly to intervene. (This in itself would explain one of the contradictions in the Duke's character pointed to by Stead: the fact that he stays hidden and does not directly intervene to save Claudio. I will be suggesting that this sense of puzzlement which Stead identifies is deliberately provoked

by Shakespeare to make us aware of the problems he is attempting to confront through the Duke's puzzling behaviour).

However, here the similarity ends. Normally we are not aware of the comic playwright's puppeteer-like role. The action plays itself out and the happy ending is duly achieved, apparently quite naturally. But in *Measure for Measure* we are made intensely aware of this manipulative role, partly by the simple presence of the Duke, but mainly — and I would like to stress this point — by the fact that he so frequently fails effectively to carry it out. Equally important, at key points in the play he makes use of classic comic techniques to resolve problems, and it is these time-honoured ploys which are seen to fail.

This process of failure works by placing the audience in a continual state of tension as to their expectations. From the moment the Duke returns in his covert role, we are led to expect the traditional happy ending. Stead points out that the conventions of the time made the Duke 'by definition, a force for good.'[12] We are therefore in no doubt as to what is to happen. The happy ending is undoubtedly duly achieved, yet — and again I stress this as a crucial point — the manner in which the Duke goes about supplying it, the obstacles he has to overcome and, finally, the way in which he eventually does bring about this promised end, cast grave doubts over the viability of the vision of life which he is supposed to be effecting in the play.

A major, if not *the* major series of ironies in the play results from the inability of the Duke to control the characters whose lives he is meant to be moving towards fortunate conclusions. This has been noticed before, Righter commenting that 'the action he contrives continually seems to escape from his control'.[13] At key points in the action, characters refuse to go along with the careful plans he has made for them, preferring to go their own wilful, egotistical way, and so constantly threatening to plunge the play back into tragedy. This process builds up from the moment the Duke re-appears in his disguise, until the climax in the last act when, in a twist of reverse irony, quite logical within the inner coherence of the play, the Duke solves his problems not by manipulating characters still further, but by *withdrawing* from direct manipulation, and allowing free will to have a total say.

The Duke's series of reverses starts slowly with his attempt to reconcile Claudio to his (apparently) imminent death, in the speech beginning 'Be absolute for death',[14] apparently with some success — only to wait out of sight and hear Claudio, in his interview with Isabella, deny his new-found resolution in the speech beginning 'Ay, but to die, and go we know not where'.[15] This is a relatively minor example of the sort of thing I am trying to indicate, but it sets

a significant pattern. The Duke proposes, and frail human nature disposes, usually in a manner diametrically opposed to that which the Duke has proposed.

Claudio is at least prepared to listen to the Duke's lengthy moralising; but his partner in sin, Juliet, is not of the same mettle. When the Duke seems to be about to embark on a long-winded homily on the subject of the iniquity of her sins:

> 'Tis meet so, daughter; but lest you do repent
> As that the sin has brought you to this shame,
> Which sorrow is always toward ourselves, not heaven,
> Showing we would spare heaven as we love it,
> But as we stand in fear . . .
>
> (II. iii.30–34)

Juliet impatiently breaks in with the sharp 'I do repent me as it is an evil,/And take the shame with joy'. Righter feels that the Duke suffers mortification in this scene;[16] she is probably correct. For the Duke is consistently humiliated throughout the play, and this humiliation becomes basic to the process of ironic undermining of the Duke's role place. This will be further discussed later.

A key moment in the play which reflects the Duke's inability to control events, occurs when the Duke evolves his plan to substitute Mariana for Isabella in Angelo's bed, for the purpose of making it seem that Isabella has submitted to Angelo's demands to exchange her chastity for Claudio's head. The exchange duly takes place; Angelo undoubtedly believes he has had his way with Isabella; and so there appears to be no reason why the Duke's plan should not succeed. The Duke himself is entirely confident, arriving at the prison the next morning quite sure that the messenger that arrives a little later carries a reprieve from Angelo: 'And here comes Claudio's pardon' (IV.ii.97). As the Provost reads the letter, the Duke adds a complacent moralising aside:

> This is his pardon, purchas'd by such sin
> For which the pardoner himself is in;
> Hence hath offence his quick celerity,
> When it is born in high authority.
> When vice makes mercy, mercy's so extended,
> That for the fault's love is the offender friended.
>
> (IV.ii.103–8)

This complacency is shattered when the Provost announces that, far from bringing Angelo's pardon, the messenger has delivered instructions for Claudio's immediate execution.

This incident is illuminating of the general pattern that is being traced: i.e. that of the inability of the Duke to control the action.

But it is particularly interesting because of the form that it takes, that of the bed-trick. This method of solving the problem was not in Shakespeare's sources, so its introduction was deliberate. Its significance, to my mind, lies in the fact that the bed-trick is quintessentially a *comic* method of resolving conflict. It is as if the Duke were standing up and announcing, 'Look, this is the way comedy solves problems; this is how comedy sorts out the messes the human race gets itself into'. And comedy is seen to fail. Angelo, the quintessence of perverse human nature, refuses to follow the neat prescriptions for his behaviour someone else has written for him, and prefers to do the age-old human thing of having his cake and eating it; of having Claudio's head and Isabella's maidenhead at the same time. Comedy, as a result, comes off rather badly, because for comedy of this type to work, the characters *must* be prepared to follow prescriptions.

The Duke does not give up. The next stage in his plans to rescue Claudio comprises an attempt to find another head to substitute for Claudio's. This plan too has about it all the characteristics of comedy: playing with appearance, physical substitutions, the solving of problems by manipulations. The Duke intends to use the head of Barnardine, a prisoner long under sentence of death, who has not yet been executed. Barnardine, however, refuses to go along with the plan. His character has puzzled critics and his role has often been misread. Stead, for example, feels that as a character he is peripheral and that he is introduced into the play 'solely, one suspects, to provide the necessary 'head' as a substitute for Claudio's'.[17] This is obviously incorrect, for Barnardine does not provide the head; in fact, his function is to *refuse* to supply the head, which is a very different thing, and from the point of view of the point I am attempting to make, highly illuminating. Barnardine represents the stumbling-block against which any theoretic plans, however noble in ultimate intention, tend to collapse. Comedy, as has been suggested earlier, implies that human nature is malleable: that the human race can be guided towards a state of perfection. 'Yes', says Shakespeare, 'but what actually happens?' What actually happens is the perversity of Angelo, wanting his cake and eating it; the stubbornness of Barnardine, opting out, particularly when it is his head that is needed to bring the theoretic plans to fruition. Comedy as Shakespeare conceived of it, then, had little chance to succeed in the face of such attitudes as these. The Duke, enraged, describes Barnardine as being unfit to live or die — yet he does live, an inescapable fact, and refuses to die at the Duke's behest. The Duke can only return once again to the drawing-board.

Having made this basic point with regard to Barnardine's refusal to help out, Shakespeare brings in a convenient corpse, that of the pirate Ragozine, to get over the problem of the substitute head so as

to set up the situation upon which the final act hinges. (The very fact that the Duke's plans for a substituted head are completed should emphasise Barnardine's role as being one of *refusal* to supply his head for the purpose).

The final scene has about it the quality of a laboratory experiment, a quality which pervades much of the play. It comprises the entire last act of the play, whereas in the normal Shakespearean comedy the final scene in which all loose ends are tied up into the traditional 'happy ending', normally takes a brief period to be played out in the last scene of the last act. This drawing out of the reconciliation process suggests a more detailed examination of that process, as one might do in an experiment.[18]

At the beginning of the scene the Duke finds himself in an invidious position. He has tried all the traditional comic ploys in order to achieve his happy ending, and they have all failed. His resonse is to set up one final experiment in comic resolution which differs radically from those he has tried before. Up to this point he has attempted direct manipulation of the action but what he decides before the final scene is the exact opposite, to place himself in a position where apparently he has no power whatsoever to influence the outcome of the action, so that the comic resolution depends for its achievement on an action *over which he has no control at all.* I refer here to his placing of the decision whether Angelo should live or die in the hands of Isabella. One may of course argue here that the whole situation is artificial anyway, and that it has been contrived by the Duke in the first place, so what is the difference? The difference lies in the fundamentally different attitude to life which this act of withdrawing from direct manipulation implies, containing within it the essential point of the process I have been attempting to describe. The Duke creates a situation in which Isabella genuinely believes that her brother has been executed by Angelo's orders, the Duke alone, of those present, knowing the truth. The position is made worse when it becomes apparent that Angelo himself is guilty of the very crime for which Claudio has been executed. Now, up to this point, the Duke has been thwarted by the sheer perversity of human nature, and all his careful plans have come to nothing. But in this scene he no longer attempts directly to manipulate the action, to force it into a preconceived pattern of his own design. Rather, he once more sets up a potentially tragic situation, but this time stands back and says to his characters, 'It's your choice this time; what are you going to do with it?' And paradoxically, it is the very human perversity that has confounded him up till now, that saves the situation and turns it into comedy. Isabella, with every reason, doubled and redoubled, to hate Angelo in the 'eye for an eye, measure for measure' tradition, does not do as could normally be expected. She goes down on her

knees and begs for Angelo to be pardoned, which is duly granted. The comic resolution is therefore achieved, and the traditional spate of marriages follows, even if the Duke's to Isabella is only hinted at, and Lucio's to a prostitute is scarcely likely to be a happy one.

Yet I would suggest that the way in which the comic resolution is achieved bodes ill for Shakespeare's concept of comedy. The very contrariness of Isabella's response suggests in itself a basic contrariness in human nature which goes beyond the abilities of traditional views of comedy to encompass. A belief in the perfectibility of humanity, a belief that harmony and order are the inevitable destiny of life on earth, presuppose a belief that human beings are subject to this ordering process: that no human being is so perverse as to be outside the control of this process. This, I would suggest, equally presupposes a basic view of human psychology which sees man as reasonable to a degree sufficient to want the ultimate triumph of order. The action of *Measure for Measure* repeatedly denies the truth of any such psychology of man. Rather, man seems to work in a much more arbitrary way, with a capacity for both good and evil, but with no absolute guarantees that the good will invariably prevail (as it must, if comedy is to fulfil itself). Isabella's plea for mercy, for all its manifestation of exemplary Christian forgiveness, has about it everything which lacks these qualities. Link this with the perversity of a man like Angelo, and we see that Shakespeare comes to the conclusion in this play that human nature as he understands it at this stage in his career has escaped almost entirely from the cage of predictability which the comic vision had to place it in. And surely it is significant that after this, Shakespeare writes a series of plays in which this quality of unpredictability, both as to the manifestation of good and evil, comes fully to the fore? The very essence of a man like Iago is the fact that he seems to have so little logical motive for what he does; while *King Lear* is structured on the fact that Regan and Goneril with every reason to love their father, prefer to hate him, while Cordelia with every 'cause' to hate Lear, can only murmur when taxed on the point, 'no cause, no cause'. The tragic form in which the action of these plays is contained allows far freer scope for the full range of human potential to be explored. *Measure for Measure* was the play in which Shakespeare proved to himself that there was no way in which that process of exploration could be carried out successfully if he continued to write within the narrow limits of the comic form.

* * *

I have mentioned earlier the constant process of humiliation which the Duke has to undergo in the course of his various attempts

to sort out the problems of Vienna. It should have become obvious by now that this is part of the learning process[19] that the Duke has to undergo as he comes to understand that his notions of life do not square with reality. But may he not learn his lesson in a kinder way; why must he be humiliated? My answer to this may be considered rather speculative, but it does seem to me to fit in with the overall feeling of the play.

The comic playwright is in many ways like an all-powerful and benevolent god. Working behind the scenes, he creates order out of chaos — his actions repeating in microcosm the initial act of creation as described in the opening chapter of the book of Genesis. But, caught up in his little, self-created world of art, he may well start to suffer from delusions of grandeur. At such times, a healthy dose of humilation may well bring him back to earth. A parallel process from antiquity illustrates the point.

The Romans were well aware of the tendency of the human mind when too full of its own successes, to take on such delusions of omnipotence, and they adopted measures to deal with this tendency. When they gave a victorious general a triumph, parading with his spoils and captives through the streets of Rome to the cheers of the adoring populace, they placed a slave, the lowliest of human beings, to whisper repeatedly in his ear, 'Remember, you are only human'. Just such a character is created in *Measure for Measure* to achieve the same purpose, that character being Lucio. As Righter has pointed out, he is there to 'reveal and attack the Duke's weak points, his pride, his vanity of reputation, and his desire to stage-manage a reality too turbulent and complex to submit to such artificial confinement'.[20] He sticks to the Duke like a burr, refusing to be shaken off, bringing a healthy dose of reality (even if that reality is morally unacceptable in the ideal sense) to the idealistic notions that are bandied about in the play, usually at the expense of simple humanity. (In fact, one of the major ironies of the play is that it is the immoral Lucio who has to encourage the cold Isabella to be more enthusiastic in her pleas for her brother's life on the occasion of her first meeting with Angelo, which suggests a moral quality in life far more complex than a simple good/evil duality.)

As I have suggested, such a view may seem highly speculative, but if we are to take into account the possibility that Shakespeare was a self-conscious artist, then it is not at all improbable, particularly in the light of *The Tempest* which is, among other things, clearly a speculation on the limitations of art and on the tendency of the artist to see himself as the all-powerful ruler of the self-contained world of his own creation.

One final point should be made. The process discussed in this essay is not the only matter with which *Measure for Measure* is

concerned. The play may well also be a speculation on the nature of true justice, it may be concerned with showing up hypocrisy, it may be most of the other things critics have seen it to be. All I wish to suggest is that while he was working through these concerns, Shakespeare was making the play do something else, making it turn about on itself and examine itself critically. This is the only explanation I can find for the series of puzzling situations which arise in the course of the action and most of which, to my mind, cease to be so puzzling if one bears this possibility in mind. Seen in this light, *Measure for Measure* may well be one of the most interesting plays that Shakespeare ever wrote.

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NOTES

1. P. Edwards, *Shakespeare and the Confines of Art* (London, 1968), p. 109.
2. Ibid., p. 119.
3. H. Hawkins, ' "The Devil's Party": Virtues and Vices in *Measure for Measure*' in *Shakespeare Survey* 31 (1978), pp. 105 and 113.
4. H. Gardner, '*As You Like It*' in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of 'As You Like It'*, ed. J.L. Halio (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968), pp. 58–9.
5. C.L. Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedies* (Princeton, 1959).
6. The details of the Elizabethan view of history should be familiar. Shakespeare clearly questioned these rigid tenets, but he seemed to have questioned them from within their basic framework — until, as with comedy, he realised that the framework was too narrow to contain his expanding view of man. See following note.
7. A.P. Rossiter describes this experience when he says of the Histories: 'the Tudor myth system . . . was too rigid, too black-and-white, too doctrinaire and narrowly moral for Shakespeare's mind: it falsified his fuller experience of man.' *Angel With Horns* (London, 1970), p. 59.
8. II.ii 218–219. All quotations are from *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, ed. P. Alexander (London and Glasgow, 1970).
9. C.K. Stead, *Shakespeare: 'Measure for Measure': A Casebook* (London and Basingstoke, 1971), p. 17.
10. A. Righter, *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play* (Harmondsworth, 1967), p. 159.
11. G. Wilson Knight, ' "Measure for Measure" and the Gospel' in *The Wheel of Fire* (London, 1949), p. 78.
12. Stead, p. 16.
13. Righter, p. 160.
14. III.i.5–41.
15. III.i.119–33.
16. Righter, p. 160.
17. Stead, p. 28.
18. An illuminating comparison can be drawn here between *Measure for Measure* and the later Romances (*Cymbeline, The Winter's Tale*, etc.) which can also be seen as modified comedies, in which fuller scope to the human potential for evil is given, yet the 'comic' resolution at the end is achieved in a way that does not negate this potential. The problems of the older, simpler type of comedy brought to light in *Measure for Measure* are resolved in the Romances by the factor of time, which allows a healing process to take place over an extended period. *Measure for Measure*, therefore, looks ahead to the Romances.
19. Generally, the concept of a learning process must be applied to the characters of this play, and to the Duke in particular. However much we inveigh against character analysis of the Bradleian type, we still tend to see character as a fixed

entity when almost without fail the essence of character in a Shakespearean play involves change, growth, and development. Othello, for example, has been praised as being a very noble human being; a reply to this depicts him as an out-and-out beast. The point to me seems that he has potential for *both* these qualities within him, and the way in which he changes from the one to the other evokes the central meaning of the play.

20. Righter, p. 161.

SELF AND CIRCUMSTANCE: A NOTE ON WOPKO JENSMA'S POETRY.[1]

by MICHAEL GARDINER

As part of the body of Jensma's poetic work, the quieter, more reflective poems are as significant as those which are socially declarative.[2] And I am persuaded that the more personal-seeming voice has as much right to attention in Jensma's case as that which the more obviously communal and historical voices receive.[3] In the three instances which are explored here, particular issues about the poetic personae emerge, illuminating the position and expectations of the reader, struggles with personal identity, and effects of futurelessness upon the registering consciousness.

The first poem offered for attention here has certain obvious social implications, but its effects are curiously personal:

WE CHILDREN

after josef hanzlik

we children of sharpeville
long since washed clean
of bloodstains
have gathered together
and are making ready to meet him

for us the massacred innocents
a special place was kept in heaven

we the smallest of the dead
once believed in our ignorance
that he was a wicked man

we lift up our hands in thanksgiving
for the truth that is shown to us
as we are gathered here for the last time
around the sacrificial altar
preparing to sing praise
waiting to clap our hands
for him
who is coming to kill us again[4]

It appears that some of the implications of liberation and salvation are explored here. As with many of Jensma's poems, some overt markers are offered; in this case, 'sharpeville'[5] and 'massacred innocents'.[6] But the central orientation of the poem seems to lie in

the painfully clear logic that the longing for a necessary and desired liberator or saviour must include acceptance that children have to be slaughtered.

The poem allows a broad reading of 'children' and of 'children of sharpeville' (including the sense that we are all children of something or somewhere), but these possibilities are not permitted by the poem to become dominant enough to offer themselves as justifications for the repeated killing of children. The voice of the children is too firmly insistent for that.

Similarly, the sweet willingness of the children to endure again their killing has a resilience about it which prevents notions of dewy-eyed sacrificial lambs. The active submission of the children — to being killed, to being cleansed, to being kept on hand, to being educated and to being killed again — is deeply disturbing, and that feeling generates real doubt about whether they really 'are gathered here for the last time'. This doubt is part of the appalled sense that the thought of the necessary killing of children excites, leavening and intensifying feelings of despair and outrage which the poem's quiet quality of restrained inevitability compels one to contain, so producing feelings of bewildered horror and admiration. Though there is an apparent preparation for a future — a future which recurs, note — the role of the children in that future gives emotional focus to an unavoidable present.

How personal is such a poem? It seems as though it is more personal to the reader than to the poet as it intensifies inordinately the reader's emotional responses without providing the stabilising and distancing perspectives of history. History is used to intensify the personal. Thus the first quality of Jensma's poetry that emerges here is the effect of voice: it addresses the reader as an individualised sensibility and demands an inescapable immediacy of response.

One of the disturbing but simultaneously reassuring qualities of Jensma's poetry is its tendency to acknowledge but to go well beyond expected or usual emotional responses to situations. This aspect is evident in the poem, 'My brother':

MY BROTHER

as clear as day i remember
my younger brother—
he left home one morning
and never came back

i remember we went to the river
i saw his body sleeping

deep under the water
i did not cry—

but i remember his quiet face
as he lay in his coffin
his nose and mouth stuffed
with clean cotton wool

i remember i was not surprised
when i saw him a week later
greeting me from amidst the crowd
at the market of our village[7]

It is not the unexpected return of the dead brother that is of interest in this poem: the quietness of the tone, which echoes the 'not surprised' of the last stanza, makes that evident. Instead it is the steady emphasis upon clarity — resonating especially in the memory — which gives the self, the speaker, a poise and lucidity that translates the brother from one dead into a dimension of the self which is alive. The poet and his brother appear to find an accord which translates the ordinary into the visionary and the miraculous into the familiar. And the poem's imagery of movement and stillness makes this accord seem entirely natural. Yet there is a solitariness in the poem as a whole, a solitariness which runs through much of Jensma's poetry. This is partly suggested by the repeated 'i remember', implying the individual act of memory. But there is also the sense that the brother has become more closely bonded and more real to the poet after death than he was when living. Such intensification has an isolating effect upon the reader's sense of the speaker because when he is greeted 'from amidst the crowd' by his brother, the speaker is the only one who knows that his brother is there. However, the point of the poem seems to lie beyond this. Because it is only the brother in the village crowd who greets the speaker, the speaker's profound solitariness becomes irrevocably established. Both brothers exist in the 'memory' of the elder alone. Neither is visible to the people of 'our village'.

That struggle with personal identity is a crucial issue in Jensma's poetry and is one that any full understanding of that poetry must consider in its real complexity. It must be acknowledged here that I cannot yet comment confidently upon a number of Jensma's poems. The tentative nature of the readings offered here is real.[8] But the second quality in Jensma's poetry which the transcendence of the usual implies, is the degree of alienation explored in it. There is no other poet in South African literature who has plumbed these depths as accurately and as perturbingly as Jensma has.

A further dimension to what can seem to be the subjectively lyrical in Jensma's poetry is apparent in the poem, 'In Solitary'.

IN SOLITARY

a man in solitary passes by
passes by me in solitary

the moon caught in tree branches

a boat with a man in it rowing

passes by me in solitary
the moon, the man, confined

it's getting late, far too late

i coined the moon, the man, free

but i remain in solitary
there's another who passes by

but i don't know him, but he is
past me confined in solitary[9]

Reflections upon various universal conditions of humanity and/or upon the predicament of the poet as poet in response to this poem are, to my mind, banal and trivialising. And yes, South Africans cannot read the words 'in solitary' without acknowledgement of the systematic injustice which characterises present society. But the heart of the poem lies elsewhere, in the particular and quietly detailed nature of the poem itself. Insofar as the line, 'i coined the moon, the man, free' does suggest the productive imagination, attention should slide beyond 'i' and 'me' to the poetry of the poem as a whole. Then, instead of being encouraged to dwell upon another statement about ironic alienation or upon conventional poetic solipsism, the reader is led on to explore the evocative potency of 'a man in solitary'. The point is that Jensma's poetry arouses and frees the responses of the reader, directing attention away from conceptual locking — 'the moon caught in tree branches' — to the elaborating, exfoliating and unfolding richness of the full poetic effect.

Jensma's poetry suggests very strongly that he and his poetic personae have very little (if any) faith in a future. Jensma's personae have no access to powers which could change their precarious and often desperate condition. Dominant forces are suggested to be implacably hostile to the yearning spirit. But the

effect in his poetry of a day-to-day focus upon experience generates more than another condition of being 'in solitary' because the emotional courage demanded by such a condition creates the pressure of restraint so evident in the varied but predominantly simple poetic forms which Jensma's poetry takes. An inability to believe or live in terms of a future is no disqualification from belief in self or in humanity. The delicate sensitivity of the poems quoted here shows that amply. In Jensma's case the effect of futurelessness is to suggest both a circumscription and a generative poetic power.

Without the protective means which deflect attention away from the force of the present, such as a sense of change or of an altered future (expectations), the personae experience the world as it really is, without hope or optimism. Such a state produces anguish and desperateness which Jensma modulates through extraordinary skill into poems of a mature voice within South African literature.

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NOTES

1. This is a modified version of the paper given at the 'Emerging Literatures' conference, University of the Witwatersrand, June 1986.
2. See M. Gardiner, 'Funking the jive: the poetry of Wopko Jensma,' *The English Academy Review* vol. 3, 1985.
3. The distinction between the private and the communal/historical voice in poetry is not an issue which can be argued here, important as it is, especially when considering 'emerging literatures'.
4. *Sing for our execution* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1973), p. 76.
5. The shooting dead in 1960 by police of 69 black people who had gathered with those who wished to surrender identity documents and work permits as part of a campaign against the necessity for black people to carry such 'passes'.
6. A reference at first level to the slaughter of the very young by King Herod shortly after the birth of Christ.
7. *Sing for our execution*, p. 65.
8. Peter Horn made the observation after hearing the first version of this paper, that a study of schizophrenia is necessary to an understanding of Jensma's poetry.
9. *where white is the colour/where black is the number* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1974), p. 44.

The writer wishes to thank Lettie Gardiner for her striking insights and Francis Faller for his helpful comments.

CORRESPONDENCE: 'LITERATURE IN SOUTH AFRICA TODAY'

The Editors,
Theoria.

The Guest Editors of your special issue, 'Literature in South Africa Today' (*Theoria* 68, December, 1986), did not consult me when editing my contribution to their volume. Unfortunately, the changes they made were so substantial that I am now compelled to take issue with two statements that appear under my name.

In my article 'Planning the Future of English Studies in South Africa: Some Observations,' I appear to define practical criticism — the approach to literature that has been influential in many English Departments in South African Universities — as an approach 'in which the minute analyses of textual subtleties and richness were conducted with little attention given to the shaping codes of specific social and cultural contexts' (107). I in fact offered no such definition. Indeed, historically speaking, it is inaccurate to argue that practical criticism placed little or no value on the 'cultural contexts' of either text or reader. It would be far closer to the truth to say that practical criticism was an attempt to extend literary studies beyond the confining historicism of earlier academic approaches; and this was done precisely so that literary critics could discuss the values of the past and, more particularly, bring them into relationship with the 'shaping codes' of current society. If one believes, as I do, that practical criticism has failed in this mission, then it is less because it neglected 'the shaping codes of specific social and cultural contexts,' and more because it misunderstood those contexts and how best they might be engaged.

Secondly, in my article I am made to claim that

> radically alternative views to literature and literary studies as valid activities *per se* have usually revealed little more than different attempts to co-opt that very literature into the service of new but equally circumscribed activities, for example, to immediate political exigencies. (111)

Now the difficulty I have with this editorial redaction of my argument is that it appears to commit me to a defence of literature and literary studies as 'valid activities *per se.*' But my argument is explicitly against giving literature or literary studies such independence. Like other cultural products, literature, literary criticism, and the institutions that promote them, must always be studied with one eye fixed on the contemporary context; and I have

no doubt that many of the most fruitful critical enquiries are those whose origins can be traced to 'immediate political exigencies.'

I do, it is true, argue against the sense of certainty and finality that often accompanies such politically-oriented criticism. But this argument is not based on the view that literary studies is an autonomous activity that can be kept free of politics; rather, it is based on the claim that all critical perspectives are necessarily limited. In this I believe I am following Theodor Adorno who writes that while we must always strive to establish perspectives which will reveal culture to be 'as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light,' we must also realise that actually attaining such a lofty point of view is, paradoxically, 'also the utterly impossible thing, because it pre-supposes 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 wrested from what is, if it shall hold good, but is also marked, for this very reason, by the same distortion and indigence that it seeks to escape.'

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