DRUM MAGAZINE (1951-1961): AND THE WORKS OF BLACK SOUTH AFRICAN WRITERS ASSOCIATED WITH IT.

by

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ABSTRACT

The upsurge of creative writing by black people in South Africa - as in other parts of Africa - in the period following the Second World War had its origin in two underlying social processes: the migration to the cities and the spreading of democratic and nationalist ideas as a result of the struggle against fascism. In South Africa, Drum magazine played a central part in recording the formation of the new urban culture as well as providing almost the sole platform for aspiring black authors.

Urbanisation, racism and the political struggle of the African national movement against the systematic enforcement of apartheid shaped the thinking of black authors. There is a strong unity persisting through the reportage, documentary and protest writing and creative literature of the period. The literary critic must be aware of this, while discriminating between the limited achievements of writers such as Can Themba, Casey Motsisi, Bloke Modisane and Lewis Nkosi and the substantial work of Ezekiel Mphahlele and Alex La Guma. The work of the Coloured writers James Matthews, Peter Clarke and Richard Rive is best assessed within the context of the special place of the Coloured people in South Africa's racial hierarchy.

The racial cleavage of South African society and the cultural under-development of the country as a whole have presented South African writers with some special problems and tasks. These derive from the absence of a cultural fabric embracing all sections

of the population in a common system of thought and feeling, and linking them organically to their own history. South African authors have been hampered by the lack of an overall perspective of the experience of their people which could, potentially at least, call upon values which transcend the historical limits of the settler colony. If the South African epic remains to be written, its achievement may be dependant upon the success of the black people's struggle to return, in Cabral's words, 'to their own history'.

David Rabkin
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C O N T E N T S

Chapter 1 - The Fifties

(1) Introduction

(2) Country and City

(3) Politics of the Fifties.

Drum magazine was first published in 1951. It continued to appear uninterruptedly for twelve years. In that time it gathered about it a group of writers and journalists who were largely responsible for black literature in South Africa, as it is generally represented in anthologies and critical surveys.

Drum was a product of the fifties. Its monthly issues over those years reflect the unique character of a decade which occupied a crucial place in South African history, and exercised a decisive influence on its contemporary literature. Its character as a popular magazine, which nevertheless served as almost the sole platform for talented and serious black writers, made it an important mediator between these writers, their subject-matter and their audience. The momentous events of the decade and the density and novelty of the experience of those who lived through it, find expression in the news-pages of Drum. Rendered into fiction, and transformed by the creative process, they appear, too, in the monthly short stories, and in the works of Drum writers published elsewhere and later. Lewis Nkosi, Drum journalist and author of several short stories, a collection of essays and a play, describes the influence of these years:

> The decade of the fifties was the most shaping influence of our young adulthood and Johannesburg, at the time I went to work for Drum publications, seemed to be the buzzing centre of all national activity. It seemed to be the place to be in for any young man trying to write. [1]

Looking back, it is possible to see clearly the crucial and yet transitory nature of the fifties. Antony Sampson, who edited Drum from late 1951 to 1955, put his finger upon one important characteristic of the situation:

> Of the nine million Africans living in South Africa (1956), two and a half million live in towns and the number is increasing rapidly. It is the urban Africans that will play the important role in the future. The old illiterate Africa of blankets and reserves, however picturesque, is insignificant in the face of this new industrial proletariat. The urban African is not merely an unhappy displaced person, torn up from his roots; amid the chaos and bewilderment of the shanty towns there is emerging a large settled community, sometimes with three generations of

town dwellers behind them. The ancient hierarchy of Chiefs and witchdoctors in the reserves has been replaced by a new aristocracy of doctors, lawyers, ministers and teachers. There are generations of African children to whom mud huts and tribal rites are as remote as trains are to their country cousins. 2

Sampson overestimates the completeness of the process. However, the generation of writers who worked for Drum were substantially of an urbanized community. Their parents had lived through the expropriation of the African lands, and had come to the cities under the pressure of economic necessity and labour laws. But the children took the urban environment for granted, turned their backs on traditional law and belief, and sought a political solution to poverty and racial discrimination. They availed themselves of what opportunities were open in education and cultural life. They took over, with enthusiasm and style, those aspects of western society available to them in Hollywood movies, pulp fiction and overseas editions of the Daily Mirror. They showed an outstanding energy and determination in adapting to the lopsided racial structure of South African society, and in bending it to their purpose. White South Africa was determined to stop them, but for a short while, in the fifties, a small area of freedom was born.

As Nkosi says:

> The fifties were important to us because finally they spelled out the end of one kind of South Africa and forshadowed the beginning of another. Sharpeville (1960) was the culmination of a decade in which it was still possible in South Africa to pretend to the viability of an extra-parliamentary opposition. While there was a fantastic array of laws controlling our lives, it was still possible to organise marches to police stations, to parliament, to the very prisons holding our political leaders. It was possible to go to the same universities as white students; there were racially mixed parties enjoyed with the gusto of a drowning people; it seemed at least obligatory to assume an air of defiance against government and authority and though the penalty was high even then, there was nothing as vicious as the 90-day Detention Law; no torture on the scale it now assumes in the government's deliberate programme for suppressing all effective opposition. 3

The fifties were a period of advance and struggle. But as Nkosi's retrospective sketch suggests, they were also a time of retreat, of defeat. African writers were striving to comprehend their experience

as a common part of the twentieth century life of mankind. African politicians fought for social justice and political democracy. White leaders denied these aspirations, and insisted that black people should accept retribalization, forcing them into a cultural backwater of stagnant tradition. The work of African writers was thus a part of the struggle. As in the case of the writers of Risorgimento Italy or the Irish poets of the Celtic Revival, their work was both about and for the life of their people. The interlocking-movement of opposed forces, those for progress and those for reaction, is thus the characterising feature of the decade.

African intellectuals articulated and chronicled the mass movements of workers for reform and progress.

> Everywhere members of my own generation were beginning to disaffiliate from a society organised on a rigid apartheid design. We began to sense that we were being deprived of a profounder experience; a sense of shared nationhood. 4

The process was complicated, however, by the deep-seated racial attitudes of whites, and the suspicion felt by African intellectuals towards white liberals. Moreover, it was one which the government was determined to frustrate. The resultant conjuncture of forces - economic, racial and political - constitutes the source and primary determinant of the literature with which we are concerned. It is a literature of assertion in the face of desperate odds.

For the fifties ended in the defeat of those aspirations and the negation of those experiences. In the course of the decade, the Nationalist Government succeeded in destroying the fragile structures of the new urban society culture; Sophiatown, its birthplace, was destroyed; the schools which had nurtured the new writers were axed by government decree; and a bastardised tribalism was forced upon people who, above all, were committed to creating a new style and a new way of life. Permeating these events, conditioning them and reinforcing them, was racism. It is perhaps the most important element in all South African literature. Its contradictions, and its

impingement on everyday life, were aggravated by the transitional nature of the fifties. In the pages of Drum it is an almost permanent presence, either directly or as an unmentioned but tangible backdrop to the representations of every-day life, trivial or tragic, of which such a magazine consists.

Whereas racism is the most constant factor in South African life as a whole, the process of urbanization has been the most conspicuous feature of African experience in modern times. The growth of urban communities is under way everywhere in Africa; it is bound to be an important preoccupation for future generations of African writers. Already it can be seen as a key constituent in the plays of Soyinka and in the novels of Chinua Achebe. In South Africa this process took place earlier and under more traumatic circumstances. It will be part of the purpose of this work, therefore, to situate black South African fiction in relation to the process of urbanization. In so doing it will be possible to develop a comparison between South African fiction and that in other parts of the continent, based securely on the examination of ascertainable facts and actual processes.

The decade 1950-1960 was a critical period in the development of South African literature. Its events were of that special and acute kind that characterises periods of transition and historical change. Drum magazine provided a record of those times, as well as a platform for its writers. But a news magazine records without analysing underlying movements. Drum was itself the product of a deeper and prior historical process. It was born out of the migration to the cities. Its nature was conditioned by that process, although the early assumptions of its proprietor and white editorial staff showed the experience to be as yet ill-digested, hardly even recognized.

When the first number of Drum appeared on the Johannesburg newsstands in 1951, it created more stir among white South Africans than

amongst its prospective readers. The Rand Daily Mail commented that the magazine would be 'read with interest by Europeans' and took notice of its articles on African traditional music and sport: 'The magazine has not ignored the athletic potentialities of the native'. [5] The first covers, counterposing the sillouetted figures of tribesman and city-dweller, suggested that theeditorial staff were aware of the process of urbanization, which had been vastly accelerated by the Second World War. The contents, however, indicate that they had little idea of how far that process had gone, or of the ways in which it had affected urban Africans.

A few white people, mainly those whose professions brought them into contact with Africans, were aware of the potential significance of African migration to the towns, and of the problems which it had already caused. Alan Paton, whose work as Principal of a Reform School brought him into contact with young black offenders, had published Cry the Beloved Country in 1947. [6] In it he gave a sombre warning of the dangers which had been incurred by the break-up of tribal life, and spoke eloquently of the sufferings of the Africans in the appalling slums of Johannesburg.

The process of migration was a continuing one. In 1927 the urban African population of Johannesburg was estimated to be 136,000 persons. Nine years later the first official census placed the figure at 229,122. By 1946 the estimate of the Johannesburg Non-European Affairs Department was nearly half a million. The rate of increase declined sharply under the Nationalist Government's influx control measures but by 1959 at least a further fifty thousand Africans were estimated to be living in the Johannesburg area. These figures do not include contract workers in the mines. In 1951 urban Africans constituted 23.6% of the total African population in South Africa. Their figures had almost doubled over the war period. [7]

Although the war had greatly hastened migration, the movement of Africans had begun in earnest with the gold rush on the Rand in 1886. Indeed, when war broke out in 1939 there was already a significant settled African population in urban areas. These people had established themselves over a relatively long period, and their numbers were closely tied to the growth of the white community. The services performed by Africans on the mines were extended with the growth of new white urban communities. African migrants settled on the veld on the outskirts of these settlements and provided domestic and municipal unskilled labour. To ensure continuity of service, Africans were encouraged to have their families with them.[8] It should be emphasized that at no period did African rights in the Transvaal (in the Cape it was more complex) include anything beyond the bare right of residence. Paul Kruger, President of the old Boer Republic, had declared that there should be 'no equality in church or state' and the Terms of Union, negotiated by the British in 1910, did not attempt to extend their liberalism beyond the boundaries of the Cape. It was at this time, however, that Africans were able to obtain freehold rights in certain outlying areas of Johannesburg, notably in Sophiatown.

Had the slow process of the pre-1939 years continued, it might have been possible for city-dwelling Africans to develop a stable social structure, and, with a minimum of conflict, to integrate the traditional forms of family and social behaviour with the conditions of urban living and wage employment. According to Buitendag, 'The intervention of the war .. disrupted the regular and gradual flow of Africans from rural areas'.[9] The simultaneous growth of new industry and the scarcity of building materials are blamed for the situation of drastically congested housing and inadequate sanitation facilities which was created. Alan Paton has described the process in vivid language:

> The black people go to Alexandra, or Sophiatown or Orlando, and try to hire rooms or to buy a share of a house.
> ... For everyone is coming to Johannesburg. From the Transkei and the Free State, from Zululand and Sekukuniland, Zulus and Swazis, Shangaans and Bavenda, Bapedi and Basuto, Xosas and Tembus, Pondos and Fingos, they are all coming to Johannesburg. 10

Paton's mellifluous listing of the African tribes and nations, reveals the diversity, but conceals the homogeneity of traditional African society. A brief sketch of that society will make it more easy to appreciate the magnitude of the loss and the extent of the damage which its destruction entailed.

Like many other African peoples whose way of life was based on the raising of crops and the herding of cattle, the Bantu-speaking people of South Africa had evolved a stable and well-integrated social system. With the major exception of the Zulus, their societies were without complex state apparatus or authoritarian institutions. The 'tribe' was generally governed by a chief, who, however, was under the influence of a council of elders and subject to the collective pressure of his people. One such form of pressure, which was widely practiced, was the withdrawal of allegiance from an overbearing or irregular chief. In the case of some peoples, for instance the Batswana and other Sotho groups, a peacable and humane ethos had been evolved, limiting, for example, the permissable practices in time of war and including a very sophisticated and deeply internalised system of law. Indeed, law in the form of customary practice is one of the most striking features of traditional African society in South Africa. It drew frequent comment from early travellers; for instance J.W.D.Moodie wrote in the nineteenth century:

> Revenge has little or no sway with them, as they are obliged to submit their disputes to the king who, after hearing the parties, gives judgement on the spot to which all parties submit without a murmur; but should the matter in dispute be of great importance, and when he cannot rely on his own judgement, he refers the parties to an older king in his neighbourhood.
> When a father beats his son as as to draw blood, and complaint is made to the king, he must pay the king a cow, as a fine. 11

The cohesive function usually exercised by the state was lodged in the relationships within the family, clan and tribe. The family in the extended form usually found in peasant societies was successful in providing its members with both security and sustenance. Relations within the family were well defined. As well as ensuring harmonious social intercourse, they governed the relations of production and dictated the division of labour. As Hoernle and Hellman wrote in 1953:

> The Household (muzi) consisting of a man, his sons and their wives and children, his unmarried daughters and other related dependent kin, also constituted the local territorial unit ... The family was patriarchal and the principle of seniority was greatly stressed. Relationship was described in terms of the classificatory system which extends a relationship term to a group of people (eg. the father and the father's brothers were all called father) to whom the same pattern of behaviour was shown. This large group of relations was bound together by a series of reciprocal rights and duties. 12

For our purposes it is the collective, more exactly communal, quality of traditional life which is important. Like many other peoples living at the level of subsistence, Africans valued mutuality and community, together with respect of age and experience. Manners were elaborately formal, and the important moments in the life of the individual - puberty, marriage, childbirth and death - were comprehended within clearly conceived ceremonial practices. A shared mythology and oral history gave to these peoples a sense of their origins and place in the world, as well as recounting the development of their culture and the early contacts, at least, with the whites.

Of course there were many negative aspects to traditional life. Sporadic limited warfare seems to have been endemic between clans and nations, and the rise of Chaka's Zulu empire in the eighteenth century was accompanied by much fierce fighting and civil bloodshed. The place of women, moreover, was unenviable, and became more so as the social roles of men-hunting, fighting and cattle-rearing, - became more circumscribed.

The history of urbanization, however, is dominated by the loss of the positive unifying elements in traditional life, and characterised by the failure, in the face of white oppression, to replace or re-create some

of those values. Some customs which were positive features of the old society,such as the limited premarital sex-play sanctioned by tradition, gave rise to serious social problems in an urban environment where collective disapproval was an ineffectual regulator. Because of the policy of apartheid, it cannot even be claimed with any certainty that the purely material conditions of Africans have improved substantially in the course of urbanization.

It was the first armed encounters with advancing British and Dutch settlers which began the process of destruction. Six wars of greater or lesser proportions took place between white settlers and the Xhosa people. Basil Davidson has commented that 'we shall never know how much damage was done to the South African Bantu-speaking peoples by those "kaffir wars" that filled so much of the nineteenth century.' 13 The Tswana, Sotho and Zulu peoples suffered the same fate as the Xhosa. The battles of Isandhlwana and Rorke's Drift are part of British imperial history. The last armed resistance which took its impetus from traditional society was that of the Zulu leader, Bambatha, in 1906. Needless to say, the African armies could not resist with fighting-sticks and assegais the disciplined musketry of the British, or the mounted Boer sharpshooters.

As the advancing whites began to settle and farm the land, their need for labour struck another blow at the African way of life. Not unnaturally, there was considerable reluctance on the part of Africans to leave their self-sustaining communites and go to work for white farmers. Labour practice on white farms paid no attention to traditionally-sanctioned divisions of labour, and African men were unwilling to perform tasks which custom assigned to their women. Whites responded by calling the Africans idle and feckless. Their solution was to apply a money tax to a peasant society without money. Either Africans went to work to earn some money to pay the tax, or the police seized them for non-payment of taxes, for which the penalty was forced labour.[14]

The final seal was set upon the destruction of the traditional societies by the Native Lands Act of 1913. It gave legal status to the de facto usurpation of African lands. The four million Africans were restricted to less than 8% of the country's area, while the remaining 92% was given to the 1¼ million white settlers. Professor Simons has explained the effect of the Act:

> The Act scheduled some 10½ million morgen [1 morgen = +2 acres] ... for occupation by Africans ... This protected white land-owners from competition by Africans who were slowly buying back some of the land filched from them or their fathers ... Finally, the restrictions on landholding by Africans would force peasants to leave the overcrowded impoverished reserves to work for mine-owners and farmers. 15

The special type of colonialism practised in South Africa - the near total appropriation of the land and the creation of a modern industrial state by the settlers - sets it apart from other African countries. The process was completed, by and large, before Africans began to create a written literature of their own (at least in English). When they did begin, they tended not to look back to their traditional societies for standards of evaluation or comparison. That society has been briefly described, as well as the historical events which destroyed it. The events of the decade in which Drum was born had their origins in that destruction; but they were of a radically different kind.

The war of 1939-1945, which was responsible for substantial migration to the towns, and specially to the Rand, also caused a breach in the application of 'job reservation' (the colour bar in employment). The number of Africans in manufacturing jobs rose by 57%. By the end of 1948 they accounted for over 80% of unskilled, 34.2% of semi-skilled and nearly 6% of skilled workers.[16] The proliferation of war industry caused wages to rise from 19.8% to 26.6% of white earnings. Job reservation was somewhat relaxed and freedom to move to the cities enlarged. As the Japanese advanced in the Pacific and invasion seemed a real danger, Smuts hinted at a relaxation of the race laws: 'Isolation has gone and I am afraid segregation has fallen on evil days too.' [17] In 1943 legislation

extended social services such as school feeding, pensions and sick pay to Africans, though at lower rates than for whites. Africans had been encouraged to enlist, though they were not allowed to bear arms and segregation was maintained in the army.

Many who served in the forces, nevertheless, came into contact with liberal whites, while others found themselves on leave in Britain. They returned with larger conceptions. Henry Nxumalo, Drum's first African reporter, was an example. Peter Abrahams has described how he met Nxumalo on leave in London and the effect which the experience of war and contact with non-South African whites had had upon him: 'We spent long hours talking about Africa. Henry sensed that Africa was on the move without quite knowing where it was going.'[18] After a short time the South African authorities had him shipped back home.

In 1947, 7,600 Africans came out on strike in the mines. The strike lasted nearly six days. The miners were finally driven down the pits at gunpoint. Nine Africans were reported to have been killed and over a thousand injured in clashes. No policeman was attacked and no property damaged.[19] Following the strike an intense police action was instituted against trade union leaders and members of the Communist Party, who were alleged to 'control' the African unions. This resulted in two court cases in which trade union leaders and communists were acquitted. The government then restricted and banned the workers' leaders by statutory means. Simons has commented: 'By and large the miners' strike and the witch hunt conducted by the Smuts government, prepared the way for further development of the police state under the Nationalist regime.'

In addition to boosting militancy among African workers, the increase in urban population had caused a crisis in living conditions. This was the period of the erection of shanty towns on waste lands about the cities, and of an explosion of poverty, deprivation and, consequently, crime.

Such was the situation which ushered in the fifties. The main

trends of the coming decade were to be determined by the victory of the National Party in the election of 1948. Hor witz has placed it in context:

> From 1938 to 1948 Afrikaner nationalism and Afrikanerdom had to accept a mobility of labour - geographical, vertical, racial - unique in the South African social process. It transformed the shape and rate of economic development stimulating industrialisation ... It pulled tens of thousands of Africans from rural slums to urban slums ... So much compulsive adaptation exercised by the economy on the social system was intolerable. In the post-second world war general election the white electorate gave a majority of seats, though not of votes, to Afrikaner nationalism. From 1948 on, the National Government made it quite clear that such uncontrolled adaptation was not indeed to be tolerated. Nothing in the social system of Afrikanerdom ... would adapt itself to mobility of labour and competition - unregulated, uncontrolled and colour-blind - in the labour movement. 20

Dr.Malan, National Party Leader, had introduced his party programme to the theme of the 'black menace':

> Will the European race in the future be able to, and also want to maintain its rule, its purity, its civilisation; or will it float until it vanishes forever without honour, in the black sea of South Africa's non-European population? 21

The Sauer Report, upon which that programme was based, identified the urban African as the main threat: 'The Native in our urban areas must be regarded as a "visitor" who will never be entitled to any political rights or equal social rights with the whites.'[22] The fifties, therefore, were to see an offensive on two fronts, the elimination of minimal political rights for Africans and other blacks outside the Reserves, and the imposition of physical segregation in social, educational and even sexual activities.

On the political front the Government abolished the Natives Representative Council, a consultative but elected body, which it claimed had become a base for anti-white agitation. Legislation providing for representation of Indians, which had never been put into action, was repealed. A prolonged constitutional battle with the judiciary was necessary before the Cape Coloured voters, whose rights had been 'entrenched' in the Union constitution, could be removed from the common voters role in 1956. In 1959 the Promotion of Bantu Self-Government Act introduced

the policy of Bantustans which was to be pursued in the Sixties. Extra-parliamentary opposition was to be curbed. The Suppression of Communism Act(1950) banned the Communist Party and gave the Minister the right to 'name' any individual or organization as communist, and thereby remove him or it from public activity or expression. There was no appeal. The Act defined communism in such broad terms that a judge commenting on it declared that 'statutory' communism had nothing to do with communism 'as it is generally understood'.[23] The Criminal Law Amendment Act provided severe penalties for breaking laws as an act of protest. The Unlawful Organization Act made it possible to proscribe organizations which the Minister of Justice considered a threat to national security.

It was the laws enforcing social segregation, however, which had the sharpest impact on the lives of urban Africans. The basis of formal apartheid was laid by the Population Registration Act which sought to establish a register which described every individual's race. Definitions of race under the Act give a sharp insight into the narrow dividing line between tragedy and farce in the politics of race. The definitions were constantly to be amended by zealous legislators who were not prepared to admit the three hundred years of miscegenation and inter-marriage of which one million Coloured people were an eloquent reminder. The Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act and the Immorality Act were introduced to halt this inevitable process, whether in or out of wedlock.

But it was the deceptively titled Abolition of Passes and Co-ordination of Documents Act which was most hated by Africans. It extended the older Pass laws and made it possible to control and severely

limit the personal freedom of Africans in towns. The Act compelled every male African to carry a Reference Book, signed by his current employer. No African could leave a job without the signature of his employer. Unemployed Africans were given a specified time, usually three weeks, in which to find a new job. Africans coming to work in urban areas were forced to accept jobs given by the Influx Control Bureaux. If there was a shortage of rural labour, permission to seek work in towns could be refused. In any event, the wife and family of an African seeking work in town could not accompany him. These are only some of the provisions of the Act. Any African whose pass was not in order or who failed to produce it on demand was liable to imprisonment and to be 'endorsed out' to his 'tribal homeland'. As a result of the pass laws, hundreds of thousands of Africans in South Africa go to prison every year, where they are treated as common criminals. The Reference Book, still called a 'pass' by white and black, was to become the physical symbol of white oppression and exploitation. African workers, beaten and robbed by tsotsis (gangsters) in the townships, would plead for the return of their pass book, the only defence against forced labour on the farms of Bethal, or 'repatriation' to the endemic starvation of the Reserves.

Supplementing the registration of individuals was the Group Areas Act. It was intended to tidy up the uneven and occasionally mixed pattern of urban residence. Urban areas were divided into separate racial zones and the residents who fell into the wrong category were forced to move. These were almost always the blacks, for where mixed

or adjacent areas existed, the Minister inevitably declared the area white. The Western Areas removal scheme was one of the first instituted under an Act whose powers have been, and still are, widely and often arbitrarily applied.

The cultural upsurge which took place in the fifties, and in which Drum was to play a central part, had as its intellectual base, the education provided by the mission schools and other private educationsl institutions, by the intergrated English-language Universities at Cape Town, Johannesburg and Grahamstown, and the African University College of Fort Hare. These will be discussed elsewhere. The Bantu Education Act of 1953, which was to put an end to most of these institutions, was based on the findings of Eiselen Commission which reported in 1951. Although the Commission found that 'the Bantu child comes to school with a basic physiological and psychological endowment which differs ... slightly, if at all, from that of the European child'[24] it proposed that the education of Africans should be in line with their socio-economic role in South African society, assumed this to be unalterable, and thus helped to make it so. Accordingly a syllabus was devised which included teaching in the vernacular languages (though children were to study English and Afrikaans as second languages) and emphasised manual labour, handicrafts and 'native history'. The spirit of the Act was well illustrated by Dr.Verwoerd, then Minister of Native Affairs, who said in parliament:

> Then I want to add - and this is very important - that their education should not clash with government policy ... I just want to remind Honourable members that if the Native in South Africa today in any kind of school in existence is being taught to believe that he will live his adult life under a policy of equal rights, he is making a very big mistake. 25

To deal with such institutions, the Act provided that no schools other than Government ones be allowed to function unless registered by the Minister, who could refuse registration if he thought it 'not in the interests of the Bantu people'. Cultural apartheid was extended to higher education in the incongruously named Extension of University Education Act (1959) which provided for separate higher education for Coloured, Indians and individual African tribes, with specialised syllabusses, and closed the 'mixed 'universities to black students.

The power of the government to segregate was limited where municipal authorities were responsible for local services. In Cape Town, for instance, municipal buses and the Town Hall had remained unsegregated. The Separate Amenities Act gave the government power to enforce segregation of amenities, while expressly stating that these need not he equal.

The twelve years which followed the Nationalist victory of 1948 can therefore be seen as a systematic offensive against the living conditions and freedom of Africans and other black people. The main purpose of this offensive was the elimination, as far as possible, of a settled urban African populatibn. Thus the successive measures abolishing rights and liberties were accompanied by a developing programme of retribalization. The new Bantu Authorities, which replaced the Native Representative Council, were based on tribal units. The new urban townships which were to house those expelled under the Group Areas Act, were zoned according to tribal and sub-tribal divisions. The Bantu Education Act and the Extension of University Education Act emphasized tribal traditions and languages. But it was a devitalized and anachronistic tribalism, devised in order to divide black people and to cut them off from 'subversive' ideas usually described as liberalism and communism'. Government schools did not teach the true history of the African peoples of South Africa, nor did the new Bantu Authorities dare to ressurrect the genuinely popular mode of government which had been practised.

The resistance which African and black organizations posed to the racialist onslaught was in defence of clearly opposite values. Africans, Indians, Colouredsand democratic whites combined in the Congress Alliance to assert the right of all to participate in a common society. As Leo Kuper explains:

> The effect of the interracial core of the society, of industrial development and economic independence, and of white dominance and influence has been to draw Africans, Indians and Coloured towards the whites and towards the common sectors of society ... political action has generally takenthe form of organization for a democratic inter-racial society, as in the African National Congress. It is significant that African political movements have been almost entirely free of nativistic elements. 26

The main lines of African resistance were laid down in the Programme of Action adopted by the ANC at its 1949 conference and put foward by the emergent leadership in the Youth League. The programme called for boycotts of apartheid bodies, political strikes and the defiance of unjust laws. The following year saw a demonstration and strike on May Day for 'freedom, land and the repeal of colour bars'. Meetings were broken up by the police and eighteen Africans died. On the 26th of June, 1951 a National Day of Protest was called against the Group Areas and Supression of Communism Acts.

The extension of repressive legislation led to increased co-operation between on the one hand, Africans, and on the other, Indians and Coloureds, who saw their position of relative privilege being undermined. This difficult alliance (for race tensions caused mistrust) found its first practical expression in the 1952 Defiance of Unjust Laws Campaign. Drum magazine, which had entered the political arena with its exposure of forced labour on the farms of Bethal in March of that year (see Chapter III), gave fairly extensive coverage to the campaign in its October and November issues. After describing the genesis of the plan and the formation of a joint planning council among the participant organizations, Drum described the first incidents of defiance:

On June 26th, bands of volunteers went into action for the first time. Without violence or disorder, a small group led by Nana Sita, an old stager of passive resistance, insisted on entering Boksburg location, close to Johannesburg, without the necessary permits. After argument with the police, they were arrested and without resistance, entered the police lorry which took them to jail. The first group was shortly followed by others, and Walter Sisulu, Secretary-General of the African Congress was one of the leaders arrested. 27

As the campaign got under way the police struck back. The ANC offices were raided and twenty black leaders charged under the Suppression of Communism Act. The Congress leaders responded by stepping up the number of defiers. The following month the focus of the campaign moved to Natal where three thousand people assembled to hear speeches by Chief Albert Luthuli and other leaders. The Defiance Campaign resulted in over eight thousand volunteers going to prison. As a direct consequence, the Government passed the Public Safety Act (which provided for a State Emergency) and the Criminal Law Amendment Act. Leo Kuper comments:

> The campaign thus had the negative consequence of increasing the repressive powers of the State and of liquidating many African and Indian leaders. But it attracted international attention and condemnation of apartheid policy: it stimulated a symbolic participation by white resisters, and the founding of two political parties, a radical Congress of Democrats, representing the unit of whites in a congress alliance of racial organizations and the South African Liberal Party, a multi-racial political party largely under white leadership; and it raised the membership of the ANC to a reputed hundred thousand, the majority being in the Eastern Cape. 28

Undoubtedly the most important achievement of the campaign was consolidated in the successful calling of the Congress of the People in 1955, sponsored by the representative organizations of the African, Indian and Coloured peoples. Ezekiel Mphahlele reported on the occasion for Drum and recorded how a Freedom Charter had been drawn up to formulate demands for a democratic society. The Charter demanded political, economic, civil and social quality for all South Africans and became the common programme of the Congress Alliance.[29]

Although the movement of resistance was strengthening and unifying itself, it failed to prevent two social measures most destructive of the evolving urban community and culture. The death of Sophiatown, symbol of the emergent metropolitan life-style is told elsewhere.

The ANC campaign against the removal scheme was largely unsuccessful. Congress' resistance to the Bantu Education Act was doomed from the start. The Act precluded the creation of an alternative education system, which the ANC was probably unable to finance and support in any case. The call to boycott the 'slave schools', though based upon genuine fears of parents that their children were being forced into an educationfor inferiority, could not succeed in face of the enormous drive for literacy, and the economic rewards which education offered. The Bantu Education Act succeeded in destroying the institutions which had enabled some Africans to acquire a liberal education and had spawned a high proportion of Drum's own writers, photographers and sub-editors.

Following the Congress of the People, the main resistance shifted from the cities to the reserves. It was possibly this lull in ANC activity in the cities whichcontributed to the splitting off of its 'Africanist' wing in 1958. This wing formed itself into the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) which opposed to the 'multiracialism' of the ANC its own brand of 'non-racialism' and accused ANC leaders of being dominated by white communists. It also opposed co-operation with the Indian and Coloured organizations. The anti-communism of the PAC and its cultural nationalism won it support from African intellectuals. Bloke Modisane for instance, records how he was attracted by the defiant tone and racial pride of the PAC supporters. The PAC also found support from white liberals who were prepared to ignore the incipient anti-white character of its policies since they felt it represented a pure African nationalism which could be won for the west. Thus two African organizations claimed the leadership of their people in the events of 1960, which put a turbulent end to a troubled decade. At the end of 1959 the ANC had decided on a mass anti-pass National Strike, to be called for March 31st of the following year. Active preparation was under way at the beginning of March. On March 21st, however, the PAC anticipated the

ANC's campaign by calling on the people to stop work, present themselves for arrest at police stations and burn their passes. It was on this day that the shooting of sixty-seven unarmed men and women at Sharpville and eleven at Langa (Cape Town) took place. In the week following the shootings, the PAC organization appears to have disintegrated, but the ANC stepped into the gap by advancing the date of its Stay-at-Home and calling for the burning of passes. Over 250,000 workers obeyed the strike call and the burning of passes was so extensive that the Government was forced to suspend the pass laws until order could be restored.

The Government responded by declaring a national State of Emergency and sending troops into the locations. A nation-wide round-up of politically suspect persons resulted in the detention of hundreds without trial. Some of those arrested had been out of active politics for a decade or more. The African National Congress, the Pan Africanist Congress and the Congress of Democrats were banned. Henceforth all political resistance was to be driven underground. Reviewing the period as a whole, Lewis Nkosi has written:

> Sharpville and the brutal massacre of unarmed Africans marching to a local police station brought us bang into 1960, and into a different era altogether. 30

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Chapter 11 - Environment & Culture

1 In the Townships

2 Education and Experience

1.

The Government legislated to keep people apart. The congress movement sought to campaign for a multiracial society. Neither was wholly successful. By imposing residential segregation and by limiting severely communication between country and city, Government policy undoubtedly stimulated the development of an African culture which, while separate from that of the whites, was not a traditional one. It contained many elements adapted from the white way of life. Urban Africans were highly conscious of this difference and the avant-garde element in the townships, 'ooClever', tended to satirize newcomers to the cities, the 'home-boys'.

The scene of this process of culture formation was predominantly the townships around Johannesburg. They varied greatly, from the freehold but congested areas of Sophiatown and Alexandra, to the municipal locations of Orlando, Moroka and Western Native Township, and the institutionalised hovels of Orlando Shelters. The nature of the townships varied according to legal variations in the forms of land tenure, etc. Where they lay outside municipal jurisdiction, as did Alexandra Township, there were fewer regulations governing the lives of residents, but also an almost total lack of amenities. Alexandra's two thousand five hundred 'stands', or plots, held an estimated hundred thousand inhabitants. Overcrowding, together with a total absence of street-lighting, contributed to Alex's unenviable reputation for crimes of violence. De Ridder describes it:

> There is Alexandra township - an odd square mile housing an estimated 100,000 people, the headquarters of the dreaded Msomi gang, officially broken but unofficially dormant, a cesspool of vice, a breeding ground of crime, the home of the old Thutha Ranch gang and the happy hunting ground of the Blue Nine gambling boys, the present-day crime school of the Frog Town tsotsi's. 1

If Alex was notable for its crime, Orlando Shelters was notorious, even among people accustomed to squalor, for its unrelieved misery. Erected

as a palliative after the post-war 'Sofasonke' squatters' movement, these breeze-block concrete shelters had neither lighting nor sanitation of any kind. One tap was provided by the council at the end of each row of lean-to's. Different again was Newclare, separated from Sophia-town by Johannesburg's main western trunk road and famous for its large colony of Basotho, nicknamed the 'Russians', and for the internecine strife between a gang of this name and a Civic Guard started by respectable citizens but degenerating, through lack of official support, into a revenge vigilante.

Conditions in all the townships were dire. Overcrowding, poverty and the brutalizing effects of police repression aggravated the natural tensions, sense of dislocation and anomie experienced by migrant communities. Malnutrition was rife and infant mortality very high indeed. The African extended family which had traditionally played a large part in regulating everyday life, could not survive 'influx control'. The separation of husband and wife which it enforced has left a deep scar on the moral quality of urban African life. The social consequences - illegitimacy, lawlessness, drunkenness - feature regularly in the pages of Drum and in the literature with which we are concerned. The disintegration of African family life was the feature most noted by white social scientists. The pass laws prevented migrant workers from bringing their wives with them to the city. Consequently there was a high disproportion between men and women, inevitably giving rise to prostitution and promiscuity.

But it is doubtful if the extended family system can survive in an industrial society. A cash economy and the acquisitive individualism stimulated by modern societies destroy the network of interrelations and communal ethics which regulate peasant groups. Among urban Africans the sexual tolerance of traditional society was uncurbed by the enforcement

of obligations incurred by breaking the rules. For instance, traditionally a rapist paid a compensation in the form of cattle to the injured girl. This would provide for her future and for her child if she conceived. A cash payment, where it could be extracted in the city, would be quickly dissipated. Moreover the sanction of disapproval was ineffective in the relative anonymity of the townships. In the traditional society aggressive male attitudes were checked and women protected by their families. In the towns the machismo survived, but parents could do little to protect their offspring. An African social worker has written:

> Among urban Africans contraceptive methods are not at all popular. And in the townships there is a saying that 'it is better done flesh to flesh.' The pregnancy of the woman doesn't matter much because damages can be paid. The normal amount of damages is assessed at about three cattle, that is about £15. Another major cause of illegitimacy is that the African looks down on a woman who has not borne a child. She is considered as barren. So as a result, no man is prepared to marry a girl he loves before they have had a child. However, after the birth, the actual marriage may be delayed by trying to evade the African custom of lobola, and more often than not the man finds himself unable to pay the required price. 2

Such attitudes and the domestic tragedies which they caused cropped up frequently in Drum's lonely hearts page, addressed to 'Dolly Drum'. Antony Sampson indicates the impossibility of giving adequate 'advice' in such cases:

> What could Dolly do? Their lives were so unstable and disrupted that no reply from Dolly could make any sense. 'It's time you settled down my dear ...' Dolly would say from her lofty plane, in reply to 'Miss Worried' of Orlando Shelters; but I could imagine Miss Worried reading it in her one-roomed windowless hovel, with her married boy-friend, saying: 'Baby, I'll make you pregnant first, then I'll marry you, true's god! 3

Lawlessness, crime and violence will be a constant concern in this study. Occupying perhaps the most staple ingredient of Drum's feature articles, the accounts of gangs, gang-leaders and the terrorism of Africans by Africans, are also a principle theme in much black fiction. It will be clear from what has already been shown, that the classical preconditions existed in the forties for an explosion of violent crime in the townships. The forms which this explosion took, and the process whereby certain criminals

came to have the status of culture-heroes, will be discussed when we come to consider the role, actual and symbolic, of the tsotsi.

These problems require emphasis. For, in describing the dynamic features of the fifties, they may be overlooked. Indeed the individuals who combined to create Drum and to write a literature of the townships have sometimes, in their desire to emphasize the vitality and exuberance of those times, created an impression of glamour and excitement which is misleading. It is the synthesis of the squalid and the tinselled, the sordid and the heroic, the destructive and the creative, which constitutes the peculiar character of township life. This synthesis is behind the driving rhythm of the kwela and its plaintive penny-whistle melodies. It is expressed in the wry accounts of shebeen escapades in the writing of Casey Motsisi.

A central symbol of the townships was Sophiatown. Originally owned by H.Tobiansky, it was leased to the old South African Republic as a 'coloured location'. In 1903 the lease was cancelled and freehold rights became available. In 1949 Sophiatown was proclaimed an area 'predominantly occupied by natives.'[4] Covering about 113 morgen, it housed nearly forty thousand people in 1950. They paid between ten shillings to a pound for shared and thirty shillings to two pounds per month for unshared rooms. 'Old Sophiatown was a complex place. It housed Indian, Coloured and African families. Some in squalor, some in wealth, a few in freehold tenure, the majority on leasehold bonds. There were few owners, and many tenants and sub-tenants. It was a heterogeneous human mass, a complex of different cultures, and yet a group of people united by a sense of ownership.'[5] The hold of Sophiatown upon the imaginations of its residents, and of its writers was strong. Trevor Huddleston has described it lyrically in his book, 'Naught For Your Comfort.'[6] Its special quality was that it partook of the life of the city. The oldest of the African townships, it was home to the established African leaders, like Dr.A.B.Xuma, to the intellectuals

who could afford the steep rents, and to the longer established industrial workers. With Alexandra it was the most politicized of the townships. Its style was a blend of sophistication, subtly self-deprecating snobbery, violence and sudden death. Here is Antony Sampson's description of it:

> It was Limehouse, Chelsea, Tottenham Court Road and Surbiton rolled into one ... In its crowded and narrow streets walked philosophers and gangsters, musicians and pickpockets, short-story writers and businessmen. Sophiatown embodied all that was best and worst in African life in towns.
>
> Sophiatown was unique because, alone of the African townships it was part of Johannesburg. Its steep, tarred streets let down to the outskirts of the city, four miles from the centre. There was no fence round Sophiatown as there is at Western Native Township or at Pimville, and no policemen at the gate to examine passes. Houses could be bought and sold... Sophiatown was a free township, free to go to hell in its own way, 7

Sophiatown was more of a pressure cooker than a melting pot. Educated and uneducated, witch-doctor and tsotsi, Basotho, Bapedi and Zulu lived together and mixed freely because their lives were basically similar. They were subject to the same laws and restrictions. They shared a common language, a lingua franca composed of corrupted Afrikaans with borrowings from every African language. Tribal dancing vied with jive as social entertainment. Weddings were a popular social event, to which whole streets would turn up, the families of the married couple being obliged by custom to provide freely and to all.[8] Sophiatown was both a symbol and a myth. In the fiction of black writers it represented a 'might-have-been' image of the new urban culture.

The distilled essence of that image was the shebeen, the illegal drinking places or speak-easies, which were the inevitable product of the prohibition of alcohol imposed on black South Africans. Lewis Nkosi has commented:

> The hold which the shebeens have on the minds of black South Africans can only be compared to the similar hold the English club has on the mind of the Englishman. This explains why the shebeens are so widely celebrated in the fiction and non-fiction of black South Africans. Shebeens like the London pub provided the focal point of city life. Interminable talk went on there about politics, business, love, literature. Anything. 9

Myths and apocrypha have gathered round these institutions. The origins of their names provide for numerous, divergent and ingenious explanations.

The shebeens themselves have survived the era of legal alcohol and their mystique has endured, too. The present writer, while conducting research in one such establishment in spring 1971, heard many of the identical stories, as well as some variants, as occurred in the pages of Drum in the fifties. The Dube village shebeen, 'Fallen Leaves', was described to him and its name variously explained as referring to the bank-notes which fall as thick as leaves there, or to the practice of its customers, whodrink there until they fall, and then leave. Shebeens varied widely in the style of their appointments, the social strata they catered for and the drinks which they served. The traditional African liquor is 'Mqombothi', a maize beer, which is intoxicating, but very filling. Moreover as Can Themba pointed out in an article in Drum:

> Native beer needs time to mature and tins of fermenting beer are frequently seized by the raiding police. Because of the police danger, various conconctions, which take a convenient time to ferment, have been invented. Many stomach-turning ingredients have been invented to give drinkers ' a special feeling of intoxication' and thus lure customers to a particular shebeen. 10

Often petrol or methylated spirits would be added. Also effective was the method of steeping chewing tobacco in brandy and then adding the latter to the brew. One of the quick-fermenting beers was brewed from pineapple. This is pleasantly sweet, but potent. 'Barberton', brewed from bread, had the convincing reputation of driving people mad. The most notorious of these concoctions was 'skokiaan', which gave its name to an internationally famous dance-tune. 'Skok' means a shock ..

A principal attraction of the shebeen was the 'queen' or 'mother'. The most celebrated of these ladies is undoubtedly Fatsy, of the 'Back o' The Moon.' The shebeen-queen acted as hostess, fulfilling the traditional custom that beer was served to the men by their women, as well as other more contemporary functions. The atmosphere of most shebeens, however, was homely rather than vicious. An added attraction was the excitement of

outwitting the law. Can Themba revealed some of the better-known stratagems:

> When hollow table legs, false bottoms to drawers, unfixed flooring boards, holes in the ground and other tricks became hackneyed, new plans were made. When a plumber's job was completed, all the shebeen keeper had to do was turn on the hot-water tap for brandy and the cold-water for wine. 11

As in all things, Sophiatown provided the slickest and the most exciting shebeens. The following anonymous account gives a more frank picture of shebeen life than that in Drum and repeats the roll-call of the most notable joints:

> The shebeen was the converging point. Here, with a glass of beer or a glass of whisky and a buxom lady near, the scene was set for complete and absolute social intercourse. Old Sophiatown had a number of shebeens: There was for instance the Church, so called because it was just next door to the church of Christ the King. Then there was The Thirty-Nine Steps, although there was not a single step at the entrance to the club. And then there was the well-known Back of the Moon, an old time Sophiatown shebeen. In such places one could sit until the following day just as long as one bought liquor ... Such were the old Sophiatown shebeens, dirty, dark little rooms, hidden away in some back alley, or smart, posh joints furnished with contemporary Swedish furniture. The shebeens ... were an excellent way of escaping from the realities of everyday life. In a haze of whisky, one could easily forget the rising cost of living, the embarassing rentals and the difficulties of feeding a family on an adequate income. 12

The writer's final point should remind us that drunkenness was a serious social problem. The crushing pressures of poverty, racial discrimination and the anomic environment of the city led to the kind of excessive drinking that caused violent behaviour, family disintegration and, not infrequently, mental disorder or deterioration. But this constant aspect of township life did not prevent the shebeens from capturing the imaginations of African writers and journalists. The bard of the shebeens is Casey Motsisi, and his column, 'On the Beat', contributed to their enduring fame, besides serving to crystalize his talent. (The shebeens will receive further attention in the chapter on Casey, Chapter Five.)

The atmosphere of the shebeens directly influenced the tone and style of African writers. It directed their attention to the writers of

America's Prohibition era, such as Damon Runyon. The convergence in the shebeen of diverse social strata, of politicians and labourers, poets and gangsters, contributed to the 'Elizabethan' quality of township life and literature which has frequently been noticed. Antony Sampson describes it well:

> One evening in a noisy Sophiatown shebeen I watched a faithless husband hiding under the table from his wife, while his friends chased his mistress out of the window. 'Big Bioscope', said a fat man, shaking beside me. It came to me suddenly that I was watching an Elizabethan play. It was as if the characters had tripped straight from the stage of the Globe, lugging their dead bodies with them.
>
> Sophiatown had all the exuberant youth of Shakespeare's London. It was the same upstart slum, with people coming from a primitive country life to the tawdry sophistication of the city's fringes. Death and the police state were round the corner: and there was the imminent stage direction:
>
> Exeunt with bodies ... 13

2.

It is a universal characteristic of human groups that they do not confine their activities to producing food and the other bare necessities of life. They tell stories about these activities, create systems of ideas and values which give order to their experience, and recreate themselves in the manifold activities we call a culture. Generally, cultures are developed through long periods of time, in history, and contain elements of fixed past tradition, the widely accepted conventions of the particular period and, always, new subversive elements which insinuate themselves constantly into the living amalgam, provoking cries of protest and giving rise to conflict. These three elements, the received, the lived, and the new, may vary in proportion. Sometimes tradition will predominate for centuries and impose a rigid undeveloping culture, such as that of ancient Egypt or the Aristotelian order of Mediaeval Europe. Sometimes the new will overwhelm all received values, causing a crisis in the life of a society. This is often the result of foreign conquest and

invasion. The period and the people now being considered were in such a crisis. The experience of urbanization gave so great an impetus to the creation of new values, and new ways of viewing experience, that it largely shattered traditional modes. Nor, in the unstable working and living conditions of the townships, could a system of living conventions be easily established. The culture of the townships was an undigested assemblage of diverse elements.

It is part of the social function of a popular journal to seize upon what is widely acceptable to its readers, and to promulgate it. To what extent Drum tried to do this, and how it tried to introduce additional values, will be reflected in the sections dealing with the development of the magazine. This section, however, will try to examine some of the separate elements of township culture, concentrating on those which were relevant, or akin, to the activity of writing, and seeking to describe more closely the position of the intellectual. The most important force in the new culture was literacy. For, although a majority of the township dwellers were illiterate or semi-illiterate, western education and especially literacy became a standard bearer of the new value system. Stratification in the township social hierarchy was based upon it. Social mobility was determined by it. A common factor in the lives of all the writers is the desperate search for education and the lucky breaks that came to a few children of talent.

An earlier section has discussed, briefly, the intentions and effects of the Bantu Education Act. At the time of its implementation not more than one third of African children were at school at all. Education was not compulsory and there was no school-leaving age limit. A very high proportion left school at very low standards, only 3.48% reaching the top form of primary school. The reason for this early drop-out is not hard to find. Primary

schools were grotesquely crowded with anything from sixty to a hundred children in a class. Facilities were minimal. Ezekiel Mphahlele has described the teaching methods in a country school. They would be very similar in town:

> There we were, a mighty crowd in a large hall, and the old teacher in front of us; an elderly tired-looking gentleman. I still wonder how he managed us, if he did at all. There we were, chanting away the multiplication tables and word spelling: M-A-T, indicating each letter by clapping of hands. The teacher bellowed out 'F-O-X, fokes; B-O-X, bokos; F-I-X, fikis,' which we echoed while we marvelled at the look of the words on the board and the miraculous sound of them. 14

Those children who survived this rude inculcation of literacy, and managed to pass their Standard Six, would still have an extremely hard time getting into high school, for African education had been, until 1955, left to the missionaries. In 1945 there were over four thousand mission schools and only 230 government schools. The mission school movement had grown entirely on its own resources. From crude, often open air classes the missionaries developed a number of major institutions, such as Lovedale, Marianhill, Adams College, and others, which established their own traditions of academic achievement and of turning out leading figures in African education, medicine, journalism and politics.[15] Some of these first western-educated Africans were able to pursue careers of distinction. Men such as Sol Plaatje, AB Xuma, James Moroka and P ka I Seme were able to benefit from the mission education and express that benefit in the relatively liberal early period. Seme, in America, enunciated at a Harvard lecture some of the earliest theories of pan-Africanism. Dr.Moroka, son of a powerful chief in the Orange Free State, owned large lands and practised as a doctor, winning patients even among the white farmers of his district.

The development of urban communities posed a fresh problem for African education. A system was developed whereby the provincial administrative subsidised African mission schools in the towns, controlling the syllabuses

and inspectorate. The scheme fell under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education. Its inadequacy was clear; at the beginning of every school year thousands of children were turned away for lack of places. The African people themselves organised private schools to meet the gap, ramshackle buildings where teachers struggled to cope with classes of over a hundred for salaries of £2.50 or £3 a month. Unsatisfactory as this system was, it was widely held to be preferable to the Bantu Education system, with its transference of control from the Education Ministry to the politically loaded Ministry of Bantu Affairs.

Because education was neither free nor compulsory, and because the people were poor, there was enormous pressure on families to send their children out to work as soon as possible. But Africans recognised the importance of education and took great pride in keeping their children at school if they could:

> Grandmother was most proud about her three sons who had gone to 'college' as she put it. The youngest of them went to a school for motor mechanics ... 'You must starve yourself, stinge yourself rice and stew if you want your children to go to college,' grandmother often said, 'and some people don't know it.' 16

Every year of school completed was a victory. Many children would drop out of school to work and save money so that they could return later. The death of a bread-winner could bring an end to hopes of a high school education. A good job obtained by an older brother would mean a chance for the younger children. Peter Abrahams has described, in Tell Freedom,[17] how he managed to complete his secondary education by alternately working as a market-boy and blacksmith's assistant, and going to school. Many pupils at church schools paid their fees by working in the school grounds or 'doing' for the teachers.

The most famous and important of the African secondary schools was St.Peter's, Johannesburg. Founded in 1922 by the Community of the Resurrection, the school made rapid progress and five years later was able

to open a secondary school. In 1932 it produced its first matriculant and established a tradition of first class passes. In its twenty-seven years existence, over two thousand students passed through the school, the lucky ones who had gained admittance from waiting lists that often numbered four thousand. At the time of its closing Drum reported:

> From these 2250 ex-students have emerged some of Africa's most famous sons and daughters: teachers, priests, doctors, lawyers, writers, journalists and businessmen. St.Peter's was the 'Eton' of South Africa, and the best recommendation in life for the man or woman who could boast to have passed through its classrooms. 17a

The winning of a place in such a school inevitably made a profound difference to the life of a young African, offering him amenities and prospects undreamed of by the majority of township dwellers. As one would expect, it was the access to books which was the most important to the young Ezekiel Mphahlele.[18] To the fledgling author, Peter Abrahams, the mission school environment meant the development of his reading and the opportunity to discuss his work and clarify his experience.[19] Within the mission schools the attitudes and values of English liberalism were upheld. Young Africans encountered, many of them for the first time, white men who did not abuse, despise or patronise them, but treated them more or less as equals. Ironically it was this new experience which, to many of them, brought a first consciousness of racism. The contrast was painful. It threw into disarray what most African children in towns accept as the natural order of things. Mphahlele has described how the sight of African roadworkers being supervised by an indolent white foreman, which might earlier have been taken for granted, now caused him to be 'filled with impotent anger'.[20] It was not only in matters of race that the privileged pupils of these schools encountered problems. Not surprisingly, they met with jealousy and resentment from those who were not able to go to school. Peter Abrahams records with pain the feelings of his elder brother on this score:

'Hello my little gentleman brother. Hear you're a college man now. Don't be snooty about it. I sat in a dice school last night with two college men, and they're even worse than I am. Don't be snooty. You'll be like me yet.' 21

Children brought up to accept the squalor of slum-life found it difficult to re-adjust to their home after the term-time order and sanitation at school. These were the first steps in the alienation of the African intellectual from his home environment, the education of a 'Situation'. (see Chapter Six).

The chance of a St.Peter's education was a slight one. The number of 'cultured as opposed to merely educated' Africans, in Trevor Huddleston's phrase, was small. There is a perceptible difference between the writings of Mphahlele and Abrahams, who went to St.Peter's, and that of Modisane and Motsisi, who did not. For those who did not, access to books and information was limited. Some city libraries were open to Africans. Institutions like the Bantu Men's Social Club had small libraries and offered their members a chance to read and talk in a relatively congenial atmosphere. A 'Non-European Library Service' did exist from 1931 to 1960. Started with a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, it had a central supply of books and sent boxes of selected works to various schools, missions and location 'libraries'. It ran a special service for students doing home courses. A survey in The South African Librarian in 1951 described the use made by Africans of these rather meagre resources:

A great many Non-European Libraries have unsuitable library accommodation. Library rooms are often small, poorly lighted and badly ventilated ... A great many centres have no library premises and books have to be kept in cupboards or stored away in boxes in schoolrooms or offices which are usually closed in the evenings, so that town workers cannot easily make use of the books available to them through book distribution schemes.

The report commented that, though Africans were acquiring the reading

habit only slowly, and had few opportunities for formal educational or recreational reading, literate Africans were proud of their skill and would often read to their families and friends. Though reading was still largely for educational and self-help reasons, detective stories, wild wests, and the books of current films were widely requested. Books about Africa and Africans were also popular. A list appended to the survey of the most widely read fiction reveals a range of authors which would differ little, one imagines, from the average requests of white libraries of the time.

Formal education, however, was only one element in the structure of township culture, even among the intellectuals. 'St.Peter's added an English liberal education to the tough schooling of the townee African, to produce a kind of cultured cockney'.[23] The tough schooling of the townships was not only a matter of hardship, violence and racial discrimination. In writing of the townships I have stressed the creative aspects of their daily life. The shebeens were one example of this. Another was the inventiveness with which young Africans applied whatever education they had picked up. Bloke Modisane describes how he and his friends would facilitate the seduction of their girl friends with an apt quotation from, for instance, Poe's Annabel Lee:

'The quotation melted her right into my arms.'
'Andthen?' we said. 'What then?'
'I kissed her!'
'De real Cassanova man' Stan Ncali Dondolo said.
'Just like Charles Boyer, man, actually, in Hold Back the Dawn; serious man - de real manne.' 24

Elsewhere it is recounted how tsotsis would hold up educated Africans on streetcorners, and force them to recite Shakespeare.

A most potent element in this unofficial culture was the cinema. Township cinemas showed predominantly American gangster films, B.features

and Westerns. They were enormously popular, and not surprisingly, for the, provided both an escape from the oppression of city life, and a mirror wherein the slum dweller could find his own experience conveyed as exciting and glamorous. Chicago speakeasies in the twenties were very like shebeens, but there was a singer who wore sequins and was blond. Tsotsis went to the cinema to cheer the gangsters and imitate their mannerisms and style. Antony Sampson has described a visit with Can Themba to a township cinema to see Street with No Name:

> The lights dimmed and the film began ... A tough police detective was preparing to smash a gang of killers. The tsotsis went on talking and shouting and cuddling their girl friends in the dark. Occasionally they jeered at the FBI.
>
> The scene shifted to the gangster's hide-out. A hush from the audience. Richard Widmark appeared in one corner. A shriek from the whole house. 'Stiles! Attaboy! Go it, Stiles.' A tense silence.
>
> Stiles wore a long overcoat, sniffed a benzedrine inhaler and occasionally bit an apple. Beside him slouched his henchman, wearing a belted raincoat with slits at the back.
>
> 'When this film came out,' Can whispered, 'the sale of benzedrine rocketed. Everybody munched apples. All the tsotsis wore those raincoats.' 25

The Tsotsis represent the township culture in its purest form. It would be impossible to write a study of black South African fiction without taking their influence into account. Their slang is the lingua franca of the townships - 'mensetaal', an Afrikaans based creole of English, Zulu and Sesotho, flavoured with American slang.[26] It is the authentic product of the breakdown of tribal society and the emergence of a multi-racial and multi-national urban culture. It is also the expression of the experience of urban Africans. An African writer and critic has commented: 'Africans are creating ... a language of their own: a language that thinks in actions, using words that dart back and forth on quick-moving feet, virile, earthy and garrulous.'[27] The language and the experience form the cutting edge of the new culture-formation in process. They can be viewed in very different

ways. A white South African social psychologist considers that 'This tsotsi slang ... mirrors the tsotsi way of life - a way of life in which id-dominated motives predominate. It is a life of gang warfare, of robbery, assault and rape, of uninhibited cruelty and sadism, a life with no social conscience and few moral standards.'[28] Bloke Modisane looks at the tsotsi from a rather different point of view:

> The white man fears the tsotsis who are perhaps the only Africans with personal dignity; theyanswer white arrogance with black arrogance, they take their just deserts from a discriminatory economy by robbery and pillage. The educated African is confined by academic rationalisations, the tsotsi is a practical realist; he is sensitive and responds to the denials and prejudice with the only kind of logic that Western man understands and respects. Tsotsis are seldom the victims of white chastisement, when white hooligans gang up on a tsotsi, he pulls a Three Star knife, then fear, the guardian of safety, will prevail on them to scatter. 29

It is necessary, however, to add that tsotsi violence was very often directed at black people. African workers, robbed of their week's pay on a Friday night, were unlikely to appreciate the sensitivity of the tsotsis. Modisane is an intellectual. On this, too, the tsotsis have the last word: 'The tsotsis say, the teachers have the knowledge but we have the sense,' reported *Drum* in the first of many crime exposes, in October, 1951.

African intellectuals looked to Keats and Shakespeare, to Countee Cullen and Paul Robeson for the expression of their experience. The tsotsis looked to Peter Cheyney and *The Fastest Gun Alive*. The eclecticism of both groups was the result of their need to understand a common problem, a common history, the move to the towns. African traditional culture persisted in family habits and, to some extent, in inter-personal relations. But it could not provide the articulation, the imagery for the new experience of the cities. In one area an

articulation was undoubtedly found. Lewis Nkosi, in an essay on black South African fiction, has compared it unfavourably with the achievements of South African musicians and of 'African jazz'.[30] It is in the music of the townships that we find the most precise and expressive rendering of the urban experience.

The African peoples of South Africa were first introduced to western music through the missionary choir. Until the twenties African music was thus basically choral, but the introduction of the gramophone stimulated the growth of rag-time groups. One of the earliest groups, the Japanese Express, had a line-up consisting of trombone, piano, banjo and drum. It played rag-time, but with a strong African beat. The thirties produced mainly imitative dance music, but after the Second World War musicians sprang up who were influenced by the leading jazz figures of the period, such as Charlie Parker, Gillespie and Oscar Petersen. Original numbers were composed, some of which became international hits. Among these were 'Mbube', by Solomon Linda, 'Skokiaan' by August Msarurgwa, 'Kiliminjaro' and 'Lovely Lies' by Mackay Davashe, who was to become leader and conductor of the King Kong band.

The music of King Kong did not consist only of the jazz-influenced sound of Mackay Davashe, however. It also featured Lemmy Special - and kwela. It is the latter that most people think of when referring to 'African jazz'. Kwela adapted the melodic and harmonic features of jazz in the mainstream form of the rhythmic phrase or 'riff'. It played these riffs over a syncopated African beat which gave it that 'driving' quality associated with black music all over the world. Kwela has something in common with Reggae. This distinctive trend of African

jazz developed in the poorest townships during the inter-war period.

Mphahlele has described his first visit to a dance hall in the townships which gave the new music its early name, Marabi:

> I was let into the Columbia. I came face to face with the U-NO-MEs dance band, whose music had before only floated to our ears as we passed the hall; violently, noisily but vigorously. Thinking back on it now I remember the sad note of depravity, self-abandon, sweet, sensuous dissipation 'Marabi' jazz sounded. The small jazz combos like the U-NO-MEs and Merrymakers beat out a new two-to-the-bar jazz, the second note in which was accentuated by a bang on the drum. The name 'Marabi' came from Marabastad. 32

Todd Matshikiza, himself an eminent jazz and choral composer, and record reviewer for Drum, gives a vivid account of the early days of a famous jazz-man. He points out, too, the connection with the urban environment:

> But of course he started in low dives. Marabi Prospect Township, now dead and buried. Prospect Township, where my Aunt Liza sold the juice of a cruel combination to buy her a house in Sof'town ... while the juice made junk of its drinkers. ...Marabi. Tsaba-tsaba. Dark days when partners didn't dance cheek to cheek or nose to nose. That was too tame. The girl danced by herself. Wild. Furious. Agitated. Shaking. Foaming. Sick. Announcing the modern age of golden pavements. 33

As the blues expressed poignantly the experience of black slaves in America, and soul or rock that experience transmuted by the northern cities, so kwela is the distinctively urban music of a people among whom music has always been a central cultural activity. It is difficult to describe adequately the effect of kwela. Perhaps its most potent ingredient is the driving, throbbing rhythm which seems to have the power to exhaust tension and sap nervous energy. Modisane has written:

> ...it is deceptively happy, but all this is on the surface, like the melodic and the harmonic lines of the kwela played by the penny-whistle ... beneath ... is the heavy storm-trooping rhythmic line, a jazzy knell tolling a structure of sadness into a pyramid of monotony; the sadness is a rhythm unchanging in its thematic structure, oppressive, dominating and regulating the tonality of the laughter and joy ... kwela has grown out of the gutters of the slums, from among the swelling smells of political stress and the endlessness of frustration. 34

African life in the townships was one in which the new had overwhelmed the past. Fragile links existed, of course. The church was

one institution that spanned country and city, providing forms of organization - women's clubs, for instance, were legion - and striving to consolidate its own scheme of values. Another link was the small but very prestigious group of doctors, lawyers and business-men whose status derived in part from their family position in traditional society. The Jabavu family were part of this group. John Tengu Jabavu had been the first African Ph.D., and the first black professor at Fort Hare College. His sons were all eminent men and his grand-daughter, Noni, has written two books about her people, the Xhosa.[35] Many members of this stratum were Xhosas, for it was in their area, the Transkei, that missionary education had struck its earliest and its deepest roots. They were known in the townships as the 'Amatope', people of the topee, after the British colonial form of dress.[36] A third force for stability and continuity was the African press. Newspapers reflect the ongoing experience of a community. They create its history and express its unity. Even when directly political or commercial in intent, they tend to reflect and thus to instil the generally received moral values of their readers. Newspapers are important purveyors of popular morality. They are the verbal expression of that central core of accepted convention which mediates between the past of a people and the impact of its future. But they are also significant in another sense. By their existence, their quality, circulation and survival, they are an index of the growth, sophistication and persistence of communities and nations. The African people have never had a daily paper. Those discussed below were weeklies or bi-weeklies.

The earliest African newspaper was Imvo Zabantsundu (Native Opinion) which was founded by Don Tengu Jabavu in King Williams Town in 1884. Jabavu published Imvo as part of his campaign for African

franchise rights, but its political influence declined sharply when he supported the 1913 Native Lands Act (see Chapter One). Imvo continued to appear, however, and was eventually bought up by the Bantu Press Group. Imvo spoke for the African chiefs and land-owners of the Eastern Cape. In Natal a similar function was exercised by Ilanga Lase Natal (The Sun of Natal). This paper was founded in 1904 by Dr. John Dube, its first editor, and reflected the development of his views from militant radical to mellow progressive. Ilanga Lase Natal also fell into the hands of the Bantu Press Group.[37]

Perhaps the most interesting of all African-language papers was Abantu-Batho (The People). First published in Johannesburg shortly after the formation of the Native National Congress (later ANC) in Bloemfontein in 1912, the paper soon established a reputation as a fighter for African rights. Radical from the outset, it followed the left-wing line of the ANC in the twenties. No complete files of it have survived. Under its first editor, Dr.Seme (see above), it played an important part in the unsuccessful struggle against the Native Lands Act. Later it led a successful struggle against the pass laws for women in the Free State, campaigning in English, Xhosa and Sesotho. It was Abantu-Batho which popularized the ANC slogan 'Mayebuye Afrika' (May Africa Return). The paper's policy of publishing in all the main African languages was evidence of the birth of a new idea, the unity of all African peoples in South Africa. Itstitle was a combination of the two main language groups, Nguni and Sesotho. The policy of using more than one language was to be adapted by other papers.

In 1928 the Communist Party entered the African newspaper field with The South African Worker, subsequently renamed Umsebenzi (The Worker). Later it became Inkululeku (Freedom) and was published in

English, Xhosa, Zulu, Tswana and Sotho. A contemporary account describes its aim as being 'to fight for the abolition of all discriminatory legislation hampering the advance of all Non-European peoples, more particularly the Africans, to the status of full citizenship on an equal footing with Europeans.'[38] In this it went further than even Abantu-Batho had done. Inkululeku ceased publication in 1950 when the Communist Party was banned, but its tradition was upheld for a further ten years by the Guardian and later New Age.

All these papers were owned by Africans, or organizations in which Africans were a majority. In 1931 two white men, Mr.B.F.G.Paver and Mr.I.F.Legrange decided to enter the African newspaper field. Their motives may have been expressed in part by the publicity material they sent to prospective advertisers, entitled 'Black Gold , a new market and its media'.[39] Their editorial policy was defined in the following aims:

> The Bantu Press believes that the Bantu peoples will fulfil an important destiny in the course of their parallel development with the advance of the modern world. The Bantu Press at all times guides and counsels the Bantu people in lines of sane and steady progress within the commercial system of today and in co-operation with constitutional authority. 40

The Bantu Press Group founded the Bantu World (later The World), which made its first appearance in March, 1932, publishing in English, Xhosa, Zulu, Sotho and Tswana. It found its main readership in Johannesburg and the industrial region of the Rand. The Bantu World of the fifties has a rather stuffy appearance today, although it was probably in advance, typographically, of other African papers of the time. It covered national, some overseas and township news on its first two pages, usually in English, and news from other areas and country districts usually in the language of that region.

The Bantu Press Group had great advantage over the African-owned newspapers in capital resources and financial expertise. The company was shortly bought out by the Argus Group of English-language newspapers which was itself controlled by a consortium of mine-owners. The Bantu Press bought Imvo and Ilanga Lase Natal, establishing a near monopoly in the African newspaper field. Its publications tended to reflect the politics of the largely English-speaking United Party, andof the mining magnates. It was not surprising, therefore, that the Bantu Press was regarded with some suspicion by Africans, who referred to it as the 'Bantu Repress'. Antony Sampson describes this attitude:

> Africans hated the "white hand". They suspected every African paper of being a white man's trick to keep them quiet. "A dog with a bone in its mouth can't bark," says a Shangaan proverb.' 41

The first venture into pictorial journalism for Africans was Umlindi wa Nyanga, a monthly owned by an independent group of whites and circulated free of charge in the Transkei. It was little more than an advertising sheet, and ceased publication in 1940. In 1946, however, it was revived in a new format. A contemporary account of it says: '... while it is strictly non-political, it is pro-African in outlook. Its policy is to provide enlightenment and information by means of photographs and strip-cartoons.'[42] It was evident to publishers that a pictorial magazine could hope to establish a mass circula tion by finding buyers among the illiterate and semi-literate. After these tentative beginnings, 1950 saw the publication of Zonk, Drum's immediate precursor and rival for many years. Zonk was unconcerned with politics or enlightenment, and concentrated on entertaining. Its text was wholly in English, which was a significant feature. However, unambitious in lay-out, and with a minimum of text, it tended to reproduce the parochial concerns of the Bantu Press in

pictorial form. It printed snap-shots of private social occasions, and group portraits of trainee police, mine-workers and teachers. Occasionally it published very short stories. Zonk subsequently became a pin-up magazine and was bought out by an Afrikaans Publishing Group, which produced another, similar periodical, Bona. The policy of this company, closely aligned with the National Party, was contradictory. In its Afrikaans papers it thundered against the depravity of African life in the cities, while in the magazines it produced for Africans there was little but sex and cheese-cake to be found. Nevertheless, Zonk outsold Drum for more than a year of the latter's existence.

The birth of newspapers like Bantu World and of magazines like Zonk and Bona, though perhaps regressive in political terms, marked a further stage in the history of the African people of South Africa. For these publications found their readership mainly in the cities. Their choice of English reflected the tendency of literate Africans to use the language as the medium of serious discussion and communication. Gradually and in varying degrees they came to reflect the urban atmosphere. Drum was a production of that culture too, the first truly urban African venture. In time it became a dominating influence on that culture. The following chapter will discuss its growth and character in some detail.

Chapter II - References

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Chapter III - Growth of Drum

1. 1951 - 1955

2. 1955 - 1961

1.

The moving spirit behind the Drum venture was Jim Bailey. He was the younger son of the gold-mining magnate, Sir Abe Bailey, and a member of the board of Directors of the Argus Group of newspapers, traditional voices of the mining companies. Although only one among the original backers of the magazine, he took a decisive step in Drum's first year, by increasing his investment and assuming direct control of the magazine. An energetic and autocratic man, Bailey's motivation was a mixture of altruism and hope of profit. The early issues of Drum carried an Important Notice to all Manufacturers and Distributors, pointing out the vast potential market provided by the Africans of the entire continent. It was Drum's aim to reach all those 150 million people. But Bailey was also a liberal in politics, and the venture into the precarious field of African publishing is evidence of a real concern for the African people, and a desire to influence their development.

This altruistic impulse probably governed his first choice of editor. Robert Crisp, DSO and Bar, was a well-known broadcaster and journalist, a hero of the North African campaign in the 1939-45 war, and a typical member of the English speaking establishment in his attitude to Africans. His conception of Drum was of a cultural uplifter, enlightening Africans about their past traditions and preparing them for a place in white society, by encouraging their positive cultural traits and exhibiting these to the whites in a favourable light. Drum in its first year seemed just as interested in the reactions of whites as of Africans. The magazine was displayed in government information offices abroad as an example of 'Bantu' achievement. It received favourable notices in white newspapers. Its correspondence column

displayed prominently a letter from the City Librarian of Johannesburg praising Drum's contribution to 'African education'.[1]

Bob Crisp's Drum was indeed educative, even moralising in tone. It included regular features on religion, farming, soil conservation, as well as cultural articles on African art and 'Music for the Tribes'. The latter, by the expert on African traditional music Hugh Tracey, expressed in its purest form the earnest concern for traditional African values felt by some white liberals of that period. It was in the spirit of 'trustee-ship' that Tracey admonished his readers on the decline of their traditional skills:

'...nor will the /Mbira/ long be heard if the people recklessly continue their Gadarene progression into utter materialism.' 2

It was not the materialism of the people, however, but that of the publisher which turned Drum to more fruitful channels. Africans did not buy it. After the first four issues (March - June 1951) the circulation was only twenty thousand, and Bailey was losing £200 a month. The proprietor's commercial instinct saved the magazine, and the power of the market decided its character. Bailey's perception of the need for a more popular mode of presentation led to disagreement between him and Crisp. Africans consulted about Drum, replied that it was a white man's paper. It viewed black people through white eyes. This failing, labelled the 'white hand', became a guiding concept in Drum's editorial policy. In November 1951 Crisp resigned and Antony Sampson was appointed editor.

Sampson had been brought out to South Africa some months earlier by Bailey, who had met him at Oxford after the war. Later to become famous as 'Pendennis' of The Observer and as the author of The Anatomy of Britain, Sampson was at this time wholly without experience of journalism. However, his quick insight into social situations and his

ready sympathy for people, enabled him to perceive in a short time that it was the urban Africans who were the most important section of the black community. As a non-South African it was also easier for him to find a modus vivendi with African journalists and workers. Although he had come to South Africa with some romantic notions of 'exotic Africa', he was less hindered than Crisp had been with pre-conceptions of what the African 'should be'. His sympathy for their plight was genuine, and he took some trouble to grasp the rudiments of the South African situation. Sampson's chief qualification for the job was undoubtedly his readiness to participate, as far as was possible, in the social life of the townships. He clearly found the shebeen and 'nice-time' atmosphere stimulating and congenial. His tendency to romanticise these aspects of African daily life, viewing them as a sort ofreal-life Beggar's Opera, was not an obstacle, for Drum itself came to mirror this view. (Ezekiel Mphahlele has criticized this tendency in Drum, 'its use of Sophiatown as the yardstick' of African standards and aspirations.[2a] But given the kind of journal it was, this was probably inevitable.)

An African Advisory Board was appointed to assist the Editor in coming closer to his readers. This consisted of Job Rathebe, secretary of the Bantu Social Men's Club, Dan Twala, sportsman and broadcaster, Dr.A.B.Xuma, ex-president of the ANC and the Coloured printer Andy Anderson, who printed pamphlets for Congress. One of the Board's first actions was to advise the axeing of 'Music for the Tribes'. The prickly reactions of the Board members to ingrained racial attitudes ('Why do you say garden boy when he's a man of fifty?') gradually began to transform Drum.[3] Sampson learned that what secured approval in the white scale of values, could usually be counted

upon to provoke a negative response among Africans. Drum began to catch the rhythms of African life and language. It discovered shebeens. It discovered jazz.

At its inception, Drum had only one African journalist, the reporter Henry Nxumalo. After the usual childhood struggles - he worked to keep himself at school and later as a boilermaker's 'boy' - he found a job as messenger on the Bantu World. He graduated to sportswriter, and became friendly with Peter Abrahams who contributed poetry to the newspaper. During the war, Nxumalo was posted to Cairo and to London. After demobilization he worked as a freelance journalist until joining Drum as sports editon But Nxumalo was essentially a reporter, and it was his articles on Bethal (March 1952) and on prison conditions (March 1953) which set the high standard of Drum's social and political reportage. His fearlessness in pursuing a story earned him the title of 'the first African reporter'. As 'Mr.Drum' he represented the magazine's crusading mission.

Todd Matshikiza was persuaded to contribute a regular page of record reviews and jazz features. A well-known musician and composer, he was a central figure in the world of African jazz, and able to chronicle its happenings with a sure instinct for what was 'in'. After a hesitant start, Matshikiza became a virtuoso exponent of the Drum style. He tore the English language to shreds in his attempt to capture the authentic speech patterns of the townships. Nicknamed 'Matshikese', his way of writing exercised a pervasive influence over the whole style and tone of Drum.

From St.Peter's Drum recruited Arthur Maimane. Wholly urbane in life-style and prose, he wrote slick stories about American fighter pilots and private detectives. He was apolitical. Maimane

took over Nxumalo's job as sports-editor. Under the pseudonym Arthur Mogale, he wrote short stories and a popular detective series, 'Hot Diamonds'.

An important new element in Drum was the inclusion of features on crime. Reading about violent crime was not just a vicarious thrill for Africans. Drum's first crime feature revealed that one in twenty-four of all Africans in Johannesburg area would be murdered. Every second African could be expected to be assaulted at least once. This first report, 'Inside Johannesburgs Underworld', was followed by 'Birth of a Tsotsi'[4] and innumerable others. Exposees of notorious gangs, campaigns to 'Clean up the Reef' and 'confessions' of ex-gangsters became a regular part of Drum's make-up.

By the beginning of 1952 Drum looked very different. Covers regularly showed pin-ups rather than the symbolic designs of the earlier period. Inside, the magazine used more and larger pictures. Copy was shorter, but better written. Educational articles, except on the women's and children's page, had disappeared. The main features were typically concerned with crime, music, township news or news of negro America. Sport, particularly boxing, became more prominent. Drum's circulation at this time rose to thirty-five thousand. It remained, however, below that of Zonk. Drum was still regarded with suspicion by many of its readers.

In March 1952, on the anniversary of its first number, Drum broke new ground. A special feature exposed the system of labour recruitment and working conditions of potato farm workers in the Bethal district of the Transvaal. Bethal had been written about before. In 1949 Michael Scott had prepared a report on it. Numerous court cases were on record, showing a tradition of brutal treatment of African labourers, including flogging and fatal beatings. What

was different about Drum's report was that it was written by an African, Nxumalo, who had spoken to workers on the farms and gained access to their prison-like living quarters. Combined with the dramatic pictures by photographer Jurgen Schadeberg, obtained by various ruses, the Bethal report caused a sensation in South Africa. Government newspapers denied itsveracity, while liberals applauded its courage. Demands for an official inquiry were made. A report was prepared for the Minister of Native Affairs, but never published.

The Bethal number sold out. African readers could identify with 'Mr.Drum's' personalised account of blows and indignities. They recognised in the Bethal article an authentic picture of their South Africa. The response was enormous. 'Though Drum did not much change Bethal, Bethal changed Drum'[5], Antony Sampson has commented. In the following year Drum published a number of similar stories, including ones on the system of payment by wine on Cape farms and the semi-feudal conditions of Indian sugar-plantation workers, bound to their employers by debt. In October it published an eight-page special photographic account of the Defiance Campaign (see Chapter I). This number sold out. It became the practice to print a major expose article in the March issue each year. In March 1954 the article 'Mr.Drum Goes to Jail', with a photograph of the humiliating method of searching African prisoners, caused an outcry similar to the Bethal number.

The response of the readership to articles such as these raises several questions concerning standards of taste and interest among urban Africans. The experience of the early Drum suggested that the stock subjects - pin-ups, sex and crime - would prove as marketable in South Africa as anywhere else. Certainly the pious

concerns of Crisp's Drum had little appeal. Sampson and Bailey had come to this conclusion:

> There was no escaping the formula for selling papers: 'Cheese-cake, crime, animals and babies.' The workers of the world were united at least, in their addiction to cheese-cake and crime. 6

But the circulation figures show that it was articles like Bethal and 'Mr.Drum goes to Jail' which pushed the readership through seemingly unassailable ceilings. The Defiance Campaign story sold out at sixty-five thousand, establishing a new circulation record. Readership in other parts of Africa increased. After 'Mr.Drum goes to Jail' circulation in South Africa rose to seventy thousand, with another thirty thousand being sold mainly in West Africa. Cheese-cake and crime could sustain Drum's circulation, but stronger stuff was needed to boost it. In fact, the political consciousness of urban Africans was very high in this period. ANC campaigns received mass support and radical papers like The Guardian had a large appeal. It is the general practice of proprietors and editors to seek the lowest common denominator of public taste, in the belief that they will thus reach the largest number. But by forgetting that urban Africans had more in common with readers of working-class and radical papers in Britain in the last century, than with those of the Daily Mirror in ours, Bailey and Sampson may have under-estimated the level of their audience. Thus, though political concerns by no means dominated the pages of Drum in this period, the increasing treatment of politics is both an index of the magazine's growth in importance, and of its developing insertion into the real life of urban Africans in the fifties.

It was the response to the Bethal article that led Bailey and Sampson to consider a political role for Drum. At its conception, Drum had declared itself to be apolitical: 'You will look in vain

for any attempt to mould your thoughts politically or for any expression or denial of a political creed', ran its first editorial.[7] Moreover, there seems to have existed an agreement between Crisp and the Minister of Economic Affairs which can only have taken the form of a promise to keep clear of politics in return for a newsprint permit (newsprint was rationed). After the Bethal number, the Minister accused Crisp publicly of a breach of faith. The latter replied in a letter to the Rand Daily Mail,[8] stating that 'I am no longer associated with the African Drum'. The Minister then denied that there had been any 'deal'. The weight of the evidence, however, including oblique references in Crisp's May 1951 editorial to 'newsprint ... the life-blood of such a venture as ours' and to 'many well-wishers in high places in the land'suggests that some assurance, perhaps informal, had been given. In the wake of the Bethal storm, Bailey and Sampson decided that, while they did not wish Drum to become 'a narrow paper of protest'[9], it could not succeed in creating a real bond with its readers, while turning a blind eye to the most important factor in their lives. The main type of political article was the exposé, a formally impartial examination of bad working or living conditions, or of official malpractices in relation to Africans. Some of these articles are mentioned above. In all such instances it was Drum's practice to appeal to the relevant authority to put things right. Drum tackled most of the more outstanding scandals in the area of labour terms and conditions. However, at no time did it turn its scrutiny on the system of migrant labour or upon the working conditions and pay of the hundred of thousands of African mine-workers. These workers are among the lowest paid and worst treated in South Africa. To this oversight Jim Bailey's connection with the Chamber of Mines

is perhaps not irrelevant. Sampson has quoted African readers' belief that Drum belonged to the Chamber of Mines as an example of unfounded suspicion.[10] Of course it did not. But the power of the mine-owners was certainly one of the constraints upon its scope and activity.

As African political action developed, (see Chapter One,3) Drum covered the main events. In February 1952 it ran an article comparing the African National Congress with the All African Convention (the rump of a pre-war broad front organization). In May of the same year it investigated differences within the Indian national movement, in an interview with Manilal Gandhi, a conservative leader, published with accompanying comments from T.N.Naidoo, a more militant leader. In July an article by Peter Abrahams appeared under a sub-title stating:

> This is one of a series of controversial articles on the African scene. The editor welcomes comments and does not necessarily associate himself with the views of contributors to Drum. 11

The article was a report of an informal meeting of members of various tendencies in the African movement with Abrahams, then visiting South Africa, taking the chair. In February 1953 Drum reported the election of Chief Luthuli to the presidency of the ANC, and in August included a page of twenty-one ANC leaders, called 'Who's Who in Congress'. The feature divided the nationalist leaders into 'High-Ups', 'Old Stagers', 'National Minded Critics' (i.e. the 'Africanists', see Chapter One,3), 'Banned Men' and 'Back Room Boys'. In September in ran a similar feature on the Indian Congress. The Forty-first Annual Congress of the ANC received a two-page pictorial spread in February 1954. In April Drum published a 'Who's Who' on the Unity Movement, a Trotskyist-influenced group consisting mainly of Coloured intellectuals

in the Cape.

In 1955 Drum ran three articles on the ANC. 'How Red is Congress' appeared in January and included Chief Luthuli's much quoted disclaimer of Communist influence on Congress. In May a rather different article, 'How Yellow is Congress', suggested that ANC had failed adequately to oppose the Sophiatown removal scheme. Ezekiel Mphahlele covered the main political event of the year, the 'Congress of the People'. His curiously unimpressed report appeared in August, entitled 'The 4 - in - 1 Congress'. In its first five years, Drum had thus covered the main events in the African national movement. Although it did not take sides in internal disputes, it tended to reflect in its articles the views of the mainstream nationalists, rejecting the anti-Indian views of the 'Africanists', and steering clear of left and ex-Communist leaders. Drum, under the influence of Sampson, believed that to exaggerate the influence of Communists in Congress was to 'play into their hands'. It thus tended to understate the real influence of the left.

In the struggle against the Bantu Education Act (see Chapter One) Drum found an issue which united white liberals and the Congress movement with its own belief in the value of education. In June 1955 appeared one of its hardest-hitting articles, 'The Shut Down in African Education'. In this and in Bloke Modisane's November article 'Education Shebeens', Drum directly attacked government policy. The tone of commitment found in these articles may be attributed to the greater freedom allowed to his writers by the new editor, Sylvestor Stein.

Apart from its domestic coverage, Drum also reported on events in other parts of Africa. The early years of the decade were most

notable for the Mau Mau rebellion. In December 1952 Drum published an impressively objective account of the rising, considering prevailing attitudes towards it in South Africa. Although condemning 'atrocities', the article carefully distinguished the Mau Mau from the Kenya African Union, and included a very positive interview with Jomo Kenyatta. On British policy it commented:

> Although drastic action was necessary, repression can only encourage such secret cults.

It also pointed out that Mau Mau had 'no parallel, as yet, in South Africa'. In June of the following year, however, this fine record was somewhat tarnished by an article called 'I was a Mau Mau'. Told in gory detail, this 'confession', was certain to encourage the kind of hysteria among whites which sought to attach the Mau Mau label to every African movement.

Positive developments in colonial Africa also received attention. In April 1955 Drum reported on the 'Black Navy' of East Africa. In July it described elections for the legislative assembly of the Gold Coast. In September, however, the West African correspondent reported on a 'Riot in the Gold Coast', in the typical rhetoric of that part of Africa:

> The atmosphere assuming a fiendish attitude told you at once that terror had invaded Ashanti. 12

However, no-one was seriously hurt. Events in other parts of Africa were to become increasingly of interest to black and white South Africans as the decade progressed. Every step towards African self-government and independence was hailed by blacks, and every set-back adduced by whites as evidence of African incapability. On the whole, in its coverage of Africa generally as well as of South Africa, Drum gave encouragement to those who believed in progress towards independence and equal rights. In doing so it undoubtedly reflected the deep pride

of black South Africans in the progress of their more fortunate brothers 'up north'.

Not only in its treatment of politics, however, did Drum draw progressively closer to its readers. Over the years it had come to reflect the texture of township life. Its articles on shebeens, on the smoking of marijuana ('dagga') and on the illegal 'numbers' lottery, Fah Fee, struck the right note of amused cynicism, while informing those of its readers not in the know, about the profitable details of these scandalous pursuits. 'Home' features presented photographs and biographies of those who had done well in life: Matriculation students, nurses, scout troop-leaders and traffic policemen. Its social page recorded the attempts of Africans and Coloured to enjoy the social occasions which were open to them: coloured 'debutantes' in Cape Town being presented to the mayor, ragged-clothed workers queueing for an Indian magic show; every New Year issue contained pictures of the Cape Town 'Coon Carnival'. Entertainment in Johannesburg meant jazz. Todd Matshikiza's column saluted the giants of jazz in a language which echoed the rhythm and cadence of the music:

> Brothers ... I've got smashing news for you. Real hot poker stuff. The kind of dope that you get once in a blue moon. D'you know King Force? Hey? The big broad-shouldered hawk-eyed veteran sax maniac? Hey? The chap that's the life-blood of the great Jazz Maniacs Orchestra of Johannesburg? You should know who I'm talking about man ... 13

Musicians and boxers were the heroes of the people. Jake Ntuli, who won the British Empire Flyweight Championship in London, was a subject of never-failing interest. His life in London, boarding with a white family with whom, Drum recorded, he ate at the same table, was a symbol of ultimate success. Although Africans accorded to the doctors and lawyers who were leaders of Congress the deep respect due to educated people, these were the heroes with whom they could more easily identify. They were also the heroes of Drum.

Increased circulation was the reward of this closeness to the people, and it brought an increase in staff. After the Bethal story, Drum acquired a second photographer, Bob Gosani, who came to the job via the positions of messenger and dark-room assistant. Gosani was the first African professional photographer in South Africa. In April 1953 the judges of Drum's first short story competition discovered Can Themba. He was offered and accepted a job on the magazine later becoming assistant editor. At the beginning of 1955 Ezekiel Mphahlele was appointed fiction editor. This appointment reflected a growing recognition of the possibilities of African fiction, and marks a turning point in the development of Drum.

In March 1955 Drum celebrated its fourth birthday with an article on labouring conditions in the western Transvaal, 'I worked at Snyman's Farm.' The annual expose had become an institution, as Drum's editorial pointed out:

> It's become a sort of tradition with Drum that we celebrate our birthday not only with a specially big and gay number, but also with a big important article ... Only by getting the facts the hard way can we get things put right. 14

Drum itself had achieved a pattern. Its regular features included the popular lonely hearts column, 'Dolly Drum'; a profile of a prominent black leader, 'Masterpiece in Bronze'; a short story and two or three picture features, usually of topical social events. In addition Drum regularly carried one important social or political story, and one or two features on black achievements in South Africa or abroad. The magazine was widely known in the townships and had become itself a part of the cultural configuration of township life.

Drum developed an aura of glamour. The Drum 'style' became a cult. Lewis Nkosi has explained its significance:

> It wasn't so much a magazine as it was a symbol of the new African cut adrift from the tribal reserve - urbanized, eager, fast-talking and brash. 15

Drum offered, if not fortune, then a hitherto unknown possibility of fame to the models, musicians and gang leaders who took to hanging around its offices trying to sell their faces, recordings or confessions. In the townships the Drum reporters were lionized. Their sophistication had substance and even respectability, unlike the flash surface of the gangsters who could be hauled off to prison at any time. Drum was by far the most professional of all African urban ventures, and its success rubbed off on all urban Africans. Among the journalists themselves the Drum cult was fostered. Lewis Nkosi recalls:

> It soon became apparent that being a Drum man did not consist merely in fulfilling one's obligations to the paper professionally but carried other extra responsibilities. For instance, even in one's personal life one was supposed to exhibit a unique intellectual style; usually urbane, ironic, morally tough and detached: one's dedication was to be to a pure form of realism which would eliminate the thinnest traces of self-pity, especially in reporting the uncertainties of urban African life in the face of rigorous apartheid laws, as well as in reporting the wanton gaiety, lust and bravery of this life. Above all, in Drum it was generally assumed that one couldn't deal professionally with urban African life unless one had descended to its very depths as well as climbed to its heights. A Drum man took sex and alcohol in his stride, or was supposed to, and stayed in the front line of danger so long as there was danger to be endured. 16

It is likely that this way of life was less selflessly devoted than Nkosi implies. Drum writers would have been less than human had they not made the most of the adulation they received. The risks which they took were in the course of their work as journalists. With some exceptions, they were not in the forefront of political events, nor did they suffer the severe prison sentences and privations which writers such as Alex La Guma and Dennis Brutus received as a result of active political engagement. It was not only in the townships, but also among a section of radical and 'bohemian' whites, that the Drum men received adulation. 'Mixed' parties were a feature in these circles, and most often it was from the ranks of these writers that the black guest-list was drawn up. These occasions must have been fraught with

many ambivalences. The mixture of envy and contempt with which African intellectuals regarded their white counterparts is well recorded in the work of Nkosi and Modisane. The Africans despised the white's awkwardness and self-consciousness at these parties, and their inability to cast off inhibition. Nevertheless they went. On the other hand, many whites resented the fact that their demonstrations of 'colour-blindness' were not accepted with gratitude. Given the realities of South African colour attitudes, it could hardly have been otherwise. Thus the men and women who worked for Drum were often caught uneasily between two worlds. Compared to the mass of ordinary urban Africans their wages were high and their way of life fabulously privileged. Compared to the white status group of which, in any other society, they would have formed a part, their lives were restricted and their incomes low. All the amenities which play an important part in the lives of intellectuals - cinemas, theatre, museums and libraries - were denied to them. This in-between status, which in township parlance is called being a 'situation'* was a constant preoccupation of these writers, and particularly of those who were unsure of their literary status. It will be an important element in the consideration of the work of Nkosi and Modisane, and to some extent of Can Themba, but not of Ezekiel Mphahlele.

After the March birthday number of 1955, Antony Sampson resigned his position as editor. He was replaced by Sylvestor Stein, a young South African journalist, the only South African to edit the paper for any considerable period. Under Stein, Drum was to increase its crusading role and enhance its status as a popular news and cultural journal.

* it is the subject of Modisane's story of that name.

Chapter III (1) - References

1 Drum - May 1951.

2 ibid., May 1951

2a Mphahlele - Down Second Avenue, Faber, London

3 quoted in: Antony Sampson, Drum, London 1956.

4 Drum, Sept and Oct. 1951

5 Sampson, op.cit., p. 51

6 ibid

7 Drum, March 1951

8 Rand Daily Mail - 8 March 1952

9 Sampson, op.cit., p. 52

10 ibid.

11 Drum, February 1952

12 Drum, September 1955

13 Drum, February 1955

14 Drum, March 1955

15 Nkosi, Home and Exile, Longmans, London 1965.

16 ibid.

Sylvester Stein belonged to Johannesburg's bohemian set. Together with his English wife, Jenny, he moved socially in 'mixed' circles and on the fringe of political groups. Stein had had some experience of journalism before coming to Drum, but it was as editor of that paper that he made his reputation. Easy-going and unconventional in manner, he seems to have got on well with his staff. This included, at the time he took over the job, Can Themba, who served as Assistant Editor; Bloke Modisane, Casey Motsisi and Matthew Nkoana among the reporters; with Mphahlele and Matshikiza handling fiction and music reviews respectively. Arthur Maimane retained his post as Boxing Editor while Henry Nxumalo had taken over the Durban office. In Cape Town the writer James Matthews was in charge.

Drum under Stein's editorship improved considerably in appearance. Pages were tidied up and photographs were larger and more effectively displayed. The rather haphazard lay-out which had characterized the early Drum disappeared. Although advertisements still peppered the magazine (they accounted for fifty to sixty per cent of the whole), some progress was made in consolidating the articles. Captions improved noticeably, as did the use of white space. The title page was redesigned and a short single-column editorial introduced.

In March 1956 Drum's Birthday number featured an investigation by 'Mr.Drum' (in this case Can Themba) into the colour bar in South Africa's churches. 'Mr.Drum' found the Anglican and Methodist churches more or less welcoming (attitudes varied within the same denomination) and the Dutch Reformed confused and hostile; the Seventh Day Adventists called in the police. This birthday expose received neither the advance publicity nor the prominence given to those of previous years; the device was growing stale. The following March saw the publication

of a by now standard exposure of child labour on Natal sugar farms. This was the last of such 'birthday' features. The type of article which had been pioneered by Henry Nxumalo, and which had achieved its impact largely through the effective use of photographs, had by now become almost a regular feature in Drum. Indignation cannot be sustained for ever, and exposé journalism, unless it achieves reforms, becomes routine reporting.

The opening of the Treason Trial (see Chapter One: 3.) was recorded vividly by Drum's reporters and photographers.[1] The trial opened with riots outside the court which, Drum showed, were provoked by the panicky reactions of the police. The article showed police man-handling spectators and journalists, and included a double page of portraits of the hundred and fifty-six accused of 'high treason'. It noted that four had been the subjects of Drum 'Masterpiece-in-Bronze' profiles. The following month, the Evaton Bus Boycott received a similarly thorough coverage, and in June 1957 Drum reported on the partially successful 'Freedom Day' general strike.

In addition to political news stories, Stein's Drum also published the occasional 'opinion' piece. Such was Can Themba's cogently argued article 'Let the People Drink'.[2] In April 1957 a remarkably prescient article appeared, warning that South Africa was 'a country marching into trouble'.[3] Written by Can Themba and Todd Matshikiza, it pointed to the growing volume of suspicion and hatred in the townships, which the absence of recognised leaders (they were all on trial for treason) was allowing to get 'out of hand'.

Under Stein's editorship political stories assumed a greater importance in Drum. This was due to the increasingly central part played by the African national movement in the country's political life. In these years - 1955-1958 - the political character of the next decade

was being decided. Drum showed a remarkable sensitivity to these developments, though sometimes mistaking appearance for substance. Hardly a monthly issue appeared without at least one political feature story.

Among the changes of staff which occurred during Stein's editorship, the most important for Drum was undoubtedly the death of Henry Nxumalo in December 1956. Nxumalo above all had been responsible for the development of Drum's serious journalism. It was one of South Africa's typical ironies that the man who had risked so much to improve the living and working conditions of his people, should have been murdered, apparently without motive, by African thugs. Can Themba's obituary profile recorded Nxumalo's last hours and concluded:

> Yes, why the bloody hell did they choose him to murder. I cannot hide my bitterness at all. 3a

Lewis Nkosi who had joined Drum as a darkroom assistant in July 1956, was promoted to make up the number of reporters.

In September 1957 Ezekiel Mphahlele resigned his post as Fiction Editor and left South Africa. His austere temperament and rigorous intellect were better suited to his chosen profession of teaching, from which the government had banned him; his few articles, mainly on political events, show a stringently critical approach, but lack colour and spontaneity. Mphahlele's main contribution was of course to Drum's fiction policy, which is examined in Chapter Four, Part 2. He and his family emigrated to Nigeria, the first of Drum's staff to go into voluntary exile.

Mphahlele's departure co-incided with the resignation of the editor, though the two events were not connected. Stein's resignation came over a disagreement with Jim Bailey. Althea Gibson, the black American tennis player, had won Wimbledon in that year, becoming the

first black woman to take the championship. Stein had decided to feature on Drum's cover a photograph of the champion being embraced by her white (female) opponent. Bailey vetoed the choice on the grounds that it would 'cause offence' to white South Africans. Tensions between editor and proprietor, always latent, came to a head on this issue. Stein left South Africa with his family to take up a job on the London Sunday paper, Reynolds News. Under his control Drum had undergone subtle changes which were not to show themselves fully for another year or so. Drum had become much less parochial. Its approach to township life and to politicall events had become more professional, but also more detached. Johannesburg itself was becoming a more sophisticated place, and that sophistication drew in some of Drum's reporters and writers, offering them greater intellectual scope and freedom,, but diluting the close rapport with their readers. These tendencies were to become more pronounced in the following years.

A significant feature of Stein's period of editorship, and of the six months 'interregnum' which followed it, was the emergence of Can Themba as the major contributor to and influence upon Drum. Themba had occupied the position of Assistant Editor for some months before the death of Nxumalo left him as Drum's senior reporter. From this time until he left the paper, he was to contribute many important features, beside his regular column, Talk o'the Town. These pieces were written in Themba's inimitable 'lingo', an eye for the vivid or idiosyncratic and a formidable logic. His article, 'Let the People Drink'(mentioned on page 67), is a good example. It was one of Drum's most influential articles. The report fell into three parts, the first reporting a tour of the township shebeens; the second exposing the well-organised complicity of black and white in procuring illegal liquor for Africans;

and the third arguing the futility and hypocrisy of the prohibition law:

> Prohibition has been proved impossible. There is too great a thirst for drink among the unentitled. 4

In August of the same year a report by Can Themba of the existence of 'concentration camps' in South Africa caused international interest. Overseas reporters, however, seized on the dramatic term rather than the substance of the story. It described a group of banned men living in a remote, fenced-in area in crude huts, and prevented from working to support themselves. Though horrifying enough, it did not warrant the term 'concentration camp', being similar to detention camps which cause little comment in Rhodesia today. In fact, the article consisted largely of a series of character sketches of the inmates of the camp. This tendency to give disproportionate space (in journalistic terms) to the manners and idiosyncracies of his subjects, particularly to the way they speak, is characteristic of Can's reporting and shows the writer in him.

In 1957 Can wrote five consecutive pieces on the life and loves of the jazz singer Dolly Rathebe. This 'talkative series' (the author's description) was written sensitively and with compassion. It tried to place Dolly's eventful life within the context of township social pressures, although it did not altogether avoid the salacious. It deserves to be remembered if only for Can's description of Dolly's first lover as a 'filibuster' (=filly-buster).

In February 1958 Themba's report on the 'Africanists' was the first study of a new and important tendency within the African National Movement. Though hostile to the theories of the new group, Themba noted that their support was growing and attacked ANC leaders who complacently dismissed them. During these years Can Themba demonstrated

his versatility and flair as a reporter on the African scene. He himself became a legend in the townships, a new 'Mr.Drum', perhaps, less solemn and more cynical than Nxumalo had been. It was his personality which stamped Drum, and gave it that vital continuity and identity, which is the most important quality of a monthly journal. He also helped to bridge the six-month interval between Sampson's departure and the arrival of Tom Hopkinson in April 1958. This interval saw the recruitment of Nat Nakasa from Natal, a precociously talented journalist, and one of the few who was able to make the transition to 'white' journalism.

Humphrey Tyler edited the paper in this time. Tyler was a reporter rather than an editor, and, brought in at short notice and as a temporary appointment, could be expected to do little more than keep things going. Drum underwent several changes under his leadership. The most important of these was the dropping of the regular short story and its replacement by Casey Motsis's column. The first four of these, called 'Bugs' concerned the adventures shared by the writer and the inhabitants of his mattress. The column was then dropped for some time to be followed by 'On the Beat', also by Motsisi. The March 1958 number appeared without either story or column, and without the usual 'birthday' feature. The uncertainty which had crept into the running of the paper was reflected in the revival of the 'find the best story' contest, which recalled the early days of Drum. Thus when Tom Hopkinson arrived to take over the reins, Drum was in need of new ideas and of the expertise to put them into practice.

In securing Hopkinson as editor, Jim Bailey had pulled off a considerable coup. Founder and editor of Picture Post in its great years from 1938 - 1950, he was one of Britain's most eminent journalists,

and unrivalled in the field of picture magazines. After resigning from Picture Post on a point of principle, he worked for two years on the News Chronicle and for a further five as a freelance journalist and for television. He was unable to find the sort of job which interested him in Britain, and having assisted Bailey with advice by correspondence for several years, took the courageous decision at the age of fifty-three, to emigrate to South Africa and take over the running of Drum.

Hopkinson was far more experienced than Drum's previous editors. He was already well-known - indeed famous - on taking up the job. He was a man sure of his own ability and professional expertise, and little interested in the social milieu which surrounded Drum. He was liberal, even left-wing, in politics but without any special interest in African affairs. From his account of these years, In the Fiery Continent,[5] Hopkinson appears rather rigid in his attitude to African currents of opinion, applying the yardstick of British liberalism without any attempt to understand the African context, and particularly the colonial experience. His opposition to the South African government was firm but, for a man who had campaigned so effectively against Hitler, rather muted. His book gives the impression that the author was strangely reluctant to learn anything from Africa. (These points will be pursued below, in regard to Hopkinson's relations with his African staff.) On the other hand, as an editor (which is certainly how he would wish to be regarded), Hopkinson showed complete professional integrity. He defended his employees from the commercial rapacity of the management as well as from the South African Police, and strove to encourage them and develop their talents. His relations with Jim Bailey, not an easy man to work with, were governed by principle. Hopkinson identified himself wholly with Drum as he saw it, and was certainly its hardest-working editor.

Hopkinson's plan was to make Drum into a picture magazine. In this he was building on a tendency that had become pronounced under Stein, but had its roots in Nxumalo's Bethal article. Of the two component parts of the magazine, its political and social reportage and its literary and cultural interests, the former were to be developed. The editor expressed the plan at his first conference as follows:

> We are going to make Drum into a picture magazine famous for its photographs but famous above all for its straightforward presentation of African life and the African point of view. 6

He appears to have taken this line of development for granted. Henceforth the magazine's photographers were to be as, if not more, important than its writers, though the quality of writing and of sub-editing were also notably improved. Inevitably, many of Hopkinson's preoccupations were technical. His main concern was to improve the quality of the paper. The cover was considerably improved, as was the quality of the newsprint. Advertisements were gradually moved to composite sections at the front and back and reduced in volume.

Changes of staff and of the functions of individuals took place, too. Casey Motsisi was to be trained as a sub-editor. Perceiving from the abortive 'Bugs' column the germ of an original talent, Hopkinson encouraged Motsisi to write a regular column, On the Beat, consisting of anecdotes from township and shebeen life. This was immediately popular, and established its author's reputation, as well as securing his credit with the shebeen-queens. The coloured photographer Bob Gosani, late of Golden City Post, was recruited, and a young English reporter, Ken Mackenzie, brought out to take charge of the difficult Cape Town office. In April 1959 Todd Matshikiza, who had left Drum to work on the music for King Kong in late 1957, was persuaded to write a second column, 'With the Lid Off'. This ran until Todd's departure to London in December 1960.

In February 1959 Can Themba was sacked. Hopkinson, who had been putting all his efforts into creating a working system for the paper, was unable to cope with the vagaries and derelictions of his Assistant Editor. He has described the difficulties he encountered - chiefly alcohol - and the attempt he made to form a partnership with Themba.[7] Previous editors, he admits, had been able to do this. It is possible that Themba's life was becoming increasingly difficult at this time, or that he took a dislike to his new boss. In any event, Drum's most talented writer departed, and Hopkinson was forced to hire a white man to take his place. Later Can Themba contributed a column, 'Shorts on Skirts', and worked on Post.

This difficulty in staff relations was closely connected to another problem which every Drum editor had to surmount: the question of his personal stance in the race conflict. Hopkinson relates[8] a discussion on this between himself and the African staff headed by Can, who quoted Trevor Huddleston's statement 'I indentify myself entirely with the African people'. This the editor of Drum found unacceptable because of its lack of detachment. When asked by Themba where he would stand 'when the shooting war started', Hopkinson felt impelled to reply 'Depends who starts it, what the issues are, and where I'm standing at the time.' This typically British response was bound to be unsatisfactory to Africans, who felt that the issues were abundantly clear (as indeed they were) and that who started it would prove irrelevant. It is possible that Hopkinson replied in this way out of irritation, but he quotes the remark with approval in 1962. Whoever was right in this exchange, it was not likely to increase the mutual confidence of the editor and his staff. Hopkinson sought a professional relationship, to which the fact that he was white and his staff black would be irrelevant. It was unrealistic in South African conditions.

Fortunately the editor's insensitivity to South African political realities at the personal level, was not reproduced in his treatment of politics in Drum. Continuing the trend established under Stein, Drum concentrated increasingly on political reporting and the magazine regularly appeared with two or three political features. Towards the end of 1957 the government began to implement its policy of passes for African women. They were first introduced in rural areas where the resistance was supposed to be less than in the cities. However, the rural people resisted fiercely. Throughout the period from 1958 to 1962 there were sporadic protests and disturbances in rural areas, where the resistance culminated in the peasant revolt in Pondoland. The issue of women's passes became involved with the general grievances of the rural Africans, who now actively opposed white power. In May 1958 Can Themba reported on the troubles in the Western Transvaal.[9] Large numbers of Batswana had fled into Bechuanaland (now Botswana) after violent clashes with police and government-appointed headmen who were attempting to issue passes. The following year Zulu women demonstrated against poverty, 'influx control', and passes. In October G.R.Naidoo, Drum's Durban correspondent, writing that the government had blamed 'outside agitators', commented that 'government laws produce hundreds of "agitators" every month.'[10] The following month Drum printed photographs of three hundred and sixty-five Ixopo women arrested for defying police orders to disperse.[11] Surrounded by sten-gun carrying police, they sat on the ground and sang hymns.

The Pondoland Emergency, which was to remain in force for six years, followed government imposition of 'Bantu Authorities' (see Chapter One: 3.) in the Transkei. Chiefs who collaborated with the Bantu Affairs Department had their huts burnt. An organization, 'Intaba', the Mountain, grew spontaneously out of the secret meetings held in the

hills by whole villages. The emergency regulations of 1960 had prevented any publication of these events, but when they were lifted in September, Drum's new political reporter, Benson Dyanti, brought off a notable scoop with the first hard news of the situation.[12] In its coverage of rural protest Drum rendered an invaluable service to South Africa and to students of South African affairs. Its African reporters were able to penetrate the veil of secrecy and suspicion erected by tribal peasants. The white press treated African movements as marginal to the political process and were thus generally ignorant of developments until they showed themselves in the form of strikes, demonstrations and riots. One of Drum's most impressive achievements during Hopkinson's editorship, was its coverage of the birth and development of the Pan Africanist Congress. Can Themba's story, mentioned above, warned ANC leaders as early as the beginning of 1958 of the possible challenge from the 'Africanist' Orlando Branch, led by P.K.Leballo. At the end of the year Drum reported the unruly conference of the Transvaal Congress from which the Leballo faction was expelled.[13] Pictures showed members of both groups armed with fighting sticks, as well as a woman beating a Special Branch plain-clothes detective over the head with a bottle.

In May of the following year Drum recorded the election of Robert Sobukwe to the presidency of the newly-formed PAC. Sobukwe, it pointed out, had all along been the ideological leader of the 'Africanists', but had hitherto been kept in the background.[14] A lecturer in Bantu Studies at Witwatersrand University, he was fiercely opposed to ANC co-operation with the Indian Congress or the White Congress of Democrats. The Drum story, by Matthew Nkoana, was the first sympathetic treatment of the 'Africanists' to appear in the magazine. Nkoana, it should be said, was himself a supporter of Sobukwe, and later a prominent publicist of the PAC in exile. PAC drew its support largely from black intellectuals

concerned for black cultural integrity and influenced by talk of the 'African personality' emanating from Accra. It had several sympathisers among Drum and Post staff-men, and this no doubt affected the manner and extent of Drum's reportage of PAC. Thus when, in early 1960, PAC leaders began to speak of 'action', Drum was in a good position to estimate the chances of PAC success both in capturing support from the ANC and in uniting the African people on the basis of their slogans (it was not clear which objective was uppermost in the minds of PAC leaders). Sobukwe announced that a press conference would be held on Friday, March 18, a day before Drum's April deadline, and a week before that number was to appear on the streets. After discussing the probability of the PAC call achieving support, Hopkinson decided to run a special feature on PAC and advanced the press date by two days so that it should co-incide with the first day of the campaign. Thus Drum's story, 'Who are the Africanists?', appeared on the streets on Monday March 21, the day of Sharpeville. No other paper, including Post, had paid any attention to the 'Africanists'. Drum's journalists were able to claim with satisfaction that their paper was attuned to the heart-beat of the African movement.

Not only within South Africa, but all over the continent, these were years of quickening political movement and dramatic events. Drum had always given space to developments 'up north'. Over the decade it had recorded a process whereby the peoples of Africa had advanced to the threshhold of independence. Black South Africans who used to regard themselves as amongst the most 'advanced' peoples on the continent watched this process with mixed feelings of optimism and frustration. Ghana had emerged as the leading spokesman for African unity in the struggle for independence. When, in June 1958,

the free black states of Africa,- there were then nine - gathered in Accra to state that 'We the independent states of Africa ... seek to eliminate racialism ...' Drum's West African editor was there to record the event.[15] The following year witnessed the 'All African People's Conference', again in Accra, and Drum was able to secure the services of Dr.Julius Kiano, a prominent Kenya African Union politician to report the speeches and resolutions. The first article, concerned largely with the debate on African unity, appeared with an accompanying map of the growth of the USA and a projected possible African confederation. The story concluded: 'deep down in the mind of the "African personality" lies the thrilling concept of a United States of Africa.'[16] Delegates may have been optimistic in their expectations (Mphahlele, attending for the ANC, put the outside limit on South African freedom at ten years), but when in February 1960 Drum reported on the first elections in Basutoland (now Lesotho), black South Africans were entitled to feel that freedom was approaching nearer with every month. Thus Drum entered the 'year of Africa', in which the attention of the world was focused on African events - on the Sharpeville's shootings and theSouth African Emergency, and on mutiny, intervention and secession in the newly-independent Congo. The emergency regulations prevented Hopkinson from using the exclusive material Drum men gathered during the March general strike. Drum reporters and photographers were the only journalists on the scene at the Sharpeville location. Hopkinson was forced to sell this story to the world press. Later, in October, Drum published a picture history of the Emergency - a series of photographs which recorded vividly the intense emotions and dramatic events of South Africa's largest ever African liberation campaign. There were no such restraints on material on the Congo troubles. Drum recorded

in successive issues[17] the full tragedy of these events which, in white South Africa's eyes at least, were evidence of the Africans' inability to govern themselves.

Tom Hopkinson's Drum was a professional production, probably the best laid-out and most effective journal to be published in South Africa. Its major features usually included at least one political story from South Africa, one from the rest of Africa, a 'township life feature', a fashion page as well as sports and crime stories. Three columns regularly appeared, Themba's 'Talk o' the Town', Matshikiza's 'With the Lid Off', and Motsisi's celebrated 'On the Beat'. The quality of captions, of head-titles and running titles, as well as the sub-editing generally, improved greatly. Above all, the quality of the photographs was notable. In these years Drum photographers won a number of national and international awards. Pictures were chosen for their spontaneity and the way they brought out the meaning of a situation. A picture story, 'Skollie's Hang-out'*,[18] for instance, consisted of seven pictures of a group of Coloured delinquents on a street corner, chaffing passing girls, quarrelling, fighting, and taking delivery of a consignment of 'dagga' (marijuana). The accompanying text filled in details, but the story was in the pictures. It should be noted, however, that Hopkinson did not succeed in making Drum into a picture magazine in the sense of Picture Post. Comparison shows that Drum retained a far greater reliance on copy and on its writers, and continued to be an illustrated rather than a picture magazine.

In ten years Drum had evolved from a sectional magazine for black South Africans to a news magazine which was among the best produced in Africa. Yet, despite the development of an independent West African edition and rising sales in East Africa, Drum could not succeed in making

* Cape word for delinquent.

a steady profit in South Africa. Its sales stuck around the hundred thousand mark, expenses were rising, and, in October 1960, Bailey decided to double the price to one shilling. The decision was opposed by Hopkinson. The resulting discussion showed wide differences between proprietor and editor. Hopkinson's view was that Drum should become a fortnightly news magazine at the old price of sixpence, with fewer pages and a more topical approach. A separate edition should be launched in East Africa in the same way that the West African edition had been built. In the long run, Hopkinson suggested, Drum's greatest chance of success lay outside South Africa. Black South Africans, he argued, had outgrown the need for an African press. They were reading white newspapers.[19] Bailey replied, with some justification, that the greatest amount of advertising revenue was to be found in the South. Moreover, he rejected his editor's Explanation of Drum's lack of success. What was needed was a more 'popular' approach:

> It's the strong sensational stories such as we have in Post - 'the Confessions of the Panga Man' - and so on. That's what people really want - not highbrow stuff.

Hopkinson objected, pointing out that it was not known what sold papers, and that 'The Africanists' and Pondoland stories had been the best sellers of last year. However, as proprietor Bailey could enforce his view, and this he did. Hopkinson offered his resignation. He continued to edit Drum for a further six months until July 1961. During this time the paper showed few new developments, though publishing the life story of Philip Kgosana, the Cape PAC leader, and securing an interview with Congress exiles in Basutoland. After the departure of Hopkinson, Drum was placed under the control of Cecil Eprile, editor of Post, who became joint editor of both papers. Shortly afterwards Drum ceased to appear in its established format. It became a monthly picture supplement to Post.

Drum had tried to be three things: a mass-circulation, low-priced picture magazine dependent on winning a vast audience so as to attract advertising revenue; a vehicle for African writers and illustrators; and a news magazine in the style of Paris-Match. It could not have succeeded in all these aims. The literary side had been sacrificed first, but not before rendering an invaluable service to black writing in South Africa. This function was taken over by The Classic and will be discussed elsewhere. Its mass distribution had been won on the basis of crime stories and pin-ups, but also through exposes such as 'Mr.Drum Goes to Jail' and 'Bethal'. Under Stein's editorship the latter aspect had become more pronounced and Hopkinson had further accelerated the process. In the early period Drum had been able to combine these functions, partly because of the lack of competition and partly because urban Africans were only slowly learning the habit of daily newspaper reading. But by the end of the fifties the African market could sustain a monthly pin-up and scandal sheet, and afford to read 'white' daily papers. Drum was failing between these two alternatives. Both Hopkinson and Bailey were thus right in their own way, though Bailey's point of view meant that what would be produced would be of little value.

Broader issues, too, were involved. The imposition of the Bantu Education Act, the consequent closure of St.Peter's, Fort Hare, and similar institutions, the destruction of Sophiatown, the ever - increasing repression and harassment of urban Africans, all combining to limit and even to destroy the urban African environment in which Drum had flourished. This was precisely the government's policy. The sixties were to be a new and harsher era, introduced by the use of sabotage by the African movement and of mass arrests, torture and

executions by the white authorities. Drum had drawn its resources - its writers, artists and photographers - from that in-between world of liberal Johannesburg which had grown, though precariously, in the post-war years. Now that milieu was snuffed out. Already in 1959 Lewis Nkosi and Bloke Modisane had left for America, unable to endure longer the stifling atmosphere of apartheid. Ezekiel Mphahlele had gone to Nigeria. Matthew Nkoana and Peter Magubane were caught in the repression which followed Sharpeville. In 1963 Can Themba went into exile in Swaziland where he died five years later. In 1964 Nat Nakasa left on an exit permit to New York after editing The Classic for only a year. Less than a year later he killed himself. Todd Matshikiza, who had gone to London in 1960, worked for a time on Zambian radio. He died in 1968. A good deal of space in The Classic has been given over to obituaries. Of the group of talented men who gathered round Drum in the fifties, only Casey Motsisi remained in Johannesburg, writing. A decade and a world had come to an end.

The decade had been one of great hopes and great defeats. The world had been bursting with talent, vitality and creativity, but it had always been perched on the edge of disaster. In destroying that world white South Africa committed itself to a new and grimmer one, where there would be a diminished common culture, fewer shared values, and few inter-racial friendships to mitigate the steel of conflict.

Chapter III (2) - References

1 Drum, January 1957

2 ibid., March 1956

3 ibid., April 1957

3a ibid., February 1957

4 ibid., March 1956

5 Gollancz, London 1962

6 Hopkinson, op.cit., p. 60

7 ibid., Chapter XV

8 ibid., pp. 109-111

9 Drum, May 1958

10 ibid., October 1958

11 ibid., November 1959

12 ibid., September 1960

13 ibid., December 1958

14 ibid., May 1959

15 ibid., June 1958

16 ibid., February 1959

17 ibid., August - November 1960

18 ibid., April 1959

19 Hopkinson, In the Fiery Continent, London 1962, Chapter 35.

Chapter IV - Fiction in Drum

(1) Introduction: Black SAn fiction prior to 1950.

(2) Fiction policy and fiction in Drum, 1951-1958.

1.

To some extent, Drum won its place in the history of black South African fiction by default. There were few opportunities for African or Coloured writers to publish in English. Apart from the African language press (see Chapter Two,2), which published occasional poems in English (including some by Peter Abrahams) there was with one exception no provision for publication in English before World War II.

The exception was the publication by the Lovedale Press in the Eastern Cape of Mhudi in 1930, a novel by Solomon T.Plaatje and an earlier work of protest by the same author, Native Life in South Africa, as part of the campaign against the Native Lands Act of 1913. Mhudi is an interesting work which has only recently received attention by critics of African writing.[1] A study of the relations between Boer trekkers, Sotho pastoralists and Ndebele migrants, it offers a picture of nineteenth-century South Africa in strong contrast to that presented by white chroniclers of the time. Most notable is its deeply moral tone and its depiction of Sotho society as a humane and morally developed system, in contrast to both Voortrekkers and Matabele.

Lovedale Press published a fairly large number of titles in African languages, mainly Xhosa. Morija Press in Basutoland, also a missionary endeavour, published works in Sesotho, most notably Thomas Mofolo's 'Moeti oa Boshabela' (The Wanderer to the East) and Chaka the Zulu. The latter, translated into English by F.H.Dutton, has influenced both English and African writers on this theme.

The immediate post-war period saw a new effort in the field of African publishing, with the founding of The African Bookman

press by Julius Rollnick and Philip Segal. This concentrated mainly on non-fictional material in association with the African night-schools movement. It did, however, have the distinction of publishing Mphahlele's first collection of stories, Man Must Live, in 1947. Their only other non-fictional title was a strongly political but naively written story, This Thing Must Stop!, (author unknown). The African Bookman was short-lived, and its failure served to discourage those who might have entered the field.[2]

The only other areas possibly open to African writers at this time were The Native Teachers Journal, which was subject to strict censorship, and Fighting Talk, the magazine of the Springbok Legion, a liberal ex-serviceman's organization. The latter certainly published such work regularly in the fifties, but it has not been possible to ascertain how early this practice began.

Thus the service rendered to black fiction by Drum can be said to have been indispensable. For over eight years it published a monthly short story, over eighty in all, not including those by non-South African black writers. (The latter however, including several by Langston Hughes, were probably influential upon the South African authors.) With all the short-comings of popular journalism, subject to the pressures of the market and the preconceptions of its white proprietor, the paper played a unique role in supporting and publishing black writers. The development of this role, and the nature and value of the fiction published in Drum is the subject of this chapter.

2.

When in June 1951, Drum published Dyke Sentso's story 'The Harvest is Waiting' it drew attention in the editorial to what was virtually a new departure:

> Finally, we want to draw your attention to the short story in this issue, 'The Harvest is Waiting' by Dyke Sentso. It is a great short story and it is technically flawless. Have no doubt about it we have discovered in Dyke Sentso an outstanding writer whose prose can measure up to that of any contemporary of any race. And ... we shall discover many more ... It is the supreme thrill of the Drum. 3

Previous creative writing had included two poems translated from the Zulu, a collection of folk-tales and one story, 'Nomoya of the Winds'; the editorial is the first indication that Drum included in its aims the 'discovery' and encouragement of African writers. Thenceforth every number was to carry at least one story. The publication of Bloke Modisane's story 'The Dignity of Begging' in September of the same year, marked the first appearance of urban themes and township life in this writing. In October Drum appealed to African writers to send in their stories. In April the following year it took a more positive step. A 'Great African International Short Story Contest' was announced. It offered £50 for the winning story and £4 for each entry published. Stories were to be up to three thousand words in length and in any language. Judges were announced as Peter Abrahams, Alan Paton and R.R.R.Dhlomo, the Zulu author and editor of Illanga Lase Natal. With the publication of Dyke Sentso's third story 'Pay Back' in May 1952, the practise of featuring 'Drum Authors' was initiated. A short biography and photograph was published along with the stories of the more considerable writers. In Drum's first five years twelve authors received this attention, which must have helped in their becoming more generally known.

In September 1952, Drum announced that it was extending the period of its competition to the end of the year, 'owing to the tremendous response'.[4] In April 1953, the results were published. The competition had aroused great interest, as the editor remarked:

> Ever since Drum announced their Great International Story Contest last year, stories in English and every African language have poured into the Drum office from every part of the world - from Lagos to Cape Town, from Bermuda to London ... and by the closing date there were over one thousand stories for the judges to read. 5

Commenting on the quality of the entry, the judges noted that 'one of the difficulties was to find stories that combined a good plot and a good style.'[6] They remarked on the high proportion of entries from West Africa, an interesting foreshadowing of the rise of Nigerian writing. Of the winning story, 'Mob Passion' by Can Themba, Peter Abrahams remarked that 'we have in this story notice of unusual literary promise.' [7] The short story contest became an annual affair. It was the first time that such an opportunity had been available to black writers in South Africa. It attracted much attention not only within the country, but all over the world among people of African descent, and among those interested at this early date in the rise of African writing. Publishing the second prize-winning story in July's Drum, the editors commented:

> Since our great contest last year we've discovered a whole school of fine writers ... There's no doubt that there's a splendid future for African writing, and we're out to do what we can to help it along. 8

Some self-congratulatory exaggeration must be allowed for, however, in estimating these statements. The following year's contest judges included the famous black American poet, Langston Hughes. In September 1953 Drum published Mphahlele's 'Blind Alley', marking a new standard of seriousness. From this time the general level of Drum's fiction, with some lapses, steadily improved. The winner of the 1953 competition was Dyke Sentso, who had clearly benefitted from being published in Drum. This story, 'Under the Blue-gum Trees', was his fourth to be accepted, and he had gained a measure of recognition, if in a rather odd fashion:

He remembered how Drum had helped him to get one of his stories translated into German. How another was translated into Swiss (sic) 9

The 1954 contest, announced in April, was to be judged by the novelist Nadine Gordimer, Can Themba (now working for Drum), the African journalist, Jordan Ngubane and Langston Hughes. The winner, announced in April, 1955 was the Coloured writer Peter Clarke. He had first been published in Drum in December 1954. In 1955 Drum's fiction included stories by Peter Clarke, Richard Rive, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Can Themba and Casey Motsisi. At the beginning of the same year Mphahlele had been appointed fiction editor, reflecting the new importance attached to this aspect of Drum's activity, and helping to strengthen the quality and influence of the magazine in this field.

During the period of Mphahlele's editorship, Drum's fiction reached its highest general level. Stories in 1956 included work by Can Themba, Richard Rive and Mphahlele himself. The April number published three stories based on a common character - 'Willie-boy' - by Rive, Peter Clarke and James Matthews. The regular appearance of stories by Coloured writers dealing with Cape themes was a new feature in Drum's fiction. In December, Mphahlele published a piece of his own, 'Lesane', based on the characters of a previous story 'Down the Quiet Street'.[10] This was extended into a loosely connected series concerned with domestic events in the Lesane family, a typical township household. It appeared in five consecutive numbers from December to the following April. This was the Fiction Editor's attempt to solve a problem which he has described in the following terms:

'... I was supposed to let in the "wet, sentimental, sexy stories and tough crime stories". I tried to argue with the proprietor whenever he interviewed me that Drum had plunged into a reading world that hadn't developed any definite magazine taste ... that it

should produce healthy material in an original style wherever possible and, in a sense, dictate what the public should read, without necessarily being snobbish and intellectual.' [11]

'Lesane' described everyday life in the townships in Mphahlele's down-to-earth and compassionate manner. It includes material to be found both in the author's autobiography and in his novel The Wanderers.[12] However, it did not succeed in its purpose. No new appointment was made when Mphahlele left Drum in September. The fifth Short Story Contest attracted over six hundred entries, but the winning story, Ritchie Maber's'Way of the Prodigal' was disappointing. A sixth contest was held but the winners were never announced for by 1958 fiction had ceased to be a regular part of Drum.

The stories published varied greatly in quality. Not all are worthy of serious attention. Some were by writers from outside South Africa, such as Cyprian Ekwensi and Margaret Dpe-Danquah (Ghana), and are thus outside the scope of this study. The best stories, those by Can Themba, Casey Motsisi, Bloke Modisane, Mphahlele, and the Coloured writers, Matthews, Clarke and Rive will be examined extensively in another section.

Although some of these stories come into the category of 'vulgar escapist stuff' (Mphahlele), the proportion is smaller than might have been expected. Most deal with social themes in one way or another. Some combine the sensational and serious. Almost all reflect the deep concern with which the average African viewed the state of his people. Particularly in the first two years Drum published a number of stories with simple moral points, clearly related to missionary writing, to the cautionary folk tale and perhaps to the parable. 'The Boomerang' by Guybon B.Sinxo,[13] warned that 'revenge always looked sweet, but many a time it had turned out to be bitter'. A government employee is sacked and turned out of his

municipal house at the instigation of his enemy, who will get job and house in his stead. He takes revenge by destroying the garden and damaging the house. But the injustice is corrected, and the now considerably damaged property restored to him. Thus his revenge has boomeranged. More complex in plot and moral is Jordan Ngubane's 'The Answer he Wanted'.[14] Zikali, his wife Linda and small daughter Nani have been prosperous, but now Linda is dying and all the money has gone on doctor's fees. It is the family custom to spend Christmas Eve singing carols and looking through the family album. But Linda dies before Christmas and Christmas Eve finds Zikali in despair. He cannot bring himself to tell Nani of her Mother's death. He is poverty-stricken and the child's demands for presents are causing him anguish. He decides to kill the child and himself. But Nani ingenuously takes out the album and begins to go through it. In a special folder she finds a hundred pounds which Linda has placed there. The story exclaims upon the folly of despair and the evil of suicide. The pecuniary form of salvation is not unusual in such stories, though to the English ear it seems out of place in a Christmas story replete with carolling villagers. But money is a very solid and unambivalent value in many of these stories, reflecting the sober materialism of a community living on or below the poverty line.

This insecurity is more ably communicated in Dyke Sentso's story of drought, 'The Sun Stood Still'.[15] It is the tale of a good man, Selai, who having laid in a store of maize is able to help his fellow tribesmen through the famine, though in doing so he incurs both envy and resentment. But eventually when the maize runs out, he is faced with the starvation of his own family, and presented with a moral dilemma:

When I had food I could not stand to see the people suffer, but I forgot you for whom I have more responsibility. I was unselfish, but I was selfish in my unselfishness. 16

However, the situation is saved by his wife who, knowing of his generosity, has secretly purchased three bags from her own husband and laid them aside. The virtuous man is rewarded by his virtuous wife. Stories such as these are distinguished by the absence of any real interest in the plot or characters. The author is concerned to establish just so much of a tale as will be sufficient to hang his moral on. Sinxo and Ngubane adopt, respectively, a humorous and a pious tone. Sentso, who is a better writer, devotes some paragraphs to describing the effects of the drought, but thereafter limits himself to expounding the lesson. In these tales the moral point is explicit and externally conceived.

The group of stories concerned with the theme of the migration from country to city, though in some cases more naive in conception and execution, contain a richer store of human experience. They impress because their content has been lived. The earliest of these appeared in April, 1951, entitled 'Nomoya of the Winds', by Randolph B.Pitso. It is about a Swazi girl, Nomoya, who is sent to work in Johannesburg. There she becomes entangled with a robber, Patrick Lofafa. When she tries to extricate herself by turning to suave (but honest) Chic Zwane, Patrick murders her. The killer escapes, but Chic is arrested for the crime. 'Nomoya' contains the basic elements of the country-to-city theme. There is the awareness of loss:

'... decision was mine in this lovely land of our fathers. But now ... the white father* will ... come for me. And he will lead me to a land of time and regularity, of fear and uncertainty.' 17

But there is also the fascination with city life, the wonder of street lighting, of 'Madam's sumptuous apartment on the eighth floor' and of

* i.e. the missionary.

city entertainments. Chic Zwane and Patrick Lofafa both represent sophisticated city types. Lofafa is described as a 'Bulky little black man in an expensive American attire',[18] while Chic wears 'A dark green felt hat and his grey raglan-sleeved American top-coat.'[19] Nomoya, as is conventional in this type of story, has fallen into bad ways through her inexperience of city ways. There is also, however, a suggestion that she has been personally corrupted. When we first encounter her in the city she is described as 'Marian Mabaso' (as Nomoya came to be known) ready groomed and pinned up for a good time - off at Haarlem.'[20] The taking of a European name is traditional in South African fiction as a sign of accommodation to the white man's ways. The author of 'Nomoya', however, is not skilful enough to bring these aspects to the centre of his story, whihh remains, in plot, one of an undetected murder and an unjust sentence. His awareness of the social and moral issues which lie behind the story finds expression only in the lyrical opening paragraphs. On the other hand, the author is clearly as impressed by Chic Zwane as is Nomoya. 'Nomoya of the Winds' is a naive story.

A more acute awareness of the country-to-city theme is shown in 'Tomorrow Never Came' by E.E.Rehzi,[21] described as 'a short, short story'. Rehzi simply presents two scenes: an old man waiting in his hut in the Reserve for his grandson to return, and the grandson Jamee, drunk in a shebeen, but remembering for a moment his broken promise:

'I'll tell you a story', Jamee went on. 'The boy was reared by his grandfather, for his parents died when he was only young. Then when he became older he left the kraal, but he promised to go back. He went to the Golden City and there fell in with bad companions. He began to drink - landed in jail, lost his money, his self-respect - lost everything. Bad company!' He shook his fist on the table. 22

Rehzi does not extricate his prodigal grandson from this predicament.

He merely comments:

> And Johannesburg lives on: a city of poverty and wealth; a city of joy and sorrow; a city of love and hate; a city of light - and of even darker shadows. 23

Such ambivalent evaluations of the city are frequent in stories concerned with this theme. For there was no fatted calf to greet the prodigal on his return, only poverty and famine.

Dyke Sentso's story, 'Pay Back'[24] looks at other aspects of the conflict of values created by moving to the city. His hero has left home despite his father's forebodings:

> 'But you are still young my son. Will you be safe in that large city?'
>
> He remembered how he had laughed at the question. Evidently his father still regarded him as a mere boy. 25

The author's concern here is with the obedience and respect for age dictated by traditional African values, and also the institutionalised struggle of the boy to prove his manhood. In the old days he would have done this by feats of hunting or warfare. Now he will go to work in Johannesburg where his ability to earn and provide for his family will bring respect and acceptance from his father. But the plan goes wrong, and for the usual reasons: youthful inexperience and bad company. Hendrik is framed by a 'false friend' and convicted of robbery. His father arrives to pay the fine. Again disregarding the old man's advice, Hendrik plans a public denunciation of the friend at a township party. For his pains he is beaten up. The incident is interesting, for the plan to shame his enemy before the people is one based on traditional values. It comes unstuck in the city, however, where the community is powerless to enforce moral standards.

African authors were well aware of this loss, but they could not

hold up life in the Reserve as a viable alternative. The traditional society had been destroyed too completely and too long ago. In this, these writers differ from white South Africans who have treated this theme frequently in what has come to be known as the 'Jim comes to Jo'burg' stories. These works commonly purported to show the disastrous effects of the city on the morals of the young tribesman (the term is appropriate in this context) who comes to work in town. Inevitably the hero is convinced by the vicissitudes he suffers of the undesirability of the white man's ways, and returns to his native kraal, fully convinced that trachoma and bilharzia are less dangerous than skokiaan and bad women. Most African writers had no such illusions, and it would be a mistake to suppose that the similarity in form of the stories by black writers to the 'Jim' variety by white authors, extended to an identity of content. When Africans have attempted the latter type, it has inevitably resulted in a sentimental posturing, as in the story 'Duma Comes Home', by D.G.Tsebe.[26] A young Zulu, Duma, returns from the city to claim his bride; he tells his family of his experiences:

> There was much rejoicing as young Duma related his adventures in the city. They laughed heartily when he told them that the lady for whom he worked was unable to call his name and therefore chose to call him Sandwich ... [27]

In this story the humiliation of the hero in the city is put aside. Life in the Reserve is shown to be a more 'natural existence for the African:

> He cursed the Sandwich shoes which had softened the pads of his feet making them too sensitive to the prick of sharp-edged pebbles ...
> Now he would put away his Sandwich clothes and once more he would wear his favourite beshu and strings of coloured beads. [28]

Though alert to the corruption and violence of township life, African writers could not indulge in this kind of dishonest fantasy without

adopting the attitudes and vocabulary of 'separate development'. They knew that this version of the migrant labour system was a fraud. Nor was this only a political question. Though the success or failure of fiction is not directly dependent on the 'correctness' or otherwise of the author's political views, no writer can depart completely from the reality he confronts without damaging the aesthetic quality of his work. This is particularly true of the South African writer, in whose society politics impinges very directly upon everyday life. Though free to select and manipulate experience, he cannot afford to include self-contradictory elements which destroy the verisimilitude of his tale. He cannot write what is patently false. This problem, and the questions it poses for the critic, will necessarily be of recurrent relevance in the present work.

For the vast majority of Drum's readers, city life was reality and the Reserves only a memory. Most stories in Drum deal with urban themes and events. These range from the pure entertainment, detective 'thriller' to the serious chronicles of the urban struggle for survival, such as the stories of Ezekiel Mphahlele. However, in this early period, the chief characteristic of the urban stories is the combination, in varying degrees of the serious and the fantastic. 'Ntombo Gets a Job', by Douglas Sidayiya,[29] is a naive example of this attempt to come to terms with the urban reality. Ntombo has been a thief, stopping short of murder, but living outside the law. He decides to apply for a job as a waiter, but finds that the proprietor of the hotel where he applies, is the same man whom he had previosly robbed. Afraid that he will be recognised when he returns to start work, he gives up his honest intention and plans a robbery the same night. The robbery fails. Back in his room after a narrow escape, Ntombo notices that it is Friday 13th. Hoping for better luck the next day, he turns up

for the job. He is not recognised and starts his new life. In form the story is a 'thriller'. Most of it is taken up with the robbery and Ntombo's escape. However, its real concern is elsewhere. It is with the insecurity of the hero's life:

> Ntombo was worried. Everything seemed to be staring at him. Unseen fingers seemed to be pointing at him from the corners of his small room. Even the rustling of the leaves on the trees outside gave him an earie feeling. Listening silently, he could hear the ticking of the small watch on his wrist, beating more loudly than usual. 30

The difficulties and the narrow horizons of this life are not missed. Ntombo has no references and has to lie, nervously, when being interviewed for the job. His desire for the job is real, though the author does not distance himself sufficiently from the plot to discern the potential pathos of the situation: '... in his heart Ntombo really did want to work as a waiter in the hotel!'.[31] The irony necessary to treat these themes in perspective is seldom to be found, except in the stories of Bloke Modisane, and in Casey Motsisi's column vignettes. Douglas Sidayiya remains trapped in the circumscribed lot of the urban African, as do many contributors to Drum.

Others attempt to avoid this problem by ignoring serious questions and concentrating on the raffish underworld material supplied by township life. Even here, however, there are pitfalls. 'The Betrayal', by Kyle Mdenge,[32] is a stereotyped story of a woman who betrays her gangster lover to save him from a 'life on the run'. The details are tedious, but the author tells his story competently, even giving an air of reality to the passionate scenes between the lovers. The narrow conventions of the 'thriller' can sustain scenes such as these. But in the arrest scene they break down. The detective, Sergeant Van Rensburg, is not a convincing member of the South African Police. The plot requires that the lovers be granted a moment of

reconciliation after the arrest of the gangster. Thus, the cop must be kindly. Van Rensburg is extremely implausible, and the tight texture of the tale is ruined.

Kyle Mdenge is tripped up by the unwelcome intrusion of reality. In Mbokotwane Manqupu's story, 'Love Comes Deadly',[33] the attempt to weld realism to the 'thriller' produces a schizophrenic effect. Jazz singer Jacqueline has her Peter Cheyney-reading lover, Barney, done to death. Detective Gray of Marshall Square tracks her down by means of an entry in Barney's diary. She calls her 'hoods' down on him, but he overcomes them in a brawl. Jacqueline flees, but is knocked down and killed by a motor-car as she leaves the cafe. The story is divided into two parts. The first describes the murder of Barney in a typical Alexandra yard and the discovery of the body. In the second we find Gray in the cafe and witness the death of Jacqueline. There is a great variation in style and tone between the two sections. The opening scene is a careful and effective evocation of the township at night:

> Children's voices had quietened and the softening of voices from the homes and shebeens were a sign that the embers of the day's revels were dying out. Now and again there would sound the heavy banging of a door: and a solitary figure would drunkenly venture into the dark, lonely and menacing streets, singing a slurred ditty of wine women and anything else. The words of the song wouldn't be very polite, but who cares? [34]

The encounter between the murderers and a neighbour is well handled with a touch of humour. When the body is discovered, however, the tone changes, becoming more solemn. An impromptu discussion on crime and punishment is initiated between members of the Civic Guards (vigilantes):

> 'Such things make me cry for Shaka,' Kuzwayo said. 'He would have collected all the men of the age group of the guilty ones and killed them...
>
> 'Heavy sentences won't stop crime', said Moreti, a school-

> teacher member of the Guards, 'look at it this way', he went on quietly. 'You always preach that crime was unknown in our ancestor's days because sentences were heavy. But that is not altogether true: Poverty was unknown, and there was no idleness - and so there was no crime.' 35

They go on to discuss the problem of youth. This is interesting enough, but it hardly prepares us for the second half of the story, where the dialogue typically goes like this:

> 'I'm levelling a torpedo at your spine, and if you do anything funny I'm liable to pump you so full of lead they'll need twenty guys to carry your coffin'. 36

The detective talks the same sort of language. It is unclear in the story whether he is white or black. Manqupu solves the problem encountered by Mdenge by taking his cops and robbers scene right out of any identifiable surroundings. He leaves the moral issues raised by the first part entirely unresolved and supplies a conclusion within the very different terms of the 'thriller' tone to which he has switched. Only the event of Barney's murder links the two sections. The moral of the 'thriller' version is supplied by Gray's musing over the case:

> And Gray thought that there were still a lot of trusting Barneys in Johannesburg; and while there are still so many Jacquelines making eyes at the Barneys, Marshall Square will be kept busy. 37

'Love Comes Deadly' is either about bad conditions or bad women. In effect, the two sections of the story cancel each other out and the reader is left with a fragmented impression. The reasons for this failure are complex and touch on questions at the heart of South African fiction. They will be examined more extensively elsewhere. One aspect, however, can be considered here. The cultural resources available to most of these authors were meagre. The author of this story worked as a civil service clerk, and is not recorded to have reached matriculation. Though this in itself need not have prevented him from wide reading, we know (see Chapter 11, 2)

how slender were the opportunities for study and recreation. Most of these writers would have gained the major part of their acquaintance with literary technique, narrative craft, dialogue etc., from an assortment of school 'classics', popular novels (Paton is a frequent influence), and predominantly from pulp fiction, the cinema and the press. Something of the curious results which such a mixed heritage could produce, can be seen in Detective Gray's moralizing:

> 'My dear man' Gray said, 'a dame like that is liable to start a strike in hell! Lucifer will find himself up against a wench who'll promise a better standard of living to the inmates and lead them in a revolt to overthrow the established government of that joint. 38

The whole speech is typical of the American 'thriller' with its hardheaded admiration for 'a helluva dame'. The slang is drawn from the same milieu. The outrageous comparison, too, is American in origin, but its content, here, is purely South African. The phrase 'to overthrow the established government' is taken from the Suppression of Communism Act (see Chapter 1,2) while the idea is obviously inspired by the general tenor of South African press reports of dangerous 'agitators'. The combination of such disparate influences, however, need not always be negative in influence. Though tending to weaken the homogeneity of the story as a whole, they often contribute a vividness and originality of expression. S.W.E.Aisien's story, 'Crime of Passion' has little to offer in the way of plot or character. The condemned man's reflections upon his past, hoever, occasionally rise to an effective poignancy:

> Mother-talk. We used to spread out mother-talk and shoot it full of holes with derision, and think that we were being smart and modern. 39

This style is capable of humour, and self-deprecation in the midst of bitterness. Talking of the man who had taken his woman, and

whom he had subsequently killed, the narrator comments:

> I got the idea into my skull that the chap was pulling one on me because I was not as tutored as he. I was tutored myself, but in a taste-it-and-leave-it manner. I think they used to call me truant. 40

The creative use of language may owe something to African languages, which are very free in construction and delight in the periphrastic description. Africans were uninhibited in their approach to English, and their ready adaptation of Americanisms may not be due only to the influence of Hollywood, but also to the greater appropriateness of American usages to their experience. Like the Rand in the fifties, the United States of the gangster movies was a melting-pot of immigrant workers for whom English was a second language, or, at most, established for a single generation.

In 1956 and 1957 a number of stories appeared which showed a possible new direction developing in Drum's fiction. Nimrod Mkele's 'The Devoted Leeches'[41] told of the stratagems of a cynical city gent pestered by willing but unwanted females. It was in appalling taste and its inclusion by Mphahlele is surprising. Ben Dlodlo's 'Kickido'[42] told the bloody tale of a shebeen queen's revenge against her daughter's lover. These stories and two others about sport, 'The Big Fix' (anon)[43] and 'Winner takes All' (D.Bolani),[44] were competently written and obviously styled for Drum. They are of little interest being typically commercial in intention, and lacking both engagement on the part of the author and any authentic connection with reality.

Drum ceased to publish regular fiction at this time; these latter contributions suggest the direction which its fiction was taking and might persuade us to believe that little has been lost. The last story to appear deserves mention, however. It was a characteristically incisive piece by Alex La Guma, 'Battle for Honour',[45] his first and

only contribution to Drum. The author's keen eye for social mannerisms and particularly for the tense, potentially violent scene, provided a worthy epilogue to eight years of popular fiction.

Anyone reading through the eighty or so stories which appeared in Drum will be struck by certain general characteristics that separate the unachieved from the achieved, and demarcate the writers of talent from the hard triers. I have tried to show what the typical Drum story was concerned with, and how far it managed to express that concern. Those authors who deserve individual attention will be considered in the chapters on individual writers. Almost every black author of note in South Africa published in Drum at one time or another. Many, as we have seen, worked for the journal. The stories we have been considering formed the staple fiction of the African reading public. It remains to sum up the weaknesses and strengths of these ordinary stories, which provide a context for the examination of more important works, as well as being of interest and merit in themselves.

Most of the stories suffer from a weakness of construction. Narrative forms are available to the writer through imitation, but what the African author encountered was hardly adequate, for the material he wished to use. The short story form as it had been developed in the twenties and thirties does not seem to have been known to many of these writers. Indeed the lists of African libraries make little mention of the works of such writers as Lawrence, Virginia Wolfe, Katherine Mansfield or Hemingway. (That Damon Runyon was known is shown by the preponderance of stories in the present historic tense!) Consequently, we find stories whose form is manifestly out of accordance with the author's intentions. Variations in the mode of narration are few, and the simple omniscient narrator or first

person narrative are almost the only types to be found. The author usually structures his narrative by breaking it into a number of scenes in chronological order, sometimes of the 'twenty years have passed' type. The cinema is probably responsible for the dominance of this form, which neglects to make use of the rich number of variations open to the writer through his medium.

Most of these stories fail to create an internal life for their characters. The attribution of motive and the description of emotion, where it occurs, is generally external. The characters do not possess an imaginative inner life, being incompletely imagined by their creators. They are moved by very simple desires or fears; the reader is informed of these rather than being made to feel them. In some cases this need (which is really the need to bring the reader into imaginative sympathy with the characters) is supplied by what is usually effective and sensitive description of the social and physical setting of the story.

In addition to these failures in what may be called the 'substructure' of fiction, most of these authors find it difficult to maintain an appropriate and consistent tone. This deficiency, as we have seen, can stem from an uncertain grasp of the intention of the story on the part of the author. Tone is a technique of the surface of fiction, indispensable, particularly in the short story, for setting the correct emotional level, the degree of detachment or involvement required of the reader, and for giving to the events of the story a sense of 'rightness' and inevitability. In those stories which are concerned with moral or social problems, the tone tends to be heavy and unsubtle, depending on rhetoric and exclamation. In the lighter tales, it is very often inconsistent. Irony is rare, though humour is sometimes achieved. The problem of tone is not a simple one, and affects writers even of the stature of Mphahlele and Modisane.

Finally, there is a lack of poise. Essential to the success of any writing, and particularly to the short story which has a limited range of devices to deploy, is that the author should at all times be working within himself. However limited the concerns of a piece of fiction, a sense of straining after effect or emotion is fatal to the success of the whole. That is why some of the most slender of these stories achieve an impact beyond their intrinsic merits, while more deeply felt themes fail to find expression. In general, these stories are not poised. They lack assurance and art.

These are serious faults. They do not, however, negate the interest and even the value of this popular fiction. The level of stories in Drum was certainly higher than in any comparable magazine in Africa. They represent a response to an important historical process and one which has something in common with other African countries. Nor are they merely documentary or sociological interest. In them the themes which were taken up by the major writers of the continent can be picked out in their unmilled state. They thus form an important basis for the understanding and evaluation of South African and African fiction. For a quarter of a century now Africa has been a continent in turmoil, with deep-going social changes the rule rather than the exception. Criticism of African literature which ignores this fact will necessarily remain superficial. Most of these writers were concerned with more than telling a story. They were concerned with what was happening to their people, and thus with moral and social questions common to all peoples. It is this which distinguishes them from the purveyors of pulp fiction. And, though technical weaknesses hamper the expression of that concern, it breaks through repeatedly, in the isolated effective scene, the snatch of telling dialogue, and the impressive overall determination to win, in unpromising circumstances, some understanding of the pattern of life.

Chapter IV - References

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Chapter V.

Reactions: Can Themba and Casey Motsisi.

'It is so exhausting to have to be
in reaction all the time.'

(Can Themba).

In the context of African and South African cultural history Drum must be(en) seen as a phenomenon of the fifties. The significance of that decade has been partly described in earlier chapters. Its paradoxical character was determined by the fact that an urban African culture began to flourish at a time when, in South Africa, a Nationalist white authority had decided to crush just such a development. The fifties was thus a time of births and deaths. Its black culture-heroes, of whom Drum furnished several, had a short lived celebrity. The newly-born cultural growth suffered a drastic, if not fatal, set-back.

The cultural growth, nourished as it was upon borrowings and adaptations, compounded naiveté and sophistication to an unusual degree. This was very visible in Drum, and particularly in its fiction. The pressure of race conflict left its inevitable mark upon the process. One form of it was the sedulous cultivation of the black writer, by people who viewed the former's mere existence as a slap in the face for apartheid theory. A certain amount of forced growth and over-enthusiastic acclaim was the result.

So far this study has concentrated upon what may be called the undergrowth of literature: the mass of verbal and visual communication, reportage, and 'popular fiction' which forms the main part of the reading public's acquaintance with the printed word or image. The literary critic aims to distinguish the blossom from the bole. Yet in confronting and assessing the rise of a new cultural structure, it is impossible to be unaware of the strong unity that persists throughout the whole formation. This is especially true of black South African writing, where race barriers prevent the artist from migrating to the rarified regions of the literary or academic intelligentsia.

'Viewed from this perspective (of the total cultural formation),

no absolute demarcation appears between the hack journalist, the sensitive reporter of fact, and the creative artist. Yet the creative artist does not merely reflect or report social and cultural realities, i.e. the experiences of men, but with the autonomy of the imagination is able to shape and even to transform them. Drum attracted writers of all these types. In the following chapters it is hoped to discriminate between the individual authors, pointing out how far their importance lies in their value as cultural indices, or in their artistic achievement as such.

Of course such distinctions must remain short of absolute. In writing of Can Themba and Casey Motsisi, the subjects of this chapter, the critic is aware of the danger of treating potential as accomplished success. Both writers, and especially Motsisi, hover on the borderline of achievement. For both, the criteria of inclusion in a study of black South African literature must include their significance as figures in a milieu, as well as their own literary quality.

1.

Moses (Casey) Motsisi was born in 1934 and educated at Western Native High School, Pretoria and Normal College. Since he spoke no African language, he left school with the advent of Bantu education, with its vernacular teaching. It was at about this time that a story which he had sent to Drum attracted the attention of Can Themba, then editing the short-lived magazine Africa. Motsisi was offered a job on Africa and later moved over to Drum. It was not until 1958, however, that he won wide recognition for his monthly column 'On the Beat' which grew out of an earlier attempt called 'Bugs', initiated during the editorship of Humphrey Tyler (see Chapter Three). Mr. Motsisi is one of the very few members of the Drum team who has remained in Johannesburg. After Drum ceased publication, he joined

the twice-weekly newspaper The World where he wrote a column very similar to his original 'On The Beat'.

In addition to his column, which ran uninterruptedly for five years, Motsisi contributed several stories to The Classic, the literary magazine founded by Nat Nakasa. 'Riot'[1] and 'Boy-Boy'[2] are sketches of township life, impressive for the sharp rendering of facets of that experience. In 'Riot', which has a kind word to say for a policeman, Motsisi notes the quality of sleep that comes to an African mother after she has drunk herself into a stupor:

> Peaceful. No thoughts; no dreams; no hopes nor fears of tomorrow. Bottle-kind of peace, but peace all the same. 3

The stultifying effect of township life is more harrowingly depicted in 'Boy-Boy', the portrait of a child deformed physically and mentally by his conditions of life. Akin, in some ways, to Can Themba's story 'The Urchin', Motsisi's story succeeds in catching the moment which makes the homicide:

> ... Esther, although she was never keen to engage her son in conversation, could not help asking what he was doing.
> 'I'm building a coffin for Topsy.'
> Topsy was the family pet dog.
> 'But Topsy's not dead yet!' Esther was shocked beyond words.
> 'I dreamed he was dead last night.'
> She felt relieved. 'Well it was a bad dream. He is not dead.'
> Tap, tap, tap went the hammer.
> 'Then I'm going to kill him ...' 4

'Boy-Boy' attempts to account for the development of Boy-Boy's delinquent traits, by sketching in the boy's home situation, his mother's job as a shebeen-keeper and the frequency of her lovers. The story remains too slight, however, to be more than a glimpse of social pathology.

'A Very Important Appointment'[5] is a very different type of story, a witty and cynical account of a fruitless attempt by a group of 'Drum-style' Africans to get to a party in Hillbrow, 'the white Sophiatown'. Drink, sex and hilarity intervene to frustrate their

attempts to get their overturned car back on the road, and passing motorists do not stop. The story with its emphasis on hilarity and futility, could be read as a parable of the whole Drum venture. However, it is more likely to be a straightforward account of a typical adventure of a group, illustrative rather than emblematic.

Casey Motsisi writes in an easy and controlled style, without showing strain either in narrative or dialogue. He is perhaps the most naturally gifted of the writers around Drum. His output, however, has been disappointingly small, probably owing, to a large extent, to the demands of writing a monthly, later weekly, column which consisted of a very short story or vignette of township life. 'On The Beat' justly brought recognition to Mr.Motsisi, and has been the basis of his representation in anthologies of African and South African writing. Written in vivid present-tense narrative, this chronicle of township life owes much to Damon Runyon, but more to Langston Hughes's 'Simple Speaks his Mind'. Mr.Motsisi has told me that the protagonist of the column - which is written in the first person - is modelled on the author's brother, who resembled Hughes's Simple. However this may be - there is a great deal of the author in his creation - Motsisi has succeeded admirably in recreating the panache, verve and excitement of his American models.

The locale of 'On the Beat' was the shebeen, and its cast an assortment of township sharp-practitioners, gangsters and 'cherries' (cheries). Its typical drama, as in the well-known 'Kid Hot-water Battle' piece,[7] is the outwitting by the frail Casey of a range of hostile forces, including his boss, tsotsis and the police. Events in 'On the Beat' are propelled by an inexorable logic. In the above mentioned example, Casey is on the wagon, under threat of a five-pound fine to be imposed by his editor for drunkenness. Drinking soda-water, and wondering 'how the world can rid itself of editors and still run

smoothly', Casey is accosted by Kid Nice, 'one tough guy who never takes no for an answer'. Kid Nice invites him for a drink:

> Jobs and fivers are tight these days, but I reckon I might as well go with Kid Nice on account a set of false teeth cost many more times than a fiver and I'll definitely need a new set if I refuse to go with Kid Nice, on account he'll ram my god-given set down my throat. 8

Inevitably they end up drunk. But by managing to persuade the police (with difficulty) to arrest him, Casey not only evades the editor's wrath, but the latter comes rushing down to the police station to save his errant columnist from the labour farm.

Not infrequently, however, Casey does come to grief, and usually as a result of opposing the will of Aunt Peggy, the lady-keeper of his favourite shebeen. In creating Aunt Peggy, a two-fisted shebeen-queen with a heart of gold, Motsisi has undoubtedly contributed a major figure to the urban African pantheon. Aunt Peggy has the verve and vigour of an elemental force:

> I've fallen out with Aunt Peggy. It's hard to believe, but that's how it is. And its not so much on account she gave me a beating up that landed me in this here nurse-full hospital in Corrieville. But mostly on reason that she punctuated her clubbing me with two little words that should never have bulldozed their way into the English lingo: Tickey-line dronklap.* 'You tickey-line drónklap' she stresses as she brings down her meaty fist on my bony face. 9

Something of the energy and invention of Motsisi's language can be felt in this passage. It is a style which draws upon township slang in syntax and vocabulary (cf. Chapter Two). Motsisi's freedom of language is, in his best pieces, however, controlled within a tight and economic narrative structure which allows him to pack a maximum of action and drama into the average seven or eight hundred words he was allowed.

More than anyone else, Casey Motsisi has given expression to the atmosphere and style of the urban African way of life. What he created, though the endless procession of vivid and violent characters, whose fanciful names recall Runyon's inventions, was a black Charivari,

* roughly: 'cheapskate soak'.

a mythology of the townships. Like all myths it was a systematic selection from reality, which became a celebration of exuberance and vitality persisting in the face of powerful antagonistic forces.

Mr.Motsisi's work remains limited by its inability to go beyond a presentation of the immediate scene. At its best it achieves a Chaplinesque comic simplicity. Yet the written word is a medium which demands an explicatory resolution which is lacking in Motsisi's work, which thus remains a species of highly individualized, but necessarily 'popular' art.

2.

No single member of the Drum staff so vividly typified the new urban culture as did Can Themba. Having graduated with a first class degree at Fort Hare, he taught English at Western Native High School to, among others Casey Motsisi and Stanley Motjuwadi. In 1953 he won the Drum short story competition, and joined the staff of the magazine. Antony Sampson has written of him that 'he combined a taste for Euripides and Blake with a restless life of intrigue and action in the streets and backyards of Sophiatown'.[10] Can Themba spoke no African language, and was wholly committed to the urban way of life. He cultivated the style of worldly cynicism, vigorous reporting and political abstentionism which became associated with the Drum group. He was a cult figure in the townships. He has himself described the impact of his exuberance upon the young men of his generation. Many of them have attested to the same effect.

Themba's brilliant intellect found few outlets which could satisfy his restless critical urge. The relations of the Drum group with both the leaders of the African nationalist movement and the black professional elite were tenuous. They were regarded as unreliable, or un-respectable. The whites, who feted them, were at

best an ambivalent audience, patronizing and adulatory by turns. It was, inevitably the semi-educated, or 'uClever', and tsotsi strata who were closest in spirit to the irreverent Drum pose. Can Themba has recorded that 'the tsotsis saw us as cousins'.[11] In response, Themba developed a cult of the tsotsi, adopting the latter as a symbol of African resistance and creativity in the face of white power: a nonchalant figure, outside the law, whose sharpness of wit was matched only by the style of his dress. Thus Themba cultivated what Lewis Nkosi has called 'an extreme cultural "underworldism" of the African township'.[12] The ambiguities of the relationship between the writer and the tsotsis has been explored and dramatized by Themba in 'The Bottom of the Bottle' and 'Crepuscule'.

In addition to his work as a reporter (. later assistant editor), Themba wrote a number of stories for Drum. These conformed, in large measure, to the limitations of the Drum prescription. 'Forbidden Love',[13] the prize-winning story, concerns the love of an African, Mike Chabane, for Dora Randolph, a Coloured girl. Dora's family are anti-'black', and when the news of the couple's relationship gets out, Dora's brothers beat up Mike. Mike's sister hears of it and reveals to him that she is expecting Dora's brother's child. The Chabanes confront the Randolphs. But when Dora's mother hears that she is to be a grandmother, her joy bridges the gulf. The story is remarkable only for the general competence of the narrative, and for its comments on coloured-African relations. Themba puts down Coloured reluctance to be associated with Africans to an unwillingness to fight for their rights.[14]

In 'Mob Passion',[15] published six months later, Themba touched on another topical social problem. The Basotho-Nguni tribal fighting is the background to this story, about love between a young Mosotho girl, and a Xhosa student, Linga. Themba takes the opportunity to lament the lack of African unity, and the national consciousness needed

to achieve it:

> The trouble is, very few of us have a vision comprehensive enough of our destiny ... Hell! and here we are feuding in God's dressing-room even before the curtain rises. 16

'Mob Passion' has an effective and dramatic ending, the lament of the girl over the body of her lover, hacked to death by the 'Russian' (Basotho) mob. But the whole piece is marred by the author's pandering to the popular 'black savagery' analysis of the 'Russian' phenomenon. He describes it as 'a Devils's Party, uncontrollably drawn into hideous orgies'. It was possible, without in any way endorsing divisive tribalism, to offer a more sophisticated explanation of a problem which gladdened the hearts of the racialists.

Though these early stories indicate an interest in contemporary problems, Themba was not to develop into a political writer. His other stories for Drum avoided any mention of contentious issues. 'Nice Time Girl' 17 was an unremarkable piece, exploiting, as its title suggests, the average Drum reader's supposed appetite for episodes of jive and corruption in the Golden City. 'Passionate Stranger'[18] tells of a visit of a young intellectual to the kraal of his friend's father. It is hard to believe that Themba took this story seriously, though the clash between city sophistication and tribal custom may have engaged his interest.

'The Suit' was quite different, a story with a malevolent edge. Philemon an African clerk who rejoices in his punctilious home life and in his beautiful wife learns that she is unfaithful to him. He rushes home one morning to find his wife's lover fled, but the man's suit left behind. He begins to torment his wife with the suit, insisting that it is placed at the table at meal time and 'fed'. He persists in this humiliation of the woman, even in front of her friends, and eventually he drives her to suicide.

It is hard not to feel that Themba takes a certain pleasure in Philemon's strategem and that the remorse at the story's end is an inadequate compensation. But the story affords ample opportunity for the authors wit and for the occasional polysyllabic flourish.

In 'Marta', the last story he published in Drum[20], Themba succeeded in creating a plausible, and moving character, albeit suspended in an unsatisfactory plot. Marta is a nice-time girl who struggles unsuccessfully against her weakness for 'Mahog' (brandy), jazz and excitement. The story begins with Marta staggering drunkenly home with her baby on her back. An onlooker comments, '"'S'funny how a drunk woman's child never falls"'. Marta attempts to reform herself, but is lured back to the shebeen by her friends:

> 'Come-ahn' said Emily. 'Boet Mike's ship is in and Sophia stands all right. Hee-e, Boet Mike say, a bottle of straight! Sophia says, straight! Boet Mike says, straight. We said, no, lets get Marta first ...'
>
> Its not every day that Boet Mike's ship is in and that Sophia stands right. 21

At the shebeen Marta falls in love with a young drummer. She brings him home, but is reluctant to compromise his innocence, which she contrasts with her sense of her own degradation. Her husband, however, interrupts the meeting and assaults the young man. Marta confesses to her friend Sophia that she had loved the young drummer; '"Yes. The drunk woman's child has fallen."' [22] A certain poignancy is developed in this story. Its earnest moral tone should remind us that in Victorian England, too, a recently urbanized population was coming to terms with cash wages and ready liquor. Themba shows, without judging (at least not too harshly) how a moral sense unanchored to any firm social structure cannot save its owner from the pitfalls of an unfamiliar world. The author sympathizes with the attraction exercised by this world:

> What's the use of fretting? Life is too large for that. And life must be lived - sweetly or bitterly - but always intensely. It is like a burning log that crackles at every knot and explodes in little bursting pellets of fire. 23

'Marta' is content to describe the effects of urban conditions. It does not attempt any analysis of the causes of social dislocation and delinquency, as the later 'Kwashiokor' was to do.

The tendency of these stories is to turn away from the treatment of social problems in themselves, and towards a depiction of the conditions of African life with a special emphasis on the dislocation of traditional attitudes in the new situation. In the three stories published by Themba in The Classic the author confines his attention to these problems. 'The Urchin'[24] skilfully charts the dynamics of a group of 'junior tsotsis', ten-or twelve-year old delinquents, whose addiction to American gangster movies and adulation of township thugs leads to killing in a street fight. Here, as in 'Marta', Themba is able to show with sympathetic insight how the impulses of these abandoned children are shaped by diverse elements of the moral chaos that surrounds them.

'The Dube Train'[25], a prize-winning entry in The Classic's competition, is an account of a ride on the early morning train to Johannesburg. The incidents of the journey include a knifing and the bodily hurling of the perpetrator from the moving carriage. They are described with a fine eye for detail, in succinct narrative, and with a sensitive ear for the cadences and idiosyncracies of township speech. The story is low-keyed, for what is described is to be regarded as, almost, normal. Themba had himself written previously about such events in a Drum report, 'Murder on the Trains'.[26] In the story he concludes:

> Odd that no-one expressed sympathy for the boy or the man. They were just greedily relishing the thrilling episode of the morning. 27

'Ten to Ten' is more optimistic.[28] Set in Marabastad location, out of the 'glamour' of Sophiatown, it is a portrait of a physically powerful Venda policeman, who exercises a benevolent, if rough, hegemony over the unlit streets of the location. Known as 'Ten to Ten' by association with the nightly curfew bell, he attempts to interpret 'law and order' in the light of his traditional upbringing, and with the tolerance born of physical self-assurance. Ten to Ten ponders over 'the daily spectacle of the degradation of my people' (this lapse into rhetoric is untypical of Themba's writing), but finds no solution outside himself.

'Ten to Ten', though a slight piece, is Themba's most successful attempt to create a character with a vision distinct from the author's own. In his later stories, Can turned to a form of 'documentary' fiction which, though promising in its flexible approach to the re-telling of fact, was to remain undeveloped. 'Kwashiorkor'[29] is an account of a problem family by a narrator whose sister, a social worker, introduces him to the case. The sister expresses a clinical detachment, while the narrator, whose job as a crime reporter brings him into repeated contact with the family, claims an emotion-based involvement which finally proves less strong than that of his sister. The problems which the story describes are commonplace: moral disorganization, police harassment, and poverty, coupled with an ignorance of dietary needs leading to the malnutritional disease of kwashiorkor. Yet Themba is perhaps less concerned with the facts than with the attitudes of the onlookers, which reflect alternate responses to the problem of the urban African dilemma. Implicit in the story is a consideration of the writer's problem in confronting this material, and especially the question of objectivity or anger. Though making an obeisance to objectivity, the story endorses a form of anger, one which is fluent in its bitterness.

This articulate rage is the most impprtant single quality of Can Themba's writing, and gives it an impact and importance beyond its slender content. It is a rage which, kept in immaculate control, can dwell on the absurdities of the law's despite, or the idiosyncracies of behaviour which affirm the resilient humanity of the individual. (It is the reason why dialogue and characterization are so often the most successful elements in Themba's writing.) Not surprisingly, irony is a constituent of this rage, though in 'Kwashiorkor' it is largely a direct and rhetorical irony, confined to the caustic observations of the narrator.

In 'Crepuscule',[30] however, the irony is implicity in the total situation of the story, and thus more profound in its implications. This story is also documentary in form, introduced by the phrase:

There is a law which says (I'm afraid quite a bit of this will seem like there is a law which says) ... 31

The law is the law of the absurd, for the story is about the Immorality Act, about the author's love affair with a white girl, to be precise. The people of the location, led by the author's previous (African) girlfriend, react to this affair by repeatedly betraying the couple to the police. Though she has agreed to end her relationship with Can, she will not be replaced 'by any white bitch'. With similar reasoning the tsotsis react aggressively, feeling that Can is letting down his fellow blacks. Though they reject the law they also reject Can's liaison. When the author, to placate them, explains that he is doing it for 'revenge', they are admiring:

'Brer Can, you've beaten caustic soda. Look, man, get me fish-meat like this, and 's'true as god, I'll buy you a vung /a car/ '. 32

Themba explains, with patient sympathy, the complex reactions to the fact of his relationship with a white girl. He counterposes this comic account of human absurdity, and hair's breadth escapes, to a clinical exegesis of the law regarding 'relations' between black and

white. The central image of the story is of a white police sergeant bending over a still-warm bed, and solemnly regarding a single blond hair.

Out of this juxtaposition an irony emerges, the mirror image of the oppressive system's absurdity within the oppressed people themselves. Yet the humanity of the township people is affirmed, for their reaction is the only one left to them. The system of law reveals itself, simultaneously, as a usurper of human values both in the individual and in the group. The story includes a plea in this respect:

... leave us some area in time and experience where we may be true to ourselves. It is so exhausting to have to be in reaction all the time. 33

Can Themba's writing is carefully attuned to the quality of this reaction. What he notes, in his reportage as in his fiction, is the ways in which the black people, among whom he lives, cope with the complex and far-flung web of restrictions and definitions imposed upon them. To this task Themba brought a fine ear and eye for the absurd and the idiosyncratic. In 'Crepuscule' this talent is employed to create a deeply ironic structure of apparently illogical events set in a seemingly logical context, and yet finally revealing the context as absurd, and the events and characters who set them in motion are impelled by a basic humanity, the logic of survival.

Themba's faith in the soundness of this reaction was, however, alloyed by a keen sense of its limitations. His plea for a respite is a plea for the right to attain a spiritual and intellectual maturity stemming from the black man's own, untrammelled potential and identity. Here Themba is, of course, speaking for himself, and for the group of which he was a part. Frustration of this kind would not normally be part of the experience of the working masses, preoccupied with more

tangible deprivations. Themba, however, was not greatly attracted to the 'intelligentsia', and his turning to the tsotsi - or a private conception of the tsotsi - was thus an attempt to ally himself to the people, via a stratum with whom he shared many values. It was not an uncommon expedient among writers of this group, and will be discussed further in relation to the writing of Bloke Modisane. Themba went much further than the others, and towards the end of his life turned his back upon the society of white and black intellectuals.

The style of the tsotsis was one permeated with violence and early death. As conceived by Themba, it was one strongly akin to the romantic image of the possessed and self-destructive artist. In 'The Will to Die',[34] the story of an African schoolteacher, Foxy, Themba traced the progress of self-destruction. The problem is posed abstractly:

> I have often wondered if there is not some mesmeric power that fate employs to engage some men deliberately, with macabre relishment, to seek their destruction and to plunge into it. 35

Foxy's path lies through the seduction of one of his pupils, and through drink. He escapes the former hazard by contracting a 'customary union' with the girl, at the price of his self-respect. But alcohol leads him inexorably to his death. 'The Will to Die' does not mention the race problem, but Foxy, too, is 'in reaction' by breaking all the rules that go to sustain the precarious security of an African schoolteacher, the archetypal role of the educated black man:

> Hitherto, he had been meticulous about not cultivating one's iniquities in the face of one's job, but now he seemed to be splashing in the gutter with a will. 36

Foxy's prolonged suicide has certain obvious affinities with the course of Can Themba's own life and career. Some details of the latter have been given in an earlier chapter. There is little doubt that alcohol took a prodigious toll of Can's vital and creative powers. His friends have stated as much. The record of his dispute with Tom

Hopkinson on Drum, which led to his dismissal, strongly suggests that a need to provoke a personal showdown with white authority was a strong element in Themba's personality. That desire must have come from the need to clarify the situation, to get rid, once and for all, of those ambiguities and ironies, which his fiction delighted to record.

Yet two pieces which he wrote for the political review, Africa South, show a different and contradictory facet of this complex man. In 'Requiem for Sophiatown' Themba lamented the destruction of that stamping ground of the black intellectual and artist, which exercised so pervasive an influence over Drum and all its creations. Sophiatown, in itself a legal anomaly in post-war South Africa, was a preservant of those cultural ambiguities and residual rights out of which the urban black culture had been developed. The reaction of Can Themba (and of Bloke Modisane) to Sophiatown's removal was, and remains, a refusal to face the realities of the South African situation, which was moving away from the muddle of its colonial past towards a stratification which embodied the strict, ideological racism of the nationalist regime. Themba and his fellow writers belonged to a moment in South African history when the paradoxes were at a peak, as the Nationalist onslaught commenced. As members of the leading stratum of black South Africa, they were in a position to feel the contradictions most keenly:

> We were those sensitive might-have-beens who had knocked on the door of white civilization (at the highest levels that South Africa could offer) and had heard a gruff 'no' or a 'Yes' so shaky that we withdrew our snail horns at once. 37

How revealing is that parenthesis! When the white government stepped in to slam the door firmly in the face of the black man who claimed a part in 'white civilization', the black intelligentsia (certainly that part of it to which the Drum group belonged) collapsed. In 'The Bottom of the Bottle', from which this quotation is taken, Themba

describes a drinking session of his coterie, a group of young black men who looked up to the 'inimitable Can Von Themba' as a guide and inspiration. Deep into the night the session was interrupted by a group of ANC senior members, who appealed to Themba to use his influence to rally the intellectuals around Congress. Themba records how, struggling to his feet, he barked out the Congress slogan 'Afrika'. The delegation responded with the conventional reply, but as they left Themba fancied he heard them dismiss him as a drunk. And for his part, he describes the exchange of slogans with a hint of derision.

Much more has been written about Can Themba than he wrote himself. All who knew him testify to the brilliance of his intellect and to a potential creativity which was never realized. The moving spirit and most typical embodiment of the Drum ethos ended his life in self-imposed exile in rural Swaziland. Can Themba turned his back on the world of the white intellectuals who helped some of his fellow writers to scholarships in Britain and the U.S.A. He turned his back too on the national movement of his people, with an air of what he would have called 'superior-ness'. Nor was he able to channel his intense vision of the South African reality into fiction worthy of it. His remaining writings are indeed a meagre sum. Yet more than any other individual, in his weaknesses as in his strengths, Themba epitomized and expressed the urban culture of the black Johannesburg.

Chapter V - References

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2 'Boy-Boy', ibid., Vol. 2. No.4

3 ibid., Vol. 1, No. 1.

4 ibid., Vol. 2, No.4

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7 Drum, December 1960.

8. ibid.

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10 Antony Sampson, Drum, London, 1956

11 The Will to Die, Heinemann, London 1972, p. 110

12 L.Nkosi, Introduction to TWTD

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30 ibid.

31 ibid., p. 3.

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Chapter VI

Situations: Bloke Modisane and Lewis Nkosi.

'Situations ... a term of abuse for members of the African middle class trying to "situate" themselves above the masses.'

(Lewis Nkosi)

The writings of Bloke Modisane and Lewis Nkosi, though differing in style, show a striking similarity in content and in concern. They are the works of isolated African intellectuals, divorced by interests and aspirations from the bulk of the black community and refused entry, or at best given an equivocal 'pass', to the world of the white intelligentsia. Drum afforded to its writers an opening to this world, but it was one which demanded as a condition that the Africans should play a pre-conceived social role. They were invited to parties, spoke to gatherings of those interested in 'the native problem' and were presented to overseas visitors both as the voice of African grievances and as a show of black achievement. Ordinary Africans, on the other hand, looked on them, on their own admission, either with suspicion as 'sell-outs', or with awe as semi-white men. African nationalists regarded them with some contempt. In township parlance, black intellectuals were called 'Situations', in Nkosi's gloss, 'a term of abuse for members of the African middle class trying to "situate" themselves above the masses.' [1]

This experience has, naturally, left its mark upon the writings of these authors who are concerned, in a way in which Mphahlele and La Guma are not, with the problem of their own identity, cultural integrity and personal integrity in face of the white liberal embrace. The problem was one of social mobility, complicated by race. The first generation of western-educated Africans has born witness to a sense of loss, of being cut off from that directness, spontaneity and immediacy of experience which is the property of the poor in African and other pre-industrial societies. In Africa this is in part the complaint of writers of the 'negritude' school, and is behind that pre-occupation with traditional myth and with childhood experiences which has been showing itself recently in the works of some anglophone West African writers.* In these independent

* this tendency was pointed out by Gerald Moore at a seminar at Leeds, 1972.

African countries the intellectual could find, in serving his people in a social or political role, some compensation for his loss. Or he might become a professional 'been-to', claiming absorption into the world of the English-speaking intelligentsia. The South Africans were denied these things, except at the price of exile. Yet, in the fifties, they inhabited a kind of half-world, a limbo which consisted of excursions to Houghton or Hillbrow, 'the white Sophiatown', interspersing the squalor and violence of the locations. Unable to found a secure life-style or value-system of his own, the Situation was defined by relationships - towards whites, tsotsis, politicians and the masses. The tsotsi, in a sense, became the culture-hero of the intellectuals, for he shared their taste for the good things in life (at least for jazz, fast cars, and fashion) but could acquire them with a knife, without compromise. The shebeen was a possible way out of the dilemma of the Situation, one chosen by Can Themba and Casey Motsisi. Another was political involvement. Both were dangerous. Mphahlele and La Guma, however, who were to varying extents involved in the Congress movement, seem to have gained from it a stability, confidence and orientation which has contributed to the quality of their work. It shows itself in the value and respect they accord to the everyday life of ordinary black people, and thus in their ability to portray that experience with imaginative completeness. It is this sense of a context of authentic experience that is absent from the work of Modisane and Nkosi, which is often febrile and confused.

2.

Bloke Modisane was born in Sophiatown in 1923 and lived there until he left South Africa in 1958. Forced to leave school by the brutal murder of his father, he worked in the liberal bookshop Vanguard Books, until joining Drum in the early fifties. On Drum he worked as

a reporter and music critic. Three stories, 'The Dignity of Begging', 'The Fighter who Wore Skirts' and 'The Respectable Pickpocket', were published under his name in Drum.[2] A further story, 'The Situation'[3] won the 1958 Alban Writers Club award. After leaving South Africa Modisane worked in London taking acting roles in a number of plays, and spent a year at Harvard. In this period he wrote Blame Me on History[4], an autobiographical work of social and political criticism, which was published in 1963. He has also published many articles and reviews on topics relating to Africa and African culture in journals in Europe and America, and still acts on radio and TV.

The three stories published in Drum form a prelude to Mr.Modisane's more substantial achievements. Written under very different circumstances and to suit conventions alien to the writer's own intentions, they nevertheless display the major concerns and general approach of the later work. 'The Dignity of Begging', Modisane has written, is about:

> an educated African capable in any society of earning himself an independent living but handicapped by being black in a society which has determined that being black is the condition of being dependent on white charity, in the same sense that a cripple is dependent for his existence on public charity. 5

If this was the intention, the achievement must be described as something less. The hero of the story, Nathaniel Mokmare, is a matriculated beggar who saves his alms in the back of his piano and has just reached the point of financial independence when he is confined in the Bantu Refuge (a sort of work-house). Some skilful talking gets him out and he returns to his family in Pampoenfontein (sic) to reveal £183 in the piano, and a further £670 in a building society, the profits of gambling. Mokmare's financial adroitness and articulacy are contrasted with the low morale and defeatism of his beggar friend, Richard Serurubele, an "exploited beggar", of whom Nathaniel remarks:

> Serurubele is a fool as well as a hypocrite; if he is forced to beg, I wonder who forces him to hand over everything he possesses. His honesty is so appalling it would make a bishop turn green with envy. 6

Serurubele is a 'good boy', and his way of life is contrasted with the cynical Mokmare, who is able to earn a living as a pianist, but chooses to win at his enemy's game, overcoming the label thrust upon him by society. The story is written in the historic present tense, adopting some of the devices of the American 'tough' style, and aiming some well-directed side blows at white generosity. The noble-mindedness of the whites - the magistrates, social workers and alms-givers - derives from their over-endowment with the good things of life. But, typically, the force of the irony is two-edged, for it is Serurubele's own family who exploit him, while it was the over-solicitousness and deference of his family which drove Mokmare to leave home. Here Modisane touches on the situation of the intellectual.

If the story, finally, falls short of the author's intentions, it is because the fable is not fully worked out. The bulk of the irony is contained in the asides of the hero-narrator, rather than in the events of the story which are rather haphazardly put together. The ending, too, is unconvincing for the author suggests a reconciliation with his family which rests purely on his acquisition of the cash, rather than any re-alignment of relationships. (We should remember, however, the moral status of money, pointed out in Chapter Three.) Nat Mokmare may have proved his manhood by providing financially for his family, but he has not come to terms with either Serurubele or the whites.

Mr.Modisane's two other stories published in Drum are of considerably less substance. 'The Fighter who Wore Skirts' is about a hen-pecked boxer who, by a domestic war of attrition, succeeds in reducing his wife to the desirable state of submissiveness. The story is competent but unremarkable, except perhaps for the practised

air of the dialogue which enlivens the scenes of domestic strife. 'The Respectable Pickpocket' is written in the manner of 'The Dignity of Begging', but lacks the latter's broader dimensions. Ezra Gumgade, alias Alan Osmond Martins, is a pick-pocket who takes pride in cheating his accomplices as well as in outwitting slowminded court officials. The story points out that 'sentiment is a sign of weakness', but the hero ends up in prison as a result of rejecting a sincere offer of love from the nice-time girl, Tandi.

Of these stories, Modisane has commented that, though he did not at the time recognise their sociological significance', their common characteristic was a posture of defiance towards law and order and of contempt for authority. An agressive assertion of self is indeed a common element, and one which is expressed, less attractively, in the domestic trivialities which are the subject of 'The Fighter Who Wore Skirts'. These earlier stories show the Situation prior to the recognition of his predicament, acting out the wish-fulfilling role of the outlaw whose wit and courage never fail him. In this sense they are immature works, the projections of an author who is not yet self-aware.

'The Situation', written some years after the latest of these stories, is a piece of far greater clarity and force. Caiaphas Sedumo, an MSc. in psychology, is threatened and humiliated in a Johannesburg city street by a group of Boer farmers, who are affronted by the very appearance of this 'cheeky kaffir'. He escapes a beating only by abasing himself. He returns to Sophiatown, full of self-hate and despair, and is not comforted by an old man who reminds him that whites are 'not like people'. He decides to go to a shebeen in order to assuage his shame, but the story of his humiliation has got out. The tsotsis, upset at the humiliation of one whom they partly admire, taunt him with cowardice and force him, at gun-point, to recite from

Shakespeare. A rival gang appears with a blues singer in tow, and the shebeen is united by the effect of the blues, 'the love-hate relationship with the colour black'. Caiaphas leaves, feeling excluded from their celebration, and returns to the isolation of his room.

The story turns upon the three encounters with the whites, the old African and the tsotsis. Together these define the Situation. The confrontation with the whites brings out the challenge to white pride implicit in the very appearance of an educated African, as well as the way the whites meet that challenge. Education and sophistication are the property of the powerful, that is, of the whites. Made conscious of their own lack of these qualities the farmers resort to their power. Because they can thus enforce their view, the whites are able to implant in Caiaphas's mind the recognition of their superiority. His reaction is complex:

> Yes, morons, enjoy yourselves; but the day will come when I will laugh. I too will laugh. Go on, laugh, at the monkey, make the monkey tell jokes, make it do tricks; but keep your eyes on the monkey, the monkey has his eyes on you. 7

The idea of revenge is used to accommodate the label of monkey, which the Situation is forced to recognise as his own, by the evidence of his own powerlessness. In his conversation with the old African, Caiaphas is even more vulnerable, for he cannot accept the latter's proffered condolence nor his sense of self-assurance. The old man's assertion that whites are 'not like people' is based upon an historical formulation in traditional African culture of what constitutes the behaviour proper to a human being. Not fulfilling these canons the whites are outside the bounds of human morality and humiliation at their hands is therefore not to be taken as a degradation of self. Caiaphas recognises the strength of this conviction, which he cannot share, and comments angrily to himself, '... what right has he to look

into my soul ... does he know that education alienated the black man from his skin?'[8]

The relation between the Situation and the tsotsis is a much closer one. Like him they accommodate themselves to white rule, but wage a criminal guerrilla warfare. The tsotsis aspire to white values and thus they admire the Situation's learning, while despising his cowardice. In turn Caiaphas admires the tsotsis' style while despising their 'vulgarity'. He mollifies the tsotsi leader, Deadwood Dick, by loudly admiring his Cardin 'can't get' tie. Both Caiaphas and the blues singer are patronised by their respective gangs for their entertainment value and, perhaps, prestige. Yet it is the blues singer as the expression of the historical experience of black people, who is the true voice of the shebeen community.

In 'The Situation', Bloke Modisane has been able to pin-point accurately the pressures which determine the state of mind of the black intellectual, and to cast them effectively in a fictional mould. The story is well imagined and convincing, especially in its dialogue. Caiaphas's reflections in his room, though perhaps over-written, are an adequate account of the general theme of the story, that 'the process of re-creation was shaping in clay a facsimile of man in the image of South Africa. It was a hollow man without reservoir of passion or human compassion.' The shebeen at mosphere, and particularly the colourful language and suppressed violence of the tsotsis, is well described, and pertinent to the story's theme. Occasionally Modisane lets the barrier between himself and his hero slip, by lapsing into the condescending manner of Caiaphas. This is one weakness; another is the excessive reliance on the words of the blues sung in the shebeen to make the point about the nature of black solidarity. These small flaws, however, do not seriously impair a story which is among the more successful and significant in South African writing.

If 'The Situation' is Modisane's clearest statement of the experience of the black intellectual in South Africa, Blame Me On History, written in the first years of his exile, is an account of the process whereby both that experience and the understanding of it were acquired. Though an autobiographical work, it is thus an integral part of the author's literary production, being rather an imaginative reconstruction of the author's life as symbol, than a record of events and personalities. Blame Me On History is written round a set, rather than a sequence, of situations. These range in time between the death of the narrator's father and his own departure from South Africa. Sophiatown provides the 'still point' about which the world of the book turns. The township's violence, squalor and eventual destruction by the white authorities stands as the central symbol of the narrator's tragedy: his failure, in the face of the pressures and conflicts of South African society, to construct and sustain a fulfilling life. The book begins with the narrator walking through the half-demolished township, and returns periodically to this progress, and to the final period of his life there, taking a fresh departure from the memories evoked by the half-ruined township and the residual street scenes he confronts. Thus the separate themes of the book are woven into a mesh of incidents, reminiscence and symbolic experience. The unity of the whole is preserved by the dominance and recurrence of these themes, and by the tone of the writing, which is remarkable in its ability to sustain a high level of emotive power without becoming monotonous or hysterical. By structuring his narrative around a central image, and adopting a diachronic approach to events, Modisane gives to the account of his own life a dimension of universality. This is the main purpose of the book: the author's life is to be seen as the creation of history.

The initial impetus and direction of that life is provided by

the murder of the narrator's father and the consequent struggle of his mother to feed, clothe and educate her children. Ma-Bloke became a shebeen queen to earn the money. Her frequent humiliation at the hands of the police had a powerful influence on the boy. Bloke worked in a progressive book shop, where he made his first contact with liberal whites. The complications, emotional and legal, of relations with whites form an important part of the narrative, as does the cultural deprivation and frustration felt by the narrator. The account of his first attempts to write, his work on Drum and with the film director Lionel Rogosin, culminates in his resignation and illegal departure from South Africa. Interspersed and subordinate to these events in the chronicle of his unhappy marriage to Fiki Plaatje, granddaughter of the writer S.T.Plaatje. The early life is seen against the background of poverty and violence in the townships; the later years are situated (the word is difficult to avoid) in the context of his white liberal friends, and the opposite appeal of African nationalism.

Violence and the conflicting emotions it aroused in the author are a principle interest. Modisane describes vividly the despairing cries for help which disturbed the sleep of township dwellers, and the fear which prevented them from aiding the tsotsis' victims. Hatred and the fear of violence conflict in the author's mind, inhibiting him in later years from reaching a personal resolution of political problems. The narrow distance between the just exercise of force and the lust of revenge is exampled in an early incident in which the author and his friends, having formed a vigilante group, beat a young tsotsi almost to death in what had begun as an, innocent enough, attempt to question him. In later years the concept of armed revolt as propagated by PAC friends both attracted and repelled Modisane.

It was in the pursuit of culture, particularly in reading, listening to music and the cinema, that the narrator sought to escape from the clutch of poverty and violence. There is a frenetic, obsessional edge to the young intellectual's quest for culture which is unattractive and yet understandable. Modisane tells how he went out of his way to cultivate the friendship of white intellectuals, deliberately displaying his knowledge of classical music, and so on, to impress and surprise them. Unable to attend theatres or concert-halls because of his colour, he would listen to current performances on record or read the texts and reviews of plays then showing. There was in this activity a deep ambivalence which the author notes in his narrative but which, one feels, he has hardly resolved. The African intellectual despises his white counterpart for his pusillanimous attitude to the race laws, his unconscious prejudice and simple ignorance of African life. To overthrow these assumptions is thus an African victory, but one which consists in itself of winning white approval and in turn undermining the intellectual's sense of his own 'Africanness'. The Situation's victories are always pyrrhic.

Modisane's attitude towards friendships with whites shows a similar ambivalence. White friends are clearly important to him and a large amount of the book is devoted to describing the complications of 'mixed' friendships. Describing white parties, the author remarks:

'I remember that I used to become overpowered by a sense of self-consciousness, I felt that I was a curiosity at most of these tea-parties. I was a piece of rare Africana.' 9

On the other hand, black domestic servants resented his presence at these occasions, either because he appeared to them as a 'sell-out', or because he 'lowered the tone'. This is the definitive experience of the Situation: to be placed in an uncomfortable relation both to the world from which he comes and to that to which he aspires. It is the experience of isolation:

> I have suffered too much alone, and bled too deeply, alone, the being alone is unbearable. I am the eternal alien between two worlds; the Africans call me a Situation, by Western standards I am uneducated. 10

This theme of isolation is the most deeply felt in the book. Modisane describes it in terms of an existential alienation. It is a form of suffering emanating from the writer's own consciousness and cutting him off even from those whom he wishes to love. Of his wife he confesses:

> I persecuted Fiki for her colour as viciously as the white man did. 11

Modisane, in Blame Me On History, accepts white as the colour of achievement and hates his own colour.

The isolation of the Situation inhibits him politically as well as personally. Blame Me On History is effective in its attack upon apartheid, particularly in its use of well-chosen quotations to illustrate the absurdity as well as the cruelty of apartheid legislation. His writings on the African political scene, however, are peculiarly inept, especially the extremely unconvincing attack upon the Freedom Charter. Modisane shows all the intellectual's ability to confuse the wood with the trees, when confronted with the problems of political action. The confused reactions and emotional immaturity, though effective when noted as the subjective dilemma of the Situation, are inadequate tools of analysis in a situation where the emotive half-truth can have serious, even fatal, consequences.

Blame Me On History is both a social and personal document. The author's purpose has been to lay out for inspection his own life and personality as the product of a specific social experience, in order to indict the system that produced it:

> ... whilst I was encouraged to look back to the kraal, to revive the image of the noble savage, I was nevertheless expected to conduct myself in a civilized manner, to conform to the stereotype which answers to 'boy' ... But I am a freak, I do presume an appreciation of Western music, art, drama, and philosophy; I can rationalise as well as they, and using their own set of assumptions, I presume myself civilized and then set about writing a book with the title,

Blame Me On History, which is an assertion that if I am a freak, it should not be interpreted as a failure of their education for a Caliban, but a miscalculation of history. But this is heresy, a subversive plot of history against well-established South African systems of beliefs. 12

The book may be fairly compared, therefore, to works such as Eldridge Cleaver's Soul on Ice, or Baldwin's The Fire Next Time. In these works the authors, as members of a minority group, confront the majority with the product of their own privilege, saying in effect: this is what you have made of me. In literary terms the form has affinities with the confessional autobiography. Nevertheless, its purpose is different, and affects the tone and tenor of the whole. The impetus towards total honesty and the objective contemplation of the self is clearly less strong in the 'social' autobiography. Modisane has an interest in making himself appear unattractive, since the blame is to be hung on white South Africa. But unlike Cleaver, who, to fulfil the label pinned on the black man by white America, went out and raped, Modisane's principle charge is that he has not been allowed to succeed in escaping from the label. He cannot be accepted as an intellectual (a white man) because the whites won't let him, but he remains committed to this aspiration. This commitment cuts him off from the only group to which he can wholly belong and through which he might escape the 'stereotype which answers to "boy" ' - the African people and their political leadership. To Eldridge Cleaver, the total commitment to reviving the dignity and identity of the most brutalized and degraded of his black fellows, afforded a poise and a compassion which mediates and transforms the tension and hostility implicit in the subject-matter of his essays.

Blame Me On History lacks such a controlling force of digested experience. Nowhere is this more clear than in the author's attitude to sexuality and to women. He exploits both, seeking in sex merely a release of tension and in women, at least black women, a receptable

for that release. He describes semen as 'filth'.

It will be objected that in attacking the subject of the autobiography I am missing or, worse, failing to accept its main point: that the personality of its subject is the responsibility of history. Here we may tentatively distinguish between a literary and a social criticism. In a social autobiography the author presents himself as a persona, and his life as a paradigm; however unattractive this persona may be, the distance between it and the author will prevent the work from being flawed by undigested emotion. It is clarity of vision and of definition, the result of comprehending one's own experience, which distinguishes the work of literature from the social document, the kind of raw material presented in Chapter Two of this study. The quality of perception and of expression is what marks off Alfred Hutchinson's Road to Ghana from Clements Kadalie's My Life and the ICU; the former is a work of literature, although a purely factual record, while Kadalie's memoir, though a more important historical document, is not.

Modisane's remains a mixed achievement. Blame Me On History, concerned with the experience and isolation of the African intellectual, contains many effective passages, and some compelling invective. It is best when dealing with domestic events and with those whom the author loves: the passages about his mother and sister are both convincing and touching. It is marred, principally, by lack of self-comprehension, which saps the force of the irony and diverts the attack. Blame Me On History was published in 1963, only shortly after Bloke Modisane's departure from South Africa. There have been no further significant publications to evidence a growth of the author's vision.

3.

Lewis Nkosi was born in Natal in 1938 and joined the staff of Drum during the editorship of Sylvestor Stein. He worked as a dark-

room assistant and later as a reporter. Mr.Nkosi left South Africa in the early 1960s and, after spending some time in the United States, settled in Britain where he has worked as a freelance journalist for the BBC, The Observer, and other journals. He was for a time literary editor of The New African, in which he has published two stories, 'As for Living'[13] and 'Holiday Story'[14] on South African themes. Another story, 'Musi'was printed in Presence Africaine. A play The Rhythm of Violence has been published by Three Crowns, and a further story, 'The Prisoner' is included in the Penguin anthology, African Writing Today. Mr.Nkosi has also written critical essays and reviews on the subject of African literature. Some of these, together with three essays on South African society and two on black America and Afro-American culture have been collected and re-published by Longman under the title Home and Exile.

Mr. Nkosi's work differs from that of Bloke Modisane by being more formal, 'literary' and deliberate. That is to say, Nkosi approaches his fiction in a spirit of high seriousness seeking to create 'literature as "revelation" or as a "maker of value', or, in another description, 'so to transmute the given social facts that we can detect an underlying moral imagination at work.'[15] Mr.Nkosi's stories are a species of moral fable, the events of which are intended to give on to a more profound vista, the revelation of values. As formulaic descriptions of literature go, this one is probably not much worse than any other, and serves as a convenient point of departure for a study of the author's own fiction. It will be found necessary, however, to place these works in a more solid context in order to evaluate them.

In 'As For Living' Ruth Shaw, a white liberal housewife, and Sipo Dumisa, a Zulu law student, go to bed together. Sipo is lodging with the Shaws in defiance of South African convention, and Mr.Shaw is away on business. The characters are motivated by a mechanical desire

which the author makes no attempt to situate in terms of their personalities or experience. He relies heavily on the language of sexuality to inject drama into the relationship, a device which negates the individuality of the characters (insofar as they have any) and frequently becomes absurd:

> He could borrow Eddie's bathing trunks. Such awful summer weather! Would he like to take off his clothes and ... her mind stopped, dazed by the heat, crushed by need, and she fingered the elastic band of her soft slip beneath the gay floral skirt. 16

The piece ends with the orgasm, and is not concerned to establish any meaning for the action beyond its mere occurrence. Necessarily so, for the function of the characters is merely referential. Inter-racial sex is illegal in South Africa and punishable by imprisonment. It is this fact which generates what tension there is in the story and is intended to imbue it with moral significance. The sex act is a metaphor for transcending the apartheid barrier. There is no other dimension.

The story fails for two reasons that are closely related. Its representation of the characters and their interaction is bare and inadequate; the events do not flow from the characters as they have been imaginatively conceived by the author, but from the end-purpose of the author himself. Secondly, the revelation of values which the story is intended to bring forth is inadequate to the social facts which it seeks, in Nkosi's phrase, to transmute. The conflict between black and white in South Africa is of greater complexity in terms of inter-personal relations than this story can account for. The gesture of white sexual self-offering (Nkosi uses the image of crucifixion) cannot provide a resolution.

Much the same is true of 'Holiday Story', the other piece published in <u>The New African</u>. The content of this story is so arbitrary and un-worked out that a precis is of little value. Suffice it to say that the device of the white woman offering herself to atone

for the cruelties of apartheid is here used even more abstractly, the sudden outcome of a chance encounter between a liberal lady and a young South African whose family has been re-classified as Coloured. The white woman drops her pants as soon as practicable. The black man, presumably, feels better.

'Musi',[17] a longer story, does attempt to create a subjective context for the action, again an inter-racial affair, in its examination of the relations between Ruth Smith, her parents, and the Zulu overseer of the Smith farm, Musi. Kelly Smith, is impotent and stricken with cancer, and his wife has taken to having affairs with the neighbouring farmers. The adolescent Ruth is shocked into an awareness of sex, both through over-hearing her parents' quarrels and by feeling the sensual masculinity of Musi, who, because of the farmer's incapacity, has increasingly taken over the running of the farm. Musi is attracted to the young 'missus', and when she accidentally stumbles into his arms, matters almost come to a head. Racial inhibitions and the evasiveness of the Zulu prevent this happening. Musi's masculinity has impressed itself upon Ruth's mother too; she is simultaneously annoyed, repelled and attracted. The story culminates in Ruth's discovery, on a hot afternoon, of the Zulu foreman and her mother making love on the floor of an abandoned hut. Recalling the event in later life, Ruth realizes that 'she would never be all right because although it was her flesh that the man had touched, it was finally her mother who had taken her place on the bed of straws.' [18]

'Musi' is marked by the influence of D.H.Lawrence, both in its evocative descriptions of the sensuous heat of the farm and in its treatment of Musi himself. The scene in which Ruth watches the Zulu washing is closely reminiscent of Lady Chatterley's Lover. However, the Lawrentian structure is not closely adhered to and the innovations (or deviations) have the unfortunate effect of blurring the moral

purpose of the story. Kelly Smith is sympathetically treated (he is described, in a fine phrase, as playing chess 'with a slow, combative hand') while his wife, Caroline, is a whore. This fact tends to diminish the moral standing of Musi himself. Moreover, although we can readily accept the traumatic nature of Ruth's experience, it is hard to know quite what we are to make of it. It would seem that, according to his own critical prescriptions, Nkosi has grafted a symbolic pattern akin to that of Lawrence into his own chosen theme of inter-racial sex, without fully bringing the two into accord. Indeed, it is an unfortunate consequence of this particular synthesis that it leaves the black man, a Zulu Mellors, closely related to his fellow tribesman Jim Makokela, the stereotyped 'noble savage' figure created by J.P.Fitzpatrick.[19] At any rate, Musi remains a cypher. The story, however, one of Nkosi's most ambitious piece of writing, shows that, despite a tendency to verbal 'over-kill', the author is capable of creating a range of effects within a sustained narrative.

Perhaps the most successful of Mr.Nkosi's stories is 'The Prisoner'.[20] Drawing on the manner of Kafka's <u>In the Penal Colony</u>, he presents a dryly ironical first person account of the exchange of roles between a black prisoner, Mulela, and his white jailer, George. Mulela tells the story from his newly-won position of power, and in describing derisively the arrogance of white authority, now reduced to impotence, illustrates the same qualities himself. The core of the story consists of Mulela's explanations of how he and the black servant--'girl', Zaza, conspired to overthrow the white man by exploiting George's contradictory lust for 'black womanhood' and his puritan sense of guilt. There is a vital insight here into the relations between black and white in South Africa. Nkosi, however, fails to realize the dramatic potentiality of this central action, and thus misses his chance. Although effective as a satirical

exposition of the baasskap mentality 'The Prisoner' is far too discursive, its narrative imcluding large and unnecessary chunks out of Mdela's past as a raffish 'Drum-type' intellectual. Elsewhere the narrative hovers uneasily on the borders of allegory, and the persona of the narrator is sometimes in danger of breaking down.

The main achievement of 'The Prisoner' is perhaps the striking and sustaining of an appropriate and attractively ironical tone; the ambivalence of the ending, which leaves the reader in doubt as to the durability of Mulela's regime, is well set up and executed.

In all these stories, Nkosi has been concerned primarily with depicting the South African tragedy in terms of inter-personal relations, and specifically with the attitudes of the whites. In 'As For Living', 'Holiday Story' and 'Musi' the black characters remain relatively undeveloped and are seen externally by the author. This rather surprising quality demonstrates the essential affinity between Mr.Nkosi's writing and that of Bloke Modisane, to which attention was drawn at the beginning of this chapter. Both writers are concerned with that essentially liberal concept, 'race relations', and with the possibility and the necessity of white acceptance of the black man. Both see the relations between black and white in terms of a sexuality/power nexus, and place the trauma of inter-racial cont acts at the heart of the South African experience. Except intermittently, in Blame Me On History, Mr.Modisane does not deal with directly political themes. Lewis Nkosi, however, has approached this difficult subject-matter in his play The Rhythm of Violence. 21

The play presents a successful attempt by a multi-racial group of students to blow up Johannesburg Town Hall while a National Party meeting is in progress there. In Act One the historical and political context is established by a dialogue between the two Boer policemen against the background noise of an African protest meeting. In the

second and third Acts the students are nervously celebrating the impending bang. They discuss the rights and wrongs of violent political action. During the party, Tula, younger brother of the student leader Gama Zulu, strikes up a tentative and tender relationship with a young Afrikaner girl, Sarie Marais (sic). In the course of his conversation with Sarie, Tula learns that her father has gone to the Town Hall meeting in order to resign from the National Party. To Tula, Gama and the rest, this fact seems to have 'made everything that was right seem wrong suddenly'. After vain attempts to warn Sarie's father by telephone (!), Tula steals off to the meeting to try to save him. Arriving as the bomb explodes, he is killed with the whites. As she is kneeling over Tula's body, Sarie involuntarily gives the plot away to the police. Looked at in the light of Mr.Nkosi's identification of literature with the moral fable, we can observe two propositions contained in the play: that, in Sarie's words, 'There must be a way of redirecting history to avoid tragedy provided there is enough love'; but, that the rhythm of violence, once set in motion (as it has been by the whites), will override individual conscience and power to love. The inevitability of violence is forcefully demonstrated by the conversation between the two policemen at the end of Act One:

Jan: What can they do without guns?
Piet: Ja, what can they?
Jan: Just talk!
Piet: Dammit, I wish they would start something! Anything! So we can handle them once and for all. 22

The play suffers from an absence of movement and from the abject slackness of the dialogue in much of Act Two and Act Three. The student party scenes are wasted in much pointless inter-racial banter, and a rehash of some of the 'township life' material. The political discussion does not do much to clarify the action of the play, being rather puerile in conception. Nkosi is not a playwright, though in The Rhythm of Violence he does succeed in sparking off a few moments of drama.

Mr.Nkosi has read widely and thought much about the problems of South African art and society, as his essays in Home and Exile demonstrate. His writing of fiction reflects this intimacy of knowledge, and to it owes what plangency and force it can muster. Yet one gets the impression that the impulse to create fiction has not, in Lewis Nkosi's case, carried him through to an adequate artistic grasp of the dynamics of his subject-matter. Thus one notes, even in his best writing, a slackening of intent and concentration, just where the fiction demands that the author rend from his material its fullest significance. It is so although he is the most self-conscious and mannered among the black writers in South Africa.

4.

It is incongruous, in a sense, that a serious comparison can be made between Afro-american writers such as Cleaver, Baldwin, even Leroy Jones, and Nkosi and Modisane, black South Africans. The black minority Americans belong to an oppressed/people whose cultural tradition and identity have been almost obliterated first by slavery, and then by the aggressive impact of the mass society of the USA. The black South Africans, though subject to far greater deprivation of rights, belong to a majority group whose identity and traditions, though much battered, continue to survive. Yet Lewis Nkosi and Bloke Modisane represent a minority consciousness. Their almost obsessional concern to withstand the force of white culture, their ambivalent attitudes towards the possibility of inter-racial relations, their fixation upon the dynamics of personal power (black and white), sexuality and violence, are products of a state of mind typical of a threatened minority. These are not qualitities and interests found in the work of all black South African writers. They closely reflect the position of the isolated African intellectual. These writers turn their backs upon the richness and density of the experience of the black urban masses, preferring to draw

their fictional resources from the unstable and often false and superficial world of the bohemian intelligentsia. Their work thus has a brittle and incomplete quality. For though it may be at the meeting point of black and white - for instance, the 'mixed' party - that feeling is most intense, yet unless it is placed within the larger context of the daily customary life of black and white, a distorted and finally inadequate image must emerge.

This argument is not a plea for a naturalistic style of fiction crowded with figures from the townships and studded with their domestic dramas; it is an assertion that the values and raw experience necessary to produce an aesthetically complete and philosophically satisfying fiction of the South African reality, must reside in the experience of those masses whose presence must be felt, th o ugh they remain off-stage. That presence is the substance and achievement of Can Themba's 'Crepuscule', and the strength of Alex La Guma's novels. It is lacking in the work of these writers, and the trauma of the Situation cannot compensate for it, for it cannot comprehend itself.

Compounded with this weakness, and closely allied to it, is a technical indiscipline, which amounts almost to a failure of integrity. Both Nkosi and Modisane are accomplished writers of prose, yet the former often relies on gimmicks and over-writing, while the latter scrambles his material together in a way which puts the whole seriousness of what he writes in doubt.

The achievement of these writers rests upon the quality of their observation of the mental processes, attitudes and ways of expression of men and women caught up in a machine of race domination. Modisane in 'The Situation' has recorded with clarity and precision the impact of this experience upon one who has cut himself off from his only refuge, his own people. Nkosi's 'The Prisoner' contains some very

sensitive insights into the nature of power domination and the complex inter-relations which have resulted from the clash of opposed African and European cultural traditions. 'Musi', an interesting failure, attempts something more ambitious, to give its subject-matter a universal symbolic reference. One feels of these writers that a deeper and more determined meditation upon the subject of their fiction might result in works of considerable significance, for their's is not a failure of talent. Yet the blight of exile may well have destroyed that prospect.

Chapter VI - References

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4 Thames & Hudson, London, 1965.

5 BMOH, p. 88

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10 ibid., p. 218

11 ibid., p. 219

12 ibid., p. 179

13 The New African, vol. v, No.6. p. 103

14 ibid., vol. vii, No.7, p. 14

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17 'Musi', Presence Africaine, Vol.60, No.181, p. 96.

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22 ibid., Act One.

Chapter VII

Naked Selves: Ezekiel Mphahlele

'We are left with ourselves to
depend on ... only our naked
selves with our ancestors to
think of.'

(Ezekiel Mphahlele)

Ezekiel Mphahlele is perhaps the most prominent and respected of South Africa's black writers. His works, which include three volumes of short stories, the widely read autobiographical Down Second Avenue,[1] and his most recent novel The Wanderers,[2] have commanded the attention of critics. He has been represented in most anthologies of African writing. A book of criticism, The African Image,[3] published in 1962, was a notable addition to the discussion of African and South African writing.

Mr.Mphahlele was born in 1919 and spent his childhood years in Bapedi country in the northern Transvaal, and in Marabastad, a location of Pretoria. These years have had a pervasive influence on his writings. After finishing primary school he went to St.Peters and to Adams College where he trained as a teacher. In 1947 he published his first collection of stories Man Must Live.[4] Involvement in the campaign against Bantu Education led to his dismissal and banning from the teaching profession. He became literary editor of Drum and reported for it on political affairs (see Chapter Four). He published five short stories in Drum, as well as a loosely connected series of portraits and episodes in the life of a township family under the general title "Down the Quiet Street". Some of these Drum stories, including "The Suitcase" and "Down the Quiet Street" have been included in Mphahlele's collected volumes. Mr. Mphahlele left South Africa in 1957 to take up a teaching post in Nigeria. His autobiographical work, Down Second Avenue, was completed shortly after he settled in Nigeria, and published by Faber in 1959. Along with Alan Paton's Cry The Beloved Country, it has become one of the best known works describing African life in South Africa, and was issued in a paper-back edition in 1962 by Seven Seas, Berlin. In 1961 a further collection of stories, The Living and the Dead[5] was published by Mbari. These stories were all

concerned with South African themes, but the collection published in Nairobi under the title In Corner B (1967)[6] included work based upon the author's Nigerian experience, giving evidence that Mphahlele was in the process of overcoming the difficult adjustment enforced by exile. The Wanderers, published by Macmillan, 1971, is concerned largely with the experience of exile. It is Ezekiel Mphahlele's first full length novel.

Mphahlele's work therefore represents, together with that of Alex La Guma and Peter Abrahams, the most weighty body of writing in English by black South Africans. His standing as South Africa's pre-eminent black man of letters, however, is not dependent on his fiction alone. The African Image includes much of the best and most stringent writing on South African literature, as well as having been a pioneering work when it appeared in 1962. The essay concerned with the treatment of the 'non-white' character in white South African writing is among the first to consider South African literature as an integral growth, the expression of a unique and unitary historical experience. In his criticism of other African writers, and particularly in his 'Remarks on Negritude' Mphahlele has put a trenchant case for accepting the facts of African history and of interaction between European and African cultures, in the face of the more rhetorical and programmatic impulse of the Francophone writers. He has done it without in any way compromising his integrity as an African or his past (active) involvement in the national movement of his people. A commitment to uphold realism is one of Mr. Mphahlele's most determined characteristics, and one which is reflected in his rigorous insistence on confronting the reality of South African society in all its complexity.

In 1957, summing up ten years of writing, Ezekiel Mphahlele wrote:

> In ten years my perspective has changed enormously from escapist writing to protest writing and, I hope, to something of a higher order, which is the ironic meeting between protest and acceptance in their widest terms. 7

Most of the stories in the 1947 collection could only be described as 'escapist' by the most intently serious-minded. The stories in Man Must Live are generally concerned with the private fortunes and emotions of their African characters, however, rather than directly with the wider South African context. One, "Out Brief Candle" is the story of a foundling, Sello, whose doubtful origins lead to his persecution at school. His mother, Annah Seripe, takes him to the city where she hopes they may escape from the slur of illegitimacy. Sello has been marked by his childhood experience, and when he meets one of his old tormentors, he kills him, and commits suicide. "Unwritten Episodes", the final story in the collection is similarly a study of personal and inward suffering. It tells of the triumphant marriage of a humble unmarried mother to the son of an African "upper class" (Mphahlele's description) businessman. This love story is rather hackneyed, but notable as an early expression of a theme which persists throughout the author's work:

> Each individual, she observed, was living through unwritten episodes of thought, inward struggle... 8

This observation is the basis for the two more interesting stories in the collection, "Man Must Live" and "The Leaves Were Falling". The former is also the most successful, the dogged narration of a solitary working man, dedicated to self-sufficiency, and survival, yet with an inner hollowness which proves his destruction. Khalima Zungu has worked as building labourer and navvy before reaching the dignity of railway policeman, a position which allows him to exercise a benevolent if contemptuous authority over his fellow black men. He meets a rich widow, marries her, and loses his self-respect when he stops working. When his wife and her daughter desert him he burns

down their house, getting badly burnt in the flames. He ends his life as an alcoholic tramp. Zungu is at once strong and weak. His physical strength wins him approval from whites and fear from his own people. Yet when his fellow workers criticise him for fawning on the white man, he does not have the courage to confront them. Zungu's weakness derives from his illusion of self-sufficiency, which cuts him off from his fellow men. Yet his determination to survive, even as a down-and-out, is accorded due respect by Mphahlele. Indeed, man must live, the story insists. This recognition of the heroic capacity of ordinary people to survive all that life throws at them, is a theme underlying all Mphahlele's work, from these early attempts right through to his most recent writings.

"The Leaves Were Falling" is by comparison a poor story, a melange of an improbable love story, with an account of the Donkey Church schism and the messianic musings of Katsane, a clergyman who refuses to follow the breakaway church. Katsane is full of self doubt, and yet with a conviction of his own capacity to lead. His intellectual stringency leads him to refuse the histrionic Donkey Church, but he recognises that this refusal is also a part of his inability to communicate with the ordinary people of the township. The inability extends to his personal relations and his shyness with the woman he loves. There is here a clear preoccupation with the position of the intellectual or artist in an African urban location, one which is to recur throughout Mphahlele's work. Katsane's wife-to-be says to him:

> You distrust mankind and find yourself distrusting your own self - of the same species. 9

If we ignore the gaucherie of expression, this remark is one of the most clear statements of a problem close to the heart of Mphahlele's work.

"The Leaves Were Falling" is marred, as are all these stories, by failures of expression, narration and tone. Mphahlele often appears to struggle to express his thought, only to fall back either on melodrama or on clumsy and often incoherent formulations. Thus, while the very simple stories like "Out Brief Candle" and "Unwritten Episode" succeed in the elementary task of narration, the more ambitious attempts become bogged down. "Man Must Live"is competent in depicting the consciousness of Khalima Zungu, yet fails to keep the narrative moving. "The Leaves Were Falling", in its attempt to reveal a more complex personality, falls back on reflection, which is often incoherent. These early stories are marked, also, by phrases from "Eng lit" and by an uneven, formal prose style which lunges awkwardly from the pedestrian to the 'poetic'.

While the stories in Man Must Live are concerned with private lives, they exhibit little of that close observation of the texture and substance of urban African life, which is characteristic of Mphahlele's later work. Yet there is in them a seriousness of intent, a struggle for precise observation and expression of human feelings which points to the future. Mphahlele's faith in the relevance of the emotions of the common people to the wider problems of the South African reality takes the form, at this embryonic stage, of a somewhat theatrical depiction of everyday tragedy. In his next period, he was to turn to the public arena, on the one hand, and to observing the behaviour of his townsmen and neighbours, on the other.

The Living and the Dead,with illustrations by Peter Clarke, was first published in 1961, by the Ministry of Education of Nigeria's Western Region. It gathers together stories written in the first half of the fifties, including the period in which Mphahlele was working for Drum . One story, "The Suitcase", was published in Drum, while "The Woman" and "The Woman walks Out", contain material which was to be incorporated in Down Second Avenue, and is close to the

spirit of Mphahlele's Drum series on urban life, "Down the Quiet Street".

"He and the Cat", first published in this collection is a new departure in terms of quality and technique. It deserves, and will receive, a fuller examination in a subsequent discussion of the author's work in general.

The other three stories in The Living and the Dead attempt to deal directly with the black-white confrontation. 'The Living and the Dead', 'The Master of Doornvlei' and 'We'll Have Dinner at Eight' concerns encounters between African characters and, respectively, an Afrikaner theoretician of apartheid, a Boer farmer, and an English-speaking liberal lady.

Stoffel Visser is a member of a commission on the 'urbanbantu' and so considers himself an authority on the lives of Africans in towns. When his servant Jackson fails to turn up after a day off, Stoffel is drawn into the reality of those lives, which includes domestic tragedy and police violence. The impact of these events disturbs the white man's sense of security, but he summons up his anger and race pride to banish the disturbance from his mind:

> He was a white man, and he must be responsible. To be white and to be responsible were one and the same thing. 10

Ironically this sense of responsibility as a white, allows him to disclaim his real responsibility to his fellow human beings.

'The Master of Doornvlei' records the ambiguities which crowd the close relations between black and white in the rural areas. The master, Sarel Britz, has come to depend more and more on the authority of his black foreman, Mfukeri. Mfukeri treats the farm-workers cruelly, and has helped his master to snuff out a threatened strike. Having always felt inferior to whites, he now comes to despise his master, while the latter is frightened by his own weakness.

The conflict comes to a head in a fight between Mfukeri's bull and the master's stallion. Mphahlele succinctly states the ambivalence of the farm-workers:

> They couldn't express their attitudes towards either side, because they hated both Britz and Mfukeri, and yet the foreman was one of them. 11

The master's stallion has to be destroyed, but the black foreman is sacked. Mphahlele points out the wider reference of the story:

> And then /Britz/ was glad. He had got rid of yet another threat to his authority.
> But the fear remained. 12

The white person in 'We'll Have Dinner at Eight' is very different from either Stoffel Visser or Sarel Britz. Miss Pringle is a social worker who talks about 'Africans', and even invites one, Mzondi, to have dinner with her. Yet the gulf between her and Mzondi is wider, in some respects, than that between Sarel Britz and Mfukeri. Miss Pringle wishes to 'help' Mzondi, but he believes that she is trying to locate a cache of stolen money which he has hidden. He kills her, but dies soon after. The story, which suffers somewhat from 'thriller' techniques, is Mphahlele's earliest attack upon the liberal figure in South Africa, one which points to the vitriolic and far more successful "Mrs.Plum". Its underlying point is that Miss Pringle deludes herself into believing she can personally surmount the race barrier, whereas, owing both to her patronizing attitude and to the harsh social facts, she cannot. The story is lamed by its plot which has little to do with this theme. Consequently the point has to be made through the awareness of Mzondi, an inadequate mode of expression.

"The Woman" comprises the same material as the chapter "Ma Lebona" in Down Second Avenue. Both "The Woman" and "The Woman Walks Out" differ from the other stories in the collection in being primarily careful description. The latter tells of the death of Ma Lebona, here called 'Madira'. The old lady's magnificent arrogance and self-regard are poignantly counterposed to the manner of her burial:

> Madira was buried in the most humble village graveyard where not a tombstone is to be seen and where, among other things, thorn trees and ant-eaten wooden crosses tell a story of abject poverty. 13

The careful description of township life is in these stories sufficient to give point and life. "The Suitcase" is an earlier story, and one which depends more heavily on melodrama to achieve its effect. An African steals a suitcase on a township bus, hoping that it will solve his desperate financial problems. But the police trace the case to his room, and in it find the body of a dead baby. The story demonstrates the horror which threatens black slum dwellers who fall behind, even momentarily, in the struggle for economic and moral survival.

The stories in <u>The Living and the Dead</u> mark a considerable increase in expertise, and a broadening scope of interest. In these stories Mphahlele strives to encompass the central conflict of South African life - the relations between black and white. Though this attempt cannot be judged as wholly successful - it is a topic beset with problems for the writer - the degree of success is much greater than anything reached in the earlier collection. On the other hand, those stories which concern the lives of ordinary township characters show Mphahlele settling into a vein of writing which was well adapted, both to his deeper purposes as an author, and to his characteristic style.

The stories which comprise <u>In Corner B</u> show a wider interest and a more skilful expression than the earlier volumes. The slightly strained emphasis on the confrontation of races is, with the exception of "Mrs.Plum", replaced by a more subtle enquiry into the social and psychological repercussions of that conflict. In addition to previously published material, the collection contains stories based on township life, including two which are placed in a Nigerian setting and two which fit into that category which Mphahlele has described as "the

ironic meeting between protest and acceptance".

"Mrs.Plum", described on the 'blurb' as a "short novel" is rather a long short story, and belongs to the genre of protest writing. "Mrs.Plum", which has been described as a 'scream of hate'*, is one of Mphahlele's most successful stories. Its forceful quality is due to its unity of tone and concentration of feeling, qualities derived from hatred perhaps, but no less valid for that.

The story is about the developing relationship between Karabo, a domestic servant, and her 'madam', a liberal lady called Mrs.Plum. Mphahlele's venom is precise:

> My madams name was Mrs.Plum. She loved dogs and Africans and said that everyone must follow the law even if it hurts. 14

Mrs.Plum undertakes to educate Karabo, telling her about democracy and encouraging her to read the newspapers. She sends her to an African women's club where Karabo meets Lilian Ngoya, a leader of the women's movement. As Karabo's education proceeds she naturally comes to question the degree of her madam's love. Events conspire to demonstrate its limits, as they must do in South Africa. When a rumour sweeps Johannesburg's northern suburbs that black servants are going to kill the pets of their white masters, Mrs.Plum's love of Africans is shown to be not greater than her love for her two lapdogs. Indeed, the latter is shown, rather gratuitously, to have a sexual dimension. Disaffection is the inevitable result of the educative process Mrs.Plum has so confidently put into action. When Karabo needs to go home to visit her family on the death of an uncle, Mrs. Plum attempts to stop her. She leaves nevertheless. Mrs.Plum follows her to the country, begging her to come back. Absorbing the final lesson, Karabo consents, but on conditions which establish the dependance of Mrs.Plum on her, a reversal of the assumptions of the

* by Mrs.Ursula Laredo, in conversation.

'madam' at the beginning of the story.

'Mrs.Plum' belongs to the same genus as the much less successful 'We'll Have Dinner at Eight'. Its greater scope and precision, and its narrative and tonal assurance, testify not only to Mphahlele's developing artistry, but to his deepending awareness of the inadequacy of liberalism. By placing the narrative in the mouth of Karabo, Mphahlele is afforded the opportunity of creating a bitter but often very funny irony. Karabo's naive intelligence resembles that of Oyono's hero in Houseboy[15]; the two works are very similar. Though it may be unfair to pillory Miss Pringle (of 'Dinner at Eight') and Mrs.Plum for their good intentions, Mphahlele insists that they are much further from understanding the realities of the South African situation than the uncompromising segregationist whites, like Stoffel Visser and Sarel Britz. It is ignorance coupled with an arrogant belief that they can take the future and interests of the Africans under their tutelage, which Mphahlele identifies as the failure of the liberals. Such a critique of liberalism is more fashionable now than it was when Mphahlele wrote 'Mrs.Plum'. It is not an anti-white attitude, though it has often been mistaken for one. Mphahlele is demanding an honest admission of the facts of the situation, with an insistence and impatience characteristic of his own intellectual rigour. 'Mrs.Plum' is one of Mphahlele's most successful pieces of sustained writing, and important as a dramatisation of a point of view (that of the domestic servant) unique and central to the South African tragedy. It deserves to be better known.

Of the four township stories, 'Down the Quiet Street' is a condensation of material which had appeared in Drum where Mphahlele published five pieces tracing the varying fortunes of a group of Newclare inhabitants. The characters are affectionately drawn with humour and a light touch new to the author's work. 'The Coffee Cart

Girl' is a naive love story, possibly intended for Drum, and interesting only insofar as its main character, China, represents a version of the African township hero. China has been dismissed from his factory job after being involved in a strike. The coffee-cart girl offers him food, but he refuses until he is on the point of starvation. He falls in love with the girl, but they quarrel, and when China revisits the site of her stall, he finds that the police have moved the coffee-carts out of the city. 'The Coffee Cart Girl' is a bare tale, and derives what strength it has from the endurance and dignity of China.

These qualities are celebrated, too, in the much more deeply conceived story 'In Corner B'. It has as its central event an African township funeral. Talita's husband has died, and the widow grieves alike for the loss of her man and for his infidelity to her in the past. At the funeral she must endure the uninvited presence of the dead man's mistress, but the load of grief is lifted by a letter she receives from this woman, exonerating her husband from adultery. Though this is the narrative stuff of the story, its real content is the funeral itself, a prolonged social ritual which comprehends mourning, drinking and furtive copulation. The funeral is a celebration of the communal quality of everyday living which has, somehow, survived the transition to urban life. The comic aspects of this transition are delicately brought out during the drinking session which develops among the guests:

> 'God's people, as I was about to say, here is an ox for the slaughter.' At this point he produced a bottle of brandy. One did not simply plant a whole number of bottles on the floor: that was imprudent. 'Cousin Felang came driving it to this house of sorrow. I have been given the honour of slaughtering it, as the uncle of this clan.' With this he uncorked the bottle and served the brandy, taking care to measure with his fingers. 15

The rich variety of feeling and language which the funeral wake includes, is a concentrated expression of the married life of Talita and her husband, which comprehend love and conflict, happiness and

and domestic sorrow. The strength of the communal ethos sustains the people of the township in the midst of hardship and oppression. Thus the mistress's letter, which concludes the story, does not appear as improbable as it otherwise might. It is the product of a fundamental decency, an underlying tough morality, which reappears even where the breakdown of human community has seemed complete.

More sombre in mood, and yet similarly concerned with what unites neighbours in the face of hardship, is 'A Point of Identity', about a coloured man, Karel Almeida, living in an African location with an African wife. Almeida must choose between an African and a privileged Coloured identity. The crisis is precipitated by the new race classification policy of the government (see Chapter One). The drama is told by an African narrator who, with his wife, constitute the critical audience. What Almeida chooses will be judged by them. The Coloured man chooses a Coloured identity card. When he falls ill, however, he turns to an African witchdoctor for a cure, against the advice of his wife. Almeida dies, a victim of a superstition which has gone deeper than his desire to be Coloured. He has proclaimed an essential Africanness. The tragedy of the story lies in Almeida's choice of dying, but not of living, as an African. Its affirmation consists of the awareness his death creates in his African neighbours and wife of the underlying oneness of human suffering.

'A Point of Identity' raises political questions too, for it includes discussion of the possibility of inter-racial co-operation. Mphahlele does not give a pat answer to this problem, but the tendency of the story is to suggest that human solidarity will make itself felt, despite the intrusion of a divisive authority.

These two stories are among Mphahlele's most successful. 'In Corner B', particularly, combines skilful and sensitive narrative with

a vision both realistic and profoundly affirmative. 'A Point of Identity' is somewhat marred by clumsy and occasionally pretentious dialogue, as well as an unnecessary attempt to transcribe the accent (and even speech impediment) of the hero. These are typical faults of Mphahlele's writing.

The two Nigerian stories included in this collection are evidence of the author's vigorous reaction to the problems of exile. Indeed, the period immediately following his departure from South Africa, seems to have been one of great productivity. These stories show how quickly the writer was able to assimilate and make use of the new material he confronted.

'The Barber of Barriga' tells of the death of the rich and licentious Bashiru, at the hands of the cuckold Okeke. The action is seen through the eyes of Anofi the barber, who is called upon to shave the dead man's scalp, and finds a large nail protruding from the skull. Anofi confronts Okeke, knowing of the latter's grievance. But Okeke only replies that Bashiru has suffered the punishment for theft traditional amongst his tribesmen. Anofi is horrified, commenting:

'You don't take de life of a man to buy de lawve of a woman. Na be what kind of lawve dis?' 16

Anofi's own feelings are to be tested, when he learns that Bashiru has 'tiefed' his wife, too.

Anofi's humanism is presented in contrast to the simple revenge philosophy of Okeke. Yet both are seen to be traditionally African, and the human quality of the drama is favourably compared to the sterile and repressed attitudes of the white colonialists who appear briefly in the tale.

A similar comparison is developed in the moving story 'A Ballad of Oyo'. Ishola, a market woman of Oyo wishes to leave her husband,

who maltreats her. She is held back, however, by the affection which she feels towards her father-in-law and which he returns. When she finally decides to leave her husband, she learns of the death of his father. Taking this as a bad omen, Ishola breaks off her plans. 'A Ballad of Oyo' succeeds in conveying the simple but deep emotional life of its characters, as well as the close structure of beliefs and conventions which sustains their society. The humanistic piety of the African peasantry provides the story with density and purpose. In both these stories set in Nigeria, Mphahlele is writing in the full strength of maturity, and with an assurance born of his deep belief in the values represented by his subject-matter.

It is the achievement of this kind of synthesis that gives meaning to Mphahlele's reference to 'the ironic meeting between protest and acceptance in their widest terms.' Acceptance does not here imply resignation in the face of oppression or deprivation, but an artistic readiness to confront and work out of the reality which surrounds the author. 'Protest writing', in the narrow sense, refuses to accept present reality. Yet all of Mphahlele's writing is a protest, for it draws upon what is unacceptable in the present, the contradiction between actuality and potentiality. The former is defined by social and political conditions. The latter subsists in the values of the African peoples, in their humanist instinct.

This quality can be discerned in the earlier story 'Grieg on a Stolen Piano', a rambling comic tale set in a South African township. The events of the story are given a unity and power by the use of a concept at the heart of the South African situation - the emotive content of blackness. The hero is a man extraordinarily black, and on this account subject to additional humiliations and petty insults. Even to his own people his blackness assumes a portentious quality. His resilience and creativity in the face of an inordinately hostile

world are identified, cumulatively, with this blackness, so that his comic humiliations and frustrations have an ennobling rather than demeaning quality. The optimism of the story is founded upon the indestructability of human character.

'He and the Cat', first published in The Living and the Dead, is a most interesting story and different in many respects from any of the author's other short stories. It concerns a visit by the first-person narrator to a lawyers office. The purpose of the visit is confessional - the narrator hopes to find relief from his troubles merely by telling them to the lawyer. We are not told what they are, and the story finishes as the narrator steps into the lawyer's office. The substance of the narration consists of the gossip and complaints of the Africans who wait to see the lawyer, the aphorisms and proverbs ennunciated by the blind clerk who works at a desk in the waiting room, and the subtle but portentious presence of a cat, a framed picture hanging on the wall. Mphahlele does not spell out the nature of what is taking place, but offers clues:

> ... here they were, pretending they had suspended their anxiety. Here they were, trying to rip this wave of heat and scatter it by so much gas talk: babbling away over things that didn't concern them, to cover the whirlpool of their own troubles ... And the man at the table: what right had he to pronounce those aphorisms and proverbs, old as the language of man, and bleached like a brown shirt that has become a dirty white? 17

Clearly a communal ritual is taking place, and one which is African in its recourse to proverbial wisdom. Yet by emphasizing the blindness of the clerk and the presence of the cat Mphahlele suggests a further, mythical reference (Egypt, after all, was another African civilization). The placing of the scene in a lawyer's office, on the other hand, places the events in the urban present, the lawyer being a new type of wise man, to whom the poor and ignorant, for a fee, can bring their problems. In this story Mphahlele makes connections which range more widely than is usual in his writing.

'He and the Cat' is among the most controlled of Mphahlele's stories, one benefitting greatly from distance imposed by a narrator and catching the inflexions of township gossip with a practised ear.

In a review of Mphahlele's short stories as a whole, certain dominant themes and preoccupations can be noted, underlying the diversity of plots and characters. Two of the most important have been pointed out in the author's earliest work: the urge of the individual to survive at whatever level is permitted by events, and the problem of the intellectual faced with a society with which he must identify but into which he cannot integrate. In these early stories Mphahlele has not found a means of giving such themes a clear expression. The incoherent reflections of Katsane in 'The Leaves were Falling' are in themselves evidence of the seriousness with which he was facing the latter problem. In fictional terms, the former, more concrete, question of the struggle for survival proved easier to describe.

The stories collected in The Living and the Dead turn to a wider consideration of South African issues. The three 'political' stories' add little, perhaps, to the vast amount written on this subject, and demonstrate all the technical difficulties of dealing directly with the confrontation of races. Yet in the later 'Mrs. Plum' the sheer impact of Mphahlele's venom and the accuracy with which he pin-points the fallacies of the liberal point of view make it an important contribution to South Africa's voluminous race debate. Moreover, its treatment of the white master/black servant relationship, places it in a wider genre of African writing. The colonial breakfast table is the lowest, and therefore the most concrete, expression of the dynamic of imperialism.

It is in this volume, too, that Mphahlele's serious attitude to the experience of the ordinary black South African, domestic servant

or family tyrant, begins to yield results in terms of a new and more profound irony, one based upon the paradoxical quality of survival itself. Where every social and political force is turned against the individual, the latter's very persistence in the idiosyncracies, faults and passions of the human personality take on an aspect which is at once heroic and profoundly humorous. Such is the impact of the story 'In Corner B'. It is a development of the writer's earlier theme of the indestructible human being, an insight of new complexity which, in fictional terms, both derives from and provides the justification for the close observation of social behaviour.

The two stories 'Grieg on a Stolen Piano' and 'He and the Cat' both exploit this irony. Yet, in the latter, Mphahlele is feeling his way towards a wider vision of the relevance of the African communal tradition, and its humanistic ethic. It is this vision which stands behind the horror of Anofi in 'The Barber of Barriga' and supports the deep feeling of 'A Ballad of Oyo'.

It is tempting to surmise that the reflective and introspective activity of the autobiographical project which resulted in Down Second Avenue, contributed to this deepening of the author's insight. Down Second Avenue is Mphahlele's best known work, and among the best known of all South African writing. It has introduced many readers all over the world to the living conditions and physical and spiritual struggles of black South Africans.

As an autobiography Down Second Avenue has the natural advantage of a given and easily assimilated structure, and a simple narrative form which avoids the many pitfalls of fictional narration. Mphahlele's characteristic fidelity and skill of observation are here sufficient, when combined with the unity of perception of the narrator - the author himself - to create a work of great emotional impact and importance. The dominant themes of Mphahlele's writing are here

embodied in the lives of the author's family, his neighbours and himself. The indomitable Aunt Dora, Ma Lebona, Rebone and many of the central figures of the book are perceived in terms of that indestructability of the human spirit which is so important in the other works. In the early chapters, which deal with the author's childhood in the northern Transvaal, can be found the roots of Mphahlele's vision of the terror of isolation, which is central to the theme of exile in The Wanderers. The struggle of the adolescent to continue his education, the ambivalencies of his position at St.Peter's Missionary School, and the frustrations of an adult career hemmed in at every point by the Native Affairs Department, throw light, too, on Mphahlele's complex attitude towards the intellectual's relation to his community.

Yet it is not primarily for what it tells us about Mphahlele the author, that Down Second Avenue is important. For it is a characteristic of the South African situation that this account of one black man's struggle to live should achieve an almost epic quality. Jan-Heinz Jahn has described this attribute of the work, as having given it an emotive impact which transcends the limitations of non-fiction:

> Ezekiel Mphahlele treats his own life as a symbol of the situation in South Africa. Just because he tells the story without passion, almost without reproach, every experience becomes a paradigm, every personal oppression a general experience. 18

Clearly Down Second Avenue invites comparison with Bloke Modisane's Blame Me On History, which adopts explicitly the intention which Jahn finds in Mphahlele's book. The dispassionate tone of Mphahlele's writing is obviously very different from that of Modisane. But the much greater impact of Down Second Avenue is largely the result of its more mature attitude towards the lives of ordinary people, whom Mphahlele observes with a respect and affection not attained by Mr.Modisane's more exaggerated and emotive approach. While Mphahlele,

too, suffers from the alienation of the intellectual from the semi-literate masses of his people, he yet holds those people in high regard. More sure of his own capacities, he has less need for the reassurances of white friendships, with all the ambiguities that this must imply in a racially divided society.

Down Second Avenue, Mr.Mphahlele's first extended work, gives evidence of the author's ability to sustain narrative and achieve conceptual depth. Yet the autobiographical form has certain obvious advantages to a writer who, at that time, could still be said to be developing his literary expertise. The full-length novel is an altogether more demanding form. Thirteen years were to elapse before Mphahlele's first novel, The Wanderers, appeared, in 1972.

In The Wanderers, Mphahlele faces the problem of unifying the close adherence to observed reality with the consideration of wider and more complex problems. Obviously, it is more difficult in the novel than in the autobiography, where reflection and even polemic are not out of place. The principle themes of the novel include exile, the black man's spiritual inheritance and relation to universal values, the position of the intellectual in a semi-educated community, neo-colonialism and the moral dilemma posed by voluntary exile from South Africa. All are considered within a narrative which begins in a South African township and ends with the main character's decision to leave Africa entirely.

Timi Tabane, Mphahlele's main protagonist, has been banned from teaching and is working unhappily for an African pictorial magazine. He is given the task of finding Rampa, the husband of a naive country girl, Naledi. Rampa has been shanghaied to a prison farm, and the search for him leads Timi and Naledi into the depths of South Africa's rural and racial backwoods. Yet they find warmth and hospitality among the share-croppers and farmworkers, and succeed

in uncovering the manner of Rampa's death. Some time later, Steve Cartwright, Timi's white editor, meets Naledi during riots at her home village. He falls in love with her. After a courtship complicated by racial inhibitions and the hostility of his rival, the African nationalist Diliza, Steve marries Naledi and takes her to London. The narrative follows Timi into exile in first Iboyoru and then Lao-Kiku, countries strongly resembling Nigeria and Kenya. Timi finds expatriate teaching a frustrating business, and discovers that his blackness is no automatic passport to integration in these very different societies. His problems are augmented by the delinquency of his eldest son, Felang. Felang rejects everything his parents offer in terms of education, values and guidance, and runs away to join the freedom fighters in the south. He is killed in Zimbabwe. Timi decides to leave Africa.

The episode with which the novel begins serves to establish its focal point. Here, in the South African country-side, is the most concentrated expression of the exploitation of the African peoples, and here the co-incidence between the concerns of the writer and the needs of the people is closest. Timi finds in this trip a satisfaction which he seeks for in vain during the rest of the novel. The terms in which he defines it form a central objective of the work:

> ... coming back to Ha-Kau, to Naledi and Shuping, was a homecoming in every relative sense of the word. It was to share certain anxieties with two other persons at an immediate level, that is immediate to the centre of the odyssey. 19

The need to share and yet to preserve one's integrity, is one of the most potent forces driving Timi first into exile, and then from one temporary haven to another. Conscious that in leavingSouth Africa he will be turning his back upon his heritage and cutting the roots that tie him to a communal value scheme, he yet feels the pressures

of the power imbalance and the intellectual poverty of his surroundings to be intolerable. The contradiction between the need to confront reality 'at an immediate level' and the need to survive is acute.

> But power is an image in the mind. You need to feel, taste, smell it at the point at which you are subject to its control. You need to be face to face with the man who possesses it, who personifies it. And yet you had to keep alive ... 20

The problem of exile, which is the theme consequent upon Timi's decision to leave, is deeply conditioned by the vacuum left by the removal of the immediate pressure of white power. The subtle frustrations of neo-colonialism baffle the bla ck South African, as the complacency of his 'free' fellow Africans angers him.

The chapters set in Iboyoru chronicle Timi's attempt to find a genuine point of insertion into West African society. The attempts of poets and dramatists to draw on traditional culture for a modern literary movement provide one such point. Yet Timi is constantly made aware of the differences between West African traditional society and that of the south. His disapproval of Iboyorun political practices further alienates him from the country of his adoption, whose national temperament is anyway foreign to Timi's intense and sometimes humourless outlook.

This section of the novel is perhaps the most slack, and relies heavily upon relatively unassimilated reflection and discussion. There is little organic unity of theme and plot, and, on occasions, a reluctance to probe the implications of Timi's somewhat arrogant reactions.

The novel's final section is given greater coherence and point by the emergence of Felang, Timi's adolescent son, as the expression of the rootlessness and sense of guilt shared by the exiles. In Lao-Kiku, Timi is nearer to the locus of struggle, and the moral pressure of the 'National Congress of Liberation' is more keenly felt.

Under the knife of Felang's adolescent intolerance ('Why don't you admit you came out to save yourselves?') Timi is forced into an awareness of his own sense of guilt:

> For the first time in nine years that my dream has been recurring, I recognize the faces of my pursuers last night. I did not know them individually, but I knew them to be black South Africans. Young men. There could not have been more than six or so in number ... 21

Behind this dream image lies the traditional African sense of the obligations of the elders to the young men. Yet Timi remains caught between the need to face the southern reality, and the urge to survive, physically and intellectually. This problem has not been solved by exile in independent black Africa. Timi's decision is to seek a deeper exile, to leave Africa. He rationalizes this:

> I love Africa but, like Aunt Dora, I like the person who lies me ... I'll serve the country that needs me - more than that, <u>wants</u> me. (emphasis in original)

The novel does not tell us what country that might be. Moreover the rationalization does not ring true, for Timi has long moved away from the level at which Aunt Dora faces the world. The novel does not appear to recognize Timi's failure to resolve the moral problems which its events pose him.

This failure of resolution (really a failure to <u>recognise</u> the absence of resolution), is closely related to certain weaknesses in the novel's structure. Whereas the first and final sections are a sufficiently coherent fictional expression of the question which the author wishes to discuss, much of the central part is only loosely composed and insufficiently relevant. There is much on Mphahlele's mind, it is clear. Yet the indulgent treatment of narrative material does little to assist the author in its expression. <u>The Wanderers</u> might, with profit, have been fifty pages shorter.

Allied to this indulgence is a failure to confront the central character, Timi. The novel is written partly in the first person,

with Timi narrating, and partly in the third person. Yet there is no perceptible difference in point of view, which suggests an identification between author and character, not dependent on external evidence of biographical co-incidence. Mphahlele is very lenient with Timi. The most ironic example of this myopia is in the episodes in which the Tabanes decide to employ house servants, and quickly find themselves in situations not far removed from 'Mrs.Plum'. Mphahlele shows neither detachment nor humour in relating the stiff self-righteousness with which Timi treats his servants.

The Wanderers begins with the statement of a personal problem: the need of the intellectual at once to be a part of his people, and to be free of the restrictions of their limited outlook. By going into exile, Timi Tabane moves away from a solution to the problem, succeeding only in institutionalizing his alienation. One cannot help feeling that his creator, too, moves away from a solution. Indeed, by sending Felang back to die on the Zambezi, Mphahlele bears witness to the necessity of killing off that part of himself which cannot help returning to 'the centre of the odyssey'.

The Wanderers remains a considerable achievement. If its material has not been wholly digested, yet its scope is greater than anything previously attempted by Mphahlele. The successful creation of a large range of convincing characters, and the depiction of a varied and complex scenario, are technical feats uncommon in South African writing. Moreover, Mphahlele has started some hares which, when they are finally run to ground, will surely have led him to problems and perspectives at the heart of the African experience. This novel, with all its imperfections, convincingly establishes him as one of the most important South African authors.

Ezekiel Mphahlele is clearly the major black writer of the fifties and early sixties. In exile he has often been a spokesman

for black South African writing. In a sense he is a representative figure - a teacher and intellectual, involved in his people's political struggles, and dedicated to a naturalistic style of writing which owes its initial impulse to a need to record the injustices of his society.

Mphahlele has moved away from pure protest writing about the race conflict itself - towards a more subtle, ironic procedure. He has described this as 'putting the ghetto people aside, by themselves, acting out their dramas, but implying the political pressure over them'.[23] Yet he has firmly declared his belief that 'Whenever you write... you are writing social criticism ... If you don't you are completely irrelevant. You don't count.'

The convictions which inspire this attitude deeply infuse all his writing. They are convictions based on African history and tradition. Though the author sharply distinguishes his point of view from negritude and similar programmes (which he considers irrelevant to the black South African), he does insist upon its African auto-genesis and its emphasis on self-reliance. Speaking of the meaning of Christianity and Islam for Africa, Mphahlele has said:

> When we have pushed all these foreign religions into the background or flushed them out of our minds, do you know what we are left with? We are left with ourselves to depend on - no props, no visions of the world to come, no guardian angels - only our naked selves with our ancestors to think of. Who are our ancestors? They are those who fell by the White man's gun. Those are the ones we think of, and those are our moral props if we need any at all. 24

It is the closeness to 'our naked selves' which is the most impressive quality of Mphahlele's writing. Never a glib stylist, indeed often clumsy and sometimes tedious, he has created a body of writing characterised by an overwhelming moral honesty.

Chapter VII - References

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Chapter VIII

Cape Voices: Peter Clarke, James Matthews and Richard Rive.

'If you're white, you're all right,
And if you're brown, stick aroun' ... '
(Traditional blues).

The Coloured writers are a rather special case in African writing, as indeed was their inclusion in Drum. The million-odd people of 'mixed' descent known as the Coloureds, or Cape Coloureds, are the descendants of the aboriginal Khoisan peoples, East Indian and Malagasy slaves, and 'Basters' ('Bastards', offspring of mixed-race alliances). Their communities were scattered over the Cape Colony, inhabiting mission stations, squatting and share-cropping on white land. A considerable section were urban dwellers, mostly in Cape Town's proletarian districts. Nearly all Coloureds were landless by the mid-nineteenth century. Though a section preserved in Islam, and in their cuisine and traditional crafts, a residual connection with the east, they have been largely without those traditions and connections with the land which have sustained the African peoples' sense of national identity and history.

The Coloured People is both the product and victim of apartheid society. A testimony to a process of miscegenation which officially does not exist, they have traditionally been accorded privileges denied to Africans, and indicated, according to the apartheid mentality, by the lightness of their skins. The urban Coloured community was not segregated by law until the early 1950s (see Chapter One), and the removal of Coloured Voters from the common electoral register caused much protest during that period. Coloureds have always been admitted to skilled trades, in contrast to Africans, and Coloured trade unionism is permitted. Traditional occupations among urban Coloured people include skilled craftsmen in the wood and building trades, fishermen and traders in fish, fruit and vegetables. Unlike most South African Africans, the Coloured people have a long and close association with the sea. There is also a proportionately strong stratum of professional people and clerical workers.

The traditional language of the Coloured people is Afrikaans. In the rural areas, at least, there are some grounds for recognising them culturally as 'brown Africaners'. In the cities the traditions of the manumitted slaves have been more closely preserved, and the proportion of those whose ancestry was East Indian has probably been higher. In many cases English as the preferred language has taken the place of Afrikaans, while the version of the latter, known as 'Kapie', has little in common, besides syntax, with the Afrikaner taal.

The Coloured people have stamped their personality on Cape Town making it a city far more oriental than African in atmosphere.

The Coloureds, however, are a marginal people, tribeless in a tribalized society. Their aspirations to inclusion in white society have been progressively stifled, and in the 1970s effectively wiped out, though recently there have been some suggestions of a re-admission of Coloureds into the white polity. These aspirations kept the majority of Coloured people passive in politics, and bred anti-African prejudice. The preoccupation with colour is deeply impressed in the Coloured community in which status, occupation, and marital prospects are often closely linked to skin tone. Coloured people distinguish about five categories of skin colour according to Antony Sampson. Many of the traumas associated with colour consciousness in the oppressed, discussed by radical black Americans like Eldridge Cleaver, are to be found in this community. They are often reflected in the work of its writers, most notably in Richard Rive's story, 'Resurrection'.[1]

Drum's decision to include Coloured writers among its contributors, was therefore not taken lightly. It followed from a decision to attempt to attract a Coloured readership, whose greater purchasing power was likely to tempt prospective advertisers. Both

the Coloureds and Africans voiced objections, Antony Sampson records. The former predicted resistance by Coloured readers to a 'black' paper. Africans were concerned at any dilution of the 'African-ness' of Drum.

A section of the Coloured people, however, has always looked to the African masses for political alliance. This 'leftish' group traces its descent from Dr.A.Abduhaman's African Political Organization of the turn of the century, through, variously, the Trotskyist "Anti - CAD" movement of the 1940s and 1950s to the Coloured Peoples Congress, a member of the Congress Alliance. The Coloured writers whose work is considered in this chapter, though not equally active in politics, have all adopted this pro-African stance. They have often criticized the colour prejudices of their own people.

The work of the Coloured writers naturally reflects the special features of their social and political situation. The relative prosperity and stability of the Coloured community and its urban environment are reflected in the sense of a dense physical back drop to the events they describe. District Six, the Coloured quarter of Cape Town, is a vivid and solid presence in the work of Rive and Matthews. In Alex La Guma's writing it plays a major role in the fiction. This relative stability may also in part be responsible for the higher productivity of the Coloured Writers. Including the poets, Dennis Brutus and Arthur Nortje, they have contributed a large proportion of black South African writing. The marginal political position of the Coloured people has also had an effect upon their writers, as has their ambivalent racial position. While Mphahlele's stories of black-white confrontation are clearly manipulated plots, the interaction of black and white in these writers flows naturally from the special

social condition of the Cape. Thus the bruising contact between the races, as well as the inner hurt of racial self-depreciation, is an ever present theme in Coloured writing. Both James Matthews and Richard Rive share the concern of Nkosi and Modisane with the ambivalent relations between black and white intellectuals; Peter Clarke, on the other hand, tends to retreat into nostalgia for a childhood on which the natural world impinged more sharply than the political. Alex La Guma's writings (to be discussed in the next Chapter) are wholly of the people, and he is able to deal naturally with the inter-reaction of African and Coloured characters in the context of their common oppression. Yet he does not gloss over the inequalities.

The Coloured writers, as the following study of their work will show, consistently interpret the life of their community within the terms of the national oppression of the black peoples by the white minority. Though their sitation is in some respects special, they are firmly located within the bounds of black South African writing.

Of the Coloured writers of merit who contributed to Drum, Peter Clarke is the least concerned with overt politics. An artist by profession, Clarke was born in Simonstown, near Cape Town, in 1929. His first story is an unremarkable account of the seduction of a virgin body-builder by a nice-time girl.[2] The comedy is well handled, and Clarke shows competence and crispness in narration. Two years later, in April, 1956, he participated in a curious literary experiment, in which he, James Matthews and Richard Rive each contributed a sketch of a young coloured delinquent, analysing aspects of his mentality and history. Drum published these in parallel columns under the general title of "Willie-boy" (also the name of a similar character in Alex La Guma's A Walk in the Night).[3]

The idea for this experiment came from the writers themselves, who, with difficulty*, persuaded Jim Bailey to consent to it. Clarke's version was a straightforward account of the young delinquent's progress from pilfering to murder with little attempt at any psychological rationale.[4] "The Departure", with which Clarke won Drum's 1955 Story contest, is a far more interesting short story. Its primary focus is upon the psychology of a coloured child "Mad Bennie" and the nature of his friendship with the poor boy, Augie. Set effectively among the kloofs and ridges of Table Mountain, Clarke's story succeeds in conveying the feeling of childhood, its intense sensuous pleasure and its terror of adult violence. The narrative moves in a series of 'flashbacks' which culminate in the episode of Augie's fatal accident on the mountain, and of the sense of his presence which haunts the lonely Bennie. "The Departure" succeeds in creating a fierce pathos, which its author has not developed in fiction, though it is present in many of his graphics.

A strongly visual imagination gives purpose to Clarke's most widely known story, "10 O'Clock: The Wagons, The Shore",[5] which won the 1958 Encounter literary competition. Less compelling than "The Departure", this nostalgic view of a Simonstown childhood is notable for its strong descriptive passages, which evoke a Van Gogh-like consciousness of texture and movement:

> Then the stiff cypresses lifted up their heavy green foliage and the oleanders along the fence shook their cake-pink and ivory-white flowers and waxy leaves to and fro, to and fro, and the bababa palms clashed their torn leaves against each other and against the branches of other trees, noisy like a noisy child, glad for the wind that came up off the sea like a small hurricane and gave it a voice, while the long yellow rods of bamboo that were tipped with leaves like green daggers, swayed and swayed from side to side, up, down, up, down, its humble sideways creak soft beneath the groans and sighs of the blue-gums.[6]

In later years Peter Clarke has had a number of poems published in international anthologies as well as several prose

* information to the author by James Matthews.

pieces in South African literary magazines. Though the poems fall outside the immediate scope of this study, it is interesting to note that they express the same purpose and feeling as the prose works. 'Young Shepherd Bathing His Feet', 'In Air' and 'Play Song', all of which have been published in Langston Hughs' anthology, Poems from Black Africa.[7] They are poems of sensuous perception, reflecting Clarke's tendency to see human figures in close relation to the natural world.[8] 'Party Conscience' on the other hand, exhibits Clarke's satirical bent, his exasperation, held strictly in check, at "the absurdities of the nation".

'Winter Shepherding'[9] is a journal of a fortnight in the Caledon district, a record of the lives of shepherds and of the countryside in winter. The description is sensitive and precise:

> In the mornings, mist blankets the village, lying thick in the valleys and below the rounded hills and down towards the plains. Under-foot and long pathways the grass is frosted, the dew chiplets of white ice. The cold pinches the fingertips and the toes. Distance is half seen. Silence is a vagueness beneath the blanket of mist. There is the odd animal sound, the odd child voice. Then you see one or two children, barefooted on their way somewhere. And it is cold.[10]

It is not only the description of the natural world, but the way in which Clarke relates the human figures to their environment that make his work quietly impressive:

> In the haystack we discussed sex and various aspects of love and the ever-lasting and eternally dismal and disappointingly frustrating lack of young unmarried women in the village. Inevitably these discussions take place when the young men gather. Then, I think, we compare with a pack of dogs.[11]

There is usually more going on in Peter Clarke's writing than meets the eye.

This tendency to suggest rather than to state can become rather gnomic, and even sentimental, however,[12] Pastorale contains nine very short sketches, ranging from 'prose poems' (eg.'Kakkapiella') to a thumbnail story 'Child and Mirror'. Some of them (eg.'Witoogies'

and 'Kakkapiella') tend to the sentimental. "Bokkems and Wine" hovers on the edge of bathos (without falling in, however), but 'Moving through a Landscape with Sheep' moves towards a satisfactory final statement:

> Going through a rain landscape with sheep requires patience. And when you have the patience of a shepherd in the rain, then you are a shepherd. The weather will improve later. 13

Much is implied by that definition.

14

"Figures and Settings" is an assemblage of six sketches comprising childhood memories; incidents out of the "pondokkie" slums of Windermere, Cape Town's most appalling black harrio; natural description; and a wry, bitter account of a visit by the artist to the white suburbs. The writing in all these pieces is taut, cool even when angry, and precise in its lyrical passages.

Peter Clarke displays undoubted talent in these later writings. Perhaps the most exciting element in these pieces is the artist's bent for revealing significance in the everyday world without resorting to the hackneyed or the superficial:

> A memory from last Summer: A drunk man, oblivious to the day, part of his brown buttocks exposed, lying face-down on a pavement in the heat of the sun. The curve of the buttocks was the same beautiful, poetic curve of peaches and the moon. 15

There is stuff for a novel in Clarke's journal writings. Whether the writer has the impetus to construct and sustain a long narrative work is yet unknown.

If Peter Clarke has tended to seek beneath life's uglinesses, his close friend James Matthews has sought, and sometimes indulged in, the emotional excess generated by the apartheid situation. Born in Cape Town in 1929, Matthews contributed his first stories to Drum in 1954. James Matthews was a prolific creator of short stories in this period, and in 1962, sixteen were published in Swedish, translated

16

by Pelle Fritz-Crone. Of these only four have received publication

in English, in Rive's collection Quartet.[17] There are no surviving manuscripts of the other twelve. Matthews' Drum stories include a boxing tale, 'The Champ', about a reluctant pugilist, 'The Downfall', his contribution to the 'Willie-boy' trilogy, a crime story, 'Dead-End and 'Penny for the Guy',[18] and entertaining Guy Fawkes story. The first two were notably mainly for a certain similarity to Alex La Guma's descriptive style, and for the author's ease of narration. 'Dead End' is a more substantial story, successful both in descriptive technique, and in its psychological depiction of a small-time gangster. Matthews has a flair for catching the significant details of slum life:

> The heat from the sun drew the moisture from the puddles in the road, cracking the edges. On a piece of sacking in a doorway a bitch was sprawled, surrounded by a quivering mass of hungry puppies ... A striped pig lumbered in their direction ... [19]

The hero of the story is convincing in his incoherent desires for speed, and excitement, and in the mawkish tenderness he displays towards a prostitute. The whole is marred however, by being set within short opening and concluding scenes of a Cape Town City Council meeting, at which the councillors debate the problems of slum conditions, and resolve to do nothing; and unnecessary and unconvincing device.

More successful, because more subtle, and controlled, is 'Penny for the Guy', a light-hearted look at the traditional Cape Guy Fawkes celebrations. In this account of three Coloured childrens' expedition to the white suburbs to collect 'pennies for the Guy', there is no explicit social comment, but no ducking the depiction of inequalities either. The story was suggested by a Peter Clarke water colour om the same theme, reproduced in Drum.

Several of James Matthews's stories reflect that preoccupation with colour confrontation noted as typical of the Coloured writers.

'The Second Coming'[20], with a rural setting, concerns the revelation to Jan the shepherd of his role as saviour of his people. Word of the revelation to Jan spreads to the Coloured workers of his farm, who leave their work to join him in the hills. But the white farmer, certain of his role as spiritual leader of the 'lower' races, apprehends the prophet and beats him to death. 'The Second Coming' is too contrived a fable to be convincing. It is spoiled, too, by the exaggerated characterization of the Boer farmer, and by the implausible "Paton-ish" dialogue attributed to the farm workers. Matthews, however, is often able to capture the drama of gesture, in the somewhat rhetorical prose style of this story; for instance:

> Placing a leg into the stirrup, he anticipated the prancing to follow and when the horse reared he came down heavily on its back and tugged sharply at the reins so that the bit pressed into the soft velvet lining its mouth. The horse submitted and the farmer, pleased, inched it forward until it was almost on top of the shepherd. From his height he spoke. [21]

The content and purpose of these stories recalls Mphahlele's attempt to portray race confrontation directly in the collection, <u>The Living and the Dead</u>.[22] 'The Park', one of the stories published in <u>Quartet</u>, belongs to this category too, and is more explicitly 'protest' writing even than 'The Second Coming'. It tells of a Coloured child who passes a 'Whites only' play park on his way to deliver the laundry his mother washes for the madam. On one occasion he enters the park but is ejected by the Coloured park-keeper. On another occasion he is driven from the entrance by a group of young whites. The story covers ground familiar in black South African writing, and its portrayal of the child is without penetration. Matthews is here recording his protest and employing the pathos of childhood and give it edge. His story lists the data: discrimination; white callousness and paternalism; poverty; black pusillanimity. And it records an individual response:

> Rage boiled up inside him. Rage against the houses with their streaked walls and smashed panes filled by too many people; the over-flowing garbage pails outside doors; the alleys and streets; and a law he could not understand; a law that shut him out of the park; 23
>
> He burst into tears.

There is a lack of thought here (reflected in careless prose) which lessens the impact of the protest, even upon the reader who acknowledges its justness.

In 'The Park' Matthews's anger inhibits the convincing development of psychological plausibility in his main character. 24 In 'The Party', the hero is perhaps more suitable for the expression of a political consciousness which is also the mind of a plausible human character. The story recounts the experience of a young coloured writer (unpublished) who is taken to a party by his friend Ron. The party is held at the home of a white 'patroness of the arts' :

> His talents, and those of the others, were on display like virgins to be sold to those like her, and Ron was their pimp. 25

Matthews has a sharp eye for what is specious in white liberalism and in this story he employs it to good effect. In contrast to the writings of Modisane, (which this story recalls), Matthews's target is rather the 'pimp', Ron, than the whites. The story ends with the bare mention that one white at the party, at least, approves of the hero's refusal to be patronized. One of the most successful elements in 'The Party' is Matthews' depiction of the crisis of values which creates a storm of conflicting responses in the mind of the young writer. The desire for recognition and acceptance as a writer clashes with his refusal to be admitted to white society only becamse he is a writer. He will not be a 'token black'.

A crisis of values is also the main content of the story 'The Portable Radio', 26 though at a very difference social level. This story concerns a young Coloured 'skollie' who finds £40, and,

for a short time, access to the world of his fantasies. He buys new clothes, and the respect of his aunt in whose house he lives. But the main expression of this access is a portable radio. Until the batteries run out, the radio is a source of excitement, romance and mystery. When the music stops however, the carnival is over. The taunts of his aunt goad him into fury. He rises from his bed and decides to 'get her'. Despite being marred by an uneven tone, and by a somewhat implausible plot, 'The Portable Radio' is successful as an insight into the human problem of the dispossessed, for whom the mere accession to money cannot enrich experience nor improve the quality of life. When Matthews shows his hero buying a set of 'sharp' clothes, we are made to feel, poignantly, the need for a reconstruction of values, which have not only been denied by poverty, but destroyed.

27

In his most successful story, 'Azikwelwa', Matthews suggests a resolution of this crisis. Set in the context of the Alexandria bus boycott (see Chapter One) whose slogan was 'Azikwelwa' ('we will not ride') it tells how a young Coloured, though at first untouched by the fervour of the African boycott, comes to join the campaign:

> Four days he watched them walk the long walk and four nights he saw them dance and drink their tiredness away, and the spirit of their pride filled him. Their word was as good as that of the white man. 28

His participation gives him both a sense of communion with the weight and solidity of the African masses, and an answer to the white men who indignantly demand to know why he, a Coloured, is walking. Here is a sense of identity independent both of white patronage and the conspicuous display of wealth.

Though not the most successful of the Coloured writers James Matthews is perhaps the most representative. His search for an adequate, independent and stable set of values mirrors the historical predicament of his people.

It is from this source, too, that Richard Rive draws what is most deeply felt in his writing. Well-known as an editor and critic, he published two stories in Drum, 'Black and Brown Song' and 'They That Mourn'[29], the latter being his contribution to the 'Willie-boy' trilogy.[30] 'The Party'was published in The Classic's first number. The American anthology, Come Back Africa included another story, 'Andrew'.[31] In 1963 Seven Seas, East Berlin, published a collection of his stories, under the title African Songs,[32] and the following year Faber issued his first novel, Emergency.[33] Four of Rive's stories were also published in Quartet,[34] which he edited, first published by Crown in 1963, but best known in the Heinemann edition of 1965.[35] Rive also edited Modern African Prose published by Heinemann in 1964.

Most of Richard Rive's short stories have been collected in African Songs, including the two previously published by Drum. They are divided thematically in this edition into stories of 'District Six', 'Strike May 1961' and 'Black White and Brown'.

The story 'African Song' first published in Drum as 'Black and Brown Song' stands as a sort of introduction to the whole collection. A statement of dedication to a multi-racial South Africa, it borrows elements of the dream/vision from Olive Schreiner and rhetoric from Alan Paton. The 'story' consists of the thoughts of a young African, newly come to town, at a protest meeting. As the crowd sings 'Nkosi Sikelele 'Afrika', ('God Bless Africa') Muti is uneasily aware of the presence of the police and the fact that he has no pass. The words of the anthem, quoted in italics, introduce Muti's vision of South Africa's past and of a free future.

The story, which may be taken as Rive's identification with the African cause, has no narrative as such, though it includes scenes of Muti's departure from the reserve and arrival in the city. As prose it is greatly spoiled by the adoption of a liturgical style

clearly derived from that used by Alan Paton in Cry the Beloved Country. The latter has had an unfortunate appeal for non-African and even some African writers (see Chapter Four) when seeking to recreate African thought idioms. Rive's attempt is a good example of the result:

> And already this one was led away because he had no pass and that one lifted the hand in protest. But one must not lift the hand in protest. And still people sang. And Muti was filled with the wonder of it all... 36

And so on. And so on. This style palls quickly, even when in consonance with Paton's essentially religious purpose. Here it serves to remind us that South African writers have often settled for easy effects, especially when the purpose of protest has seemed to justify it.

The three stories of District Six include one, Willie-boy, which was originally a part of the trilogy of that name published in Drum. Rive's contribution was the most ambitious and successful of the three, both in its attempt to probe the motives of the young thug, and in its depiction of his state of mind:

> Willie-boy saw and did not see, felt and did not feel. He felt iron, hard iron against his wrist, felt the heat coming in waves up the street, felt the oppressive confines of the alley. 37

Willie-boy is moved superficially by the desire to blot out the humiliation he has suffered at the hands of the gang-leader Jamesy. He is afraid of Jamesy, and afraid, too, of the whites. Behind these fears the story points to the boy's confused and contradictory feelings towards his dead mother. (This theme is an abiding preoccupation of Rive's writing.) Troubled by the memory of his mother's death, Willie-boy menaces an old Malay woman who seems to him to resemble her. But when she mutters the very words of his dying mother - 'Here wees my genadig' - ('Lord have mercy on me') he bursts into tears. Though the ending is contrived, the evident feeling which the story expresses lifts it above the largely

sociological interest of Matthews and Clarke's versions.

Of the other District Six stories, 'Moon Over District Six' and 'Rain', the latter is a rather laboured and sentimental tale of a country girl lured to town and abandoned by a city slicker. Rive overdoes both the pathos and the local 'colour'. 'Moon Over District Six' to which Nkosi took such strong objection in his essay 'Fiction by Black South Africans' is a pure 'colour' piece, a sketch of the District on New Year's Eve. The colour is laid on thick:

> The moon was in a recklessly gay mood and shouted 'Happy New Year!' to the stars. The stars twinkled back respectfully 'same to you'.

This kind of Enid Blyton whimsy fortunately occurs only rarely in Rive's writing. (Another example is in 'Rain' where it is even more out of place.) Yet it represents such a lapse as to trouble the critic seriously. Nkosi's attack, though ill-natured, points to a weakness in Rive's writing of which any serious appraisal must take account.

'Strike' and 'Drive In', two of the stories under the general heading 'Strike, May, 1961' also point to a general defect in Rive's writing, though it is here one of outlook rather than style. 'Strike' tells how the aloof and apolitical attitude of artist Lennie Damons leads to the arrest of his militant writer friend, Boston Cloete. Boston is accused of shop-lifting while waiting for Lennie, who insists on buying art-paper for his work. The police are summoned and pamphlets calling for a strike are found in Boston's satchel.

In 'Drive In', militant Bill is offered a lift home from a meeting by a white sympathiser, Valda. The girl, an extreme sample of the white liberal bungler, involves the two in a squabble with a Drive-In restaurant owner, who refuses to serve Bill. Again the result is the arrest of the militant, through the sheer stupidity of his companion.

The trouble with both these stories is that their heroes, who are virtually identical, come over as very unattractive persons. The author so evidently considers them to be right-headed, and so unsparingly contrasts them with their wrong-headed companions, that the reader is repelled. 'Drive-In' is the less offensive of the two, for Rive spares a thought for Valda's sincerity. But the total lack of any authorial distance leaves a strong taste of priggishness in the mouth. The dialogue of 'Strike' in which Boston scores over Lennie, is not only stilted (a general failing in Rive's work) but blatantly partisan. It suggests that the story's message is in the malice. Priggishness, partisanship, and failure to objectivise the leading character, are faults which recur in Emergency.

'Dawn Rain' is a more detached and a more successful piece of writing. A sympathetic portrait of a political activist whose banning order does not save him from arrest on the eve of the strike, it succeeds in portraying character both from within and without. Damon realises that he is not an intellectual, that 'basically he was a rabble-rouser, lived on a platform, and had strong convictions about what he thought was right and wrong'. His quiet acquaintance Abe, sees him rather differently:

> Queer chap. Lived, ate and slept politics. Arrested for high treason ... Then banned for five years. And yet with all this experience he fought shy of theoretical discussion. 39

The quiet dignity with which Damon accepts his arrest, and the unarticulated love he feels for his life, endorse Damon's outlook compared with the equivocal attitudes of Abe.

Five stories in African Songs are gathered under the title 'Black, White and Brown'. Two of these depend on the same device as James Matthews's 'The Second Coming'; they retell episodes of the Christian gospel in terms of present day South African realities.

'The Return' tells of a brown-skinned stranger who enters a

small South African town, and is quickly educated in its racial attitudes. He is set upon by white youths for not behaving with proper respect (he knocks at the front door of a white house) and turned out of the Dutch Reformed Church. A coloured woman gives him water and shelter, and expresses the defeat and resignation of the 'brown folk'. Rive captures the sleepy atmosphere of the 'dorp' quite successfully, as well as its suppressed violence, and the racist idioms of the inhabitants.

The story is unfortunately prefixed by a rather banal piece of verse, the purpose of which seems to be to establish the story within a 'universal' context, an example of some sort of original sin:

> ...with man came sin
> And a sickness was over all the land
> And there was a crack within the Temple of God
> A crack that was irreparable. 40

It concluded with a few similar lines and the predictable plea 'Forgive them, they know not what they do'. This last rings rather oddly after the story's deliberately shocking depiction of brutality.

'No Room at Solitaire' is a more effective piece, mainly because it conceals its purpose better than 'The Return'. It tells of the arrival, on Christmas Eve, of a black Mary and Joseph at a lonely country bar, where the Afrikaner proprietor and his sole customer are discussing the thorny problem of whether 'kaffirs could not be educated beyond Standard Two'. (They take a liberal view.) Rive handles the dialogue with much greater skill than he normally commands, perhaps because he is seeking for a caricatured rather than a 'real' mode of speech. The discussion between Fanie van der Merwe and Oom Dawie Volkwyn (sic) has some of the humour and old-worldishness of H.C.Bosman's stories. As Fanie and Dawie dispute, they are interrupted by Fanie's servant Witbooi, who informs them, by stages, that there is a black man looking for accommodation, that he has a pregnant woman with him and, finally, that he has lodged them in the

stable. At which Fanie gasps 'Hemelsnaam' ('Heaven's name').

Although both stories are contrived, and their purpose transparent, nevertheless the power of the gospel story is such that both achieve a certain shock effect. 'No Room at Solitaire', though the more self-assured, remains a little pointless, owing to Rive's failure to unite the two portions of the story. 'The Return' voices a more conventional protest, and is a predictable yet still urgent piece of writing.

'The Bench', too, may be called protest writing, though it is also interesting for its depiction of the growth of a measure of self-awareness in the mind of a simple Coloured worker. Based on the 1951 Defiance campaign (see Chapter One), it tells how Karlie, recently arrived from the country-side, attends a rally at which the crowd are urged to defy unjust laws: 'Karlie felt something stirring inside him. Something he had not bothered to explore before'. 41. Mentally he compares the words of the black and white platform speakers with the attitudes instilled into him at home. Rive is subtle enough to pose this contrast in terms of a comparison of sophistication and 'style', rather than abstractions. Karlie resolves to defy. He makes his way to the railway station and sits on a 'whites only' bench. Interior voices assail him, repeating the lessons of childhood subservience. They trouble him more than the hostile white crowd which gathers. Thus, when he is finally arrested by a white policeman, he feels his victory to be one over his own background, confirming his manhood, a victory over the 'cringing figure of his father, and his father's father, who were born like mules, lived like mules, and died like mules'. 42.

A sincere piece of writing, 'The Bench' is not disfigured by the self-righteousness and solemnity of some of Rive's other political stories. The attempt to portray the thought-process of that most

cliche-ridden event, the 'dawning of consciousness', is skillfully handled and largely successful. Though Karlie remains somewhat externally conceived (thus, incidentally, benefitting from authorial detachment) the reader is given sufficient of him to command sympathy and respect.

The same cannot be said of the voices in 'Street Corner', in which Rive approaches the central preoccupation of his writing: the racial bitterness that pervades the heart of the Coloured community and family life. Told entirely in dialogue, 'Street Corner' is set in motion by the application of a 'dark' Coloured to join a 'light' football club. That the applicant's brother is an accepted member of the club, does not prevent some of the sportsmen from rejecting him as a 'Kaffir'. Colour and class snobberies intertwine. A 'dark' player will reduce the club to District Six status. Other members hold that a Coloured is a Coloured, 'light' or 'dark'. Of course, letting in a 'real' African would be different.

'Street Corner' is an unpleasant story illuminating an unpleasant area of the South African psyche. That Rive chose the dialogue form is thus unfortunate, for he is not a particularly skilful renderer of speech, and especially of polemic. Perhaps for that reason he needed to write this piece. Certainly what 'Street Corner' says, in however stilted a fashion, needed to be said.

In 'Resurrection', his best known short story, Rive goes to the heart of this matter. It is the story of a funeral. Mavis' Ma, a Coloured woman married to a white man, has died leaving three white shildren and the dark Mavis. As the mourners, white friends and family of the father, sing hymns in the 'front room', Ma's Coloured friends sit in the kitchen. And Mavis, 'a small inconspicuous brown figure in the corner', reflects on the tragedy of colour:

/her mother's/ eyes ... had asked questioningly, 'Mavis, why do they treat me so? Please Mavis, why do they treat me so?'

And Mavis had known the answer ... And she had spat out at the Old-Woman, 'Because you're Coloured! You're Coloured Ma, but you gave birth to white children. It's your fault Ma, all your fault ... You gave birth to white children. White children, Ma, White children!' 43.

The intensity of feeling is well conveyed by the rhetoric of Mavis's thoughts, as well as by the terse, almost staccato style of the narrative. Mavis' self-directed recrimination against her mother reach back to the core of her hurt, and there, in the story's central irony, find recognition in the Old-Woman's understanding:

And Mavis had felt a dark and hideous pleasure overwhelming her so that she had screamed hysterically at the Old-Woman, 'You're black and your bloody children's White. Jim and Rosy and Sonny are White, White, White. And you made me. You made me black!'

Then Mavis had broken down exhausted at her self-revealing and had cried like a baby.

'Ma, why did you make me black?'

And then only had a vague understanding strayed into those milky eyes, and Ma had taken her youngest into her arms and rocked and soothed her. 44

'Resurrection', and expressionistic treatment of the racial tumour which Fugard dissected with clinical precision in The Blood-knot, is Rive's finest piece of writing, and certainly stands among the most important South African stories.

The best of Rive's short stories benefit from his intense and serious involvement with the trauma of race. In some ways the most deeply felt themes in his writing are akin to those in the works of Lewis Nkosi and Bloke Modisane. (see Chapter Six): problems of identity, frustration and isolation. In 'Resurrection' he has probed to the roots of these insecurities. But the author's tendency to self-righteousness, and even pomposity, often works against the effectiveness of his writing.

These defects are accentuated by certain technical weaknesses. Rive's narrative is often uncertain and his dialogue wooden. Lack of 'distance' between the viewpoint of the author and that of his characters also contributes to the sense we have of a heavy-handed

direction of our sympathies. Occasionally, as in 'Rain' or 'Moon Over District 6' Rive lapses into an execrable style. One suspects that this may be due to the desire to evoke a sense of place and time which the author has not truly felt. Rive's language is sometimes unsteady, and often laboured. Such faults are of course magnified by the tight confines of the short story form.

Richard Rive's first published novel, Emergency! appeared in 1964. In a 'prologue' he notes:

> I have used the declaration of a state of Emergency in order to focus attention on the development of particular characters and not as an end in itself. 45

The events of the three days, 28, 29, 30 March 1960, which led to the declaration of a state of Emergency in South Africa form the superficial narrative of the novel. Seen largely through the eyes of a Coloured teacher Andrew Dreyer, the main character, they are interspersed by reflections upon his childhood and education.

The narrative begins with the police baton charge into a meeting on the Grand Parade, Cape Town. Andrew escapes from the stampeding crowd. Returning to his lodgings he finds that the political police have been looking for him. Thereafter the story traces Andrew's movements across the city, seeking to evade arrest. The Special Branch visit his white girl-friend Ruth, and threaten to tell her parents of the relationship with Andrew. As the crisis deepens Andrew's sense of involvement grows. He seeks out Justin Bailey, an old school-friend now actively involved in the general strike. Although he is not wholly convinced of the rightness of Justin's approach, Andrew agrees to help distribute leaflets. In doing so he falls out with his close friend Abe Hanslo, who cannot overcome his academic objections to the campaign. Andrew, however, compels Abe to accompany him when Africans stage a march on the Police Headquarters, and later, after Justin has been arrested, he

insists on entering Langa, the black location, to distribute leaflets. The police attempt to arrest Andrew and Abe, but the crowd intervene and a riot is sparked.

Abe sees this outcome as a confirmation of his criticism of the ANC/PAC strategy. He proposes that Andrew, Ruth and himself, by now evading arrest only by sleeping at the home of their onetime headmaster, drive to Basutoland (Lesotho) to seek asylum. But Andrew refuses. He will stay and face the consequences.

> I ran away from District Six. I ran away the night my mother died. I ran away from Miriam's place. I've been running away from the Special Branch ... Maybe I've been running away from myself. But that's all over now. I am determined to stay. 46

The structure of the novel, which ranges in time from the events of the riot to Andrew's childhood and youth, gives to this statement the function of combining the narrative strands and summing up the progress of the hero. Clearly Rive's intention has been to describe Andrew's 'emergence' into manhood, the overcoming of those hostile forces of family and environment which demand that he become 'de little black bull', a phrase that recurs throughout his reminiscing.

This 'underlying' narrative is by far the more compelling and convincing. Beginning with the account of Andrew's Ma's death, for which the rest of the family blame him (unjustly), it recounts the boy's struggle to overcome the disabilities of poverty, squalor and being 'black' in a 'near-white' family. That Andrew is the most intelligent of the children only increases the resentment of his elder brother James, who tyrannizes him. After his mother dies, Andrew lives with a sister, Miriam. But his dark skin and academic success again generate conflict, this time with Miriam's husband, Kenneth. A scholarship enables Andrew to go to University and eventually become a high-school teacher. But his childhood struggle has marked him with the scars of loneliness and uncertainty.

While the reflections in Part One deal mainly with Andrew's

childhood, those in Part Two include a precis of political events from the 1948 Nationalist victory to the Sharpeville crisis. Linked to this is an account of Andrew's reaction to political developments, which broadens into a discussion of alternative black strategies and objectives. The issues of boycott or participation, of'non-racialism' and 'multi-racialism' are debated. The novel shows Abe moving away from involvement into an ivory tower of theory, while Andrew grows more emotionally involved and more active. There is a suggestion, implicit in this account, of the effects of the friends' very different backgrounds. Abe belongs to the class of 'respectable Coloured', a category of being which is alternately attractive and repelling to the District Six-born Andrew. Through the varying choices made by Abe, Justin and Braam de Vrees, a white radical 'pseudo-bohemian', in Part Three, these alternatives are given a measure of dramatization.

Yet Rive's purpose is not to evaluate political tactics, but to express differences of character through their differentiation. Thus the political elements in the novel, though dramatic in themselves, have a muted impact upon the reader. We are not made to feel the weight of the crowd as 30,000 black workers march into Caledon Square, though we realize that Andrew's presence there and his feelings of solidarity with the African masses are a significant part of the purpose of the novel. Even on the characters themselves, the impact of the events is unconvincing. Andrew does not sweat with fear when he thinks that the Special Branch have pulled up in a car beside him. Rive has not been capable of such imaginative realization of character.

Part of the problem lies in the dialogue, which, as in the author's stories, is stilted and indistinctive. No individual tones, illuminating the various characters can be distinguished. The usual idiom is uniformly restrained and heavily modified by the author's unfortunate habit of using superfluous adverbs. Nkosi's judgement

that Emergency 'fails in characterization and imaginative power' must be partly endorsed.

In the characterization of Andrew himself, it is felt in the not infrequent lapses of detachment between author and character. Thus when Rive tells us that, confronted by a young hoodlum on a bus, "Andrew was by now distinctly uninterested" the p ose belongs to the author. On other occasions the writing switches point of view unpredictably:

> Andrew intensely disliked the place and as intensely disliked having to share a bed with anyone. Both his sisters were married and had emmigrated from the filth of District Six to the pseudo-sophistication and pretentiousness of Walmer Estate. 47

This lack of consistent objectification (in reality a species of incomplete fictionalization) has a further unfortunate effect, akin to that described in relation to the short stories 'Drive In' and 'Strike'. Andrew is an unsympathetic character, impressing the reader as being rather arrogant and insensitive, particularly so in the depiction of his relation with Ruth, his shadowy white girl-friend. Now although the novel offers evidence in extenuation of these characteristics, it remains necessary for the author to 'admit' them; the reader might then forgive. But it is hard to believe that Rive is even aware of these traits of his hero. He is too closely involved.

Yet in the passages which deal with the young Andrew's family life (for example, the sections in which his relation with his mother are is described) many of these failings disappear, and the writing becomes taut. Here, at the centre of hurt, the writer's imagination is fully engaged.

The marginal social and historical role of the Coloured people has inevitably influenced its authors. Caught in the racial nexus of apartheid society, the Coloureds have been pulled this way and that by the lure and dominance of white society with its sting

of racial rejection on one hand and on the other the threat and the promise of the black masses. James Matthews' stories tend to emphasize the hurt inflicted by the bruising impact of external forces, while Richard Rive in his best work examines the deeper, inner hurt. Both Rive and Matthews tend to seek for a stability in values and social status which would mitigate the anguish of intermediacy.

The search for permanence and stability is present in the writings of Peter Clarke too. But here the author grasps at the larger, the transcendent experiences: those moments of intuition into human or natural beauty which hint at a reassuring universal order and permanence. This is not escape writing, however, and for that reason - because he can include the ugly and the hateful - Peter Clarke's works have the potential of more substantial achievement.

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Chapter IX

From Insight to Action: Alex La Guma

'The South African artist finds himself
with no other choice but to dedicate
himself to that movement which must involve
not only himself but ordinary people as well.'

(Alex La Guma.)

Alex La Guma was born in 1925, in Cape Town. His father, Jimmy La Guma, was a life-long political activist and trade unionist. Alex worked as a factory-hand, clerk and book-keeper, but was primarily involved in radical politics in the Congress movement. He was one of the 155 accused in the Treason Trial (1956) and was placed under house-arrest after his acquittal in 1961. He also spent periods in prison under the 90-day and 180-day 'no trial' detention laws. In 1966 he left South Africa.

Despite this chronicle of harassment, La Guma has been one of South Africa's most consistently successful and productive black writers.[1] His novella A Walk in the Night, was first published by Mbari in 1962. Short stories had appeared in Drum (1958) and in Black Orpheus in 1962, 1963 and 1964. The Heinemann edition of A Walk in the Night was published in 1967 and included three new stories.[2] In 1964 La Guma's second novel, And a Threefold Cord, was published by Seven Seas, Berlin, and The Stone Country appeared under the same imprint in 1967 and in Heinemann in 1974.[3] La Guma's most recent novel, In the Fog of the Seasons End, has been published by Heinemann in 1972.[4] Four stories appeared in Quartet edited by Rive, in 1963.

La Guma is perhaps more thoroughly 'political' than any other black South African author. This is not to say that his work is more concerned with politics than theirs. It is not. In terms of explicit content, only one of his stories, 'The Lemon Orchard', could be called 'protest writing' and only Season's End, of the novels, has political events as its central subject. Yet all of La Guma's writing is profoundly influenced by his Marxist ideas. It is thus provided with an overall orientation which, whatever its specific merits, allows the author to overcome many of

the aesthetic problems that bedevil his contemporaries. One consequence of this orientation is a re-alignment of the relative functions of plot, character and setting in the novels.

La Guma's characteristic methods are most clearly applied in his novels, and have been most frequently discussed in that context, both by Western and East European critics. (La Guma is, not surpris ingly, a popular subject of study among the latter.) In his short stories, however, La Guma tends to focus more on the personal and idiosyncratic elements in his writing. In these stories the author examines the more fugitive repercussions of the apartheid society, and especially the loss and damage to human integrity which it entails, although the ultimate survival of that integrity is always asserted. The relation between personal truth and social fact is varied in these stories. Some move from a situation created by the 'system' to the revelation of a personal truth, while in others an intimate narrative has as its purpose the illustration of the effects of race discrimination.

Of La Guma's short stories, 'Battle for Honour'[5], his single contribution to Drum, 'Blankets'[6] and 'A Matter of Taste'[7] can be considered as sketches, brief depictions of character and incident in the milieu typical of the author's longer works. The Drum piece uses a typical La Guma device, the story within a story, in this case a pub yarn about marital infidelity told, unwittingly, in the presence of the husband. 'Blankets' recounts the dying thoughts of a young skollie, as he lies waiting for the ambulance. It illustrates another of La Guma's preoccupations: the way in which social and familial circumstances combine to make up character.

'A Matter of Taste' is one of La Guma's few stories which deal directly with the meeting between black and white (excluding confront-ations with figures of white authority, such as police.) An encounter

between black railway workers and a young white hobo, it illustrates how the shared experience of poverty creates a common vocabulary which overcomes, without obliterating, colour differences. The common social background of the black and white characters, enables the white boy, isolated from his race, to join the black workers in their simple class humour and in the common activity of brewing coffee. As in the case of the old Irishman, Mr.Doughty, in A Walk in the Night, the white boy illuminates the ambivalency of class and colour in the South African context.

'A Battle for Honour' and 'Blankets' both portray incidents of the daily round in the limbo world of bars, cafes, and alley-ways. Similar in setting, 'Nocturne' recounts an episode in the life of a petty-crook, who is lifted for a moment from the planning of a robbery by the sound of a Chopin nocturne issuing from a nearby tenement window. La Guma draws his skollies with a tender but unsentimental eye, stressing whatever finer impulses briefly animate them. Unlike some other black writers, he never glorifies his gangsters. 'At the Portagees', a vignette of adolescent life in District Six, is written with similar tenderness, and with La Guma's characteristic flair for creating atmosphere through dialogue:

> 'Your can have the one in green' Banjo said.
> 'She's got pimples'.
> 'But she's got mos knobs too, don't I say'.

The narrator and Banjo succeed in 'pulling' the girls they spot in the Cafe. The author succeeds in transmitting the very flavour of their world.

'The Lemon Orchard' is an untypical piece of 'protest', an account of a potential lynching, in which a group of Afrikaner farmers set out through a moonlit lemon orchard to punish a Coloured schoolteacher who has been 'giving cheek'. The violence to come is thrown into relief by the beauty and serenity of the orchard. The

story is interesting mainly for the author's attempt to keep tight control over a potentially melodramatic situation. Like some other writing of its type, however, it is not able to build up a sufficiently convincing fable, while the characters remain representatives rather than embodiments of their respective outlooks. The piece is rather artificial.

In all these stories, with the exception of 'The Lemon Orchard' La Guma has followed the practice described by Mphahlele as putting 'the ghetto people aside, by themselves, acting out their dramas but at the same time implying the political pressure over them'.[12] The key work is 'implying'.[13] 'The Gladiators', a boxing story, is the report of a bout between a Coloured and an African fighter, told in township idiom. The Coloured fighter is described as:

> Not exactly like teak, because he's lighter, just miss being white which was what make him so full of crap. He was sorry he wasn't white and glad he wasn't black. 13

In this story La Guma states his allegiance to the black camp in a characteristically oblique fashion. The distastefulness of the colour bar as between black and brown is well expressed in the narrator's disgust with the brutality of the fight game. Here, too, the sense of an enclosed ghetto society, in which frustration finds vicarious release in gladiatorial display, is strongly emphasized.

All these stories are distinguished by La Guma's careful narrative, delicate assemblage of descriptive detail and immediately convincing dialogue. These skills enable him to convey the experience and general condition of the slum-dwellers without that ponderousness into which Mphahlele's similar pieces sometimes lapse.

These stories are one form of the relation between personal and social revelation exhibited by La Guma's work. The author has achieved further extensions of the short-story form, however, both

in intensity of feeling, and range and depth of observation.

The substance of the story 'A Glass of Wine'[14], consists of the shy and tender relationship between a young white boy and a Coloured girl. The anguish of adolescent love is thrown into relief by the cynical comments of a drunken onlooker, at the cafe where the young couple meet. It is the narrator who hustles his friend outside and tells him: 'You know that white boy can't marry the girl, even though he may love her. It isn't allowed.'[15] Here the short story, with its typical minute examination of a circumscribed incident, works in the sameway as the author's novels, demonstrating the human meaning of the Immorality Act. The function of the pathos is to define the nature of the suffering which the law creates. The author uses the typical device of the short story, the final twist which alters the import of the story's action, and thus brings home the point.

In another of La Guma's stories, 'Out of Darkness'[16], in the same collection, the balance between the personal and the political is even more finely pitched. The love of the dark-skinned school-teacher for the near-white girl, Cora, ends in murder when Cora decides to cross the colour line. It is not the girl whom the teacher murders, however, but his best friend who reproaches him for being 'a damn fool for going off over a damn play-white bitch'.[17] The school-teacher's narrative, re-told in a prison cell, points out that we do not hate the objects of our illusions so much as those who shatter them. The statement, complete in itself, is given a further dimension by the wider context of the story, which begins with the persecution of one of the inmates by the brutal 'leader' of the cell. The latter, fawning to white authority, exerts his own brand of tyranny over his fellow black prisoners. The thug reacts to

authority as the teacher does to his play-white mistress, and exacts a price for his self-abasement at the expense of his fellows. Here the political and the personal exist in parallel, each extending the meaning of the other.

If the balance is finely drawn in '<u>Out of Darkness</u>', the emphasis in 'Slipper Satin' [18] is upon the personal. The story takes its departure, however, from a 'political' event, the imprisonment of a Coloured girl, Myra, under the Immorality Act. Myra had sincerely loved her white boy-friend, although he let her down in court. Yet when she is released from prison she finds that her community and her own mother stamp her with the label of the system:

> 'What's the matter with your own kind of people? ...Its not better than being a whore,' the old woman sobbed. 'No better than that.' [19]

If the attitude of the women in the slum street is to label Myra a whore, that of the men is to anticipate that 'maybe there was a chance for one of them'. Only Myra's sister, Adie, welcomes her home.

The effect of this reception on the girl is to persuade her to accept the definition which the law has placed upon her and her own people endorse. Adie is to be married, and Myra decides to buy her a wedding dress:

> She thought, Adie is going to be happy. She wanted Adie to be happy and she told herself that Adie would have that slipper satin dress she wanted as a present from her. She could earn eight guineas easily. [20]

Alex La Guma's stories thus fall into two groups, of which the first, that which resembles in purpose Mphahlele's township-life pieces, is closely related to his longer fiction. The stories which are more concerned with the revelation of personal truth, on the other hand, explore experiences which tend to be excluded by the procedure of the novels. Almost all La Guma's stories benefit from the author's technical skills and narrative poise, especially in establishing a strong sense of scene in a short space.

La Guma's command of dialogue deserves special attention as one of the strengths which mark him off from may other black writers, and especially from Mphahlele, whom he resembles inmany ways. Part of its success is due to severe curtailment. La Guma never forgets that speech is only one means of communication, and, in a slum environment, probably the least important. His characters are never long-winded. The exception is when, again convincingly, they are telling a story. The dialogue is couched in idiom based on a literal translation from the Afrikaans usage of the Coloured people. La Guma never allows his practice to create obscurity, but he will include typical phrases such as 'don't I say' ('se ek nie', pronounced 'sekie', and used ubiquitously) and words such as mos which have no translatable meaning, but give rhythm and intonation to his characters' speech. The result is distinctive without being tediously quaint. Of course, La Guma benefits from the fact that Cape idiom is vivid and original in itself.

All the characteristic strengths of La Guma's short stories are to be found, though in different combinations, in his longer fiction. In the latter the function of character tends to be subordinated to larger designs, but the ability to create convincing figures and conversations remains, a notable feature of the novels.

A Walk in the Night, La Guma's first sustained narrative, records the events that take place from the time when Mike Adonis, a young Coloured factory worker, steps off the bus after being sacked by his white foreman, to the death, late that night, of Willie-boy, a petty crook gunned down in error by the police. Adonis nurtures a 'pustule of hatred' for the white who has sacked him. He visits a bar, becoming mildly drunk. A group of criminals approach him with an offer to join them on a 'job'. Adonis returns to his tenement

where, in a fit of mindless revenge, he assaults and kills a harmless Irish alcoholic, who rooms there. Mike escapes detection, however, for Willie-boy is seen leaving the block at the time the murder is discovered and it is his description which is given to the police.

Yet, though it is Willie-boy who dies late that night in the back of the police pick-up van, Adonis has decided to join the criminals, and the death is clearly intended as a metaphor of his moral decline. Mike has stepped down from the integrity of a factory worker into the limbo of petty-crime, the world of those 'condemned for a certain time to walk the night'. This, in the larger perspective of the novel, is the real moral loss, of which the murder of old Mr.Doughty is the symptom. The novel ends on an optimistic note, however, with the announcement that Mrs.Lorenzo, one of Adonis' neighbours is 'expecting' again: new life, the 'riches of the poor'.

<u>And a Threefold Cord</u> is a more optimistic and broadly imagined novel. Set in the shanty-towns on the outskirts of Cape Town, its principle figure, Charlie Pauls, struggles to hold his family together and (literally) to keep a roof over their heads, in the long winter rains. Charlie's father is dying and his mother is worn out by a life of harsh struggle. A younger brother slips inevitably into crime. But Charlie himself moves into an awareness of his love for a neighbour woman, with whom he has been having a casual affair, and an understanding of the basic social forces determining his situation and that of his family. As in <u>A Walk in the Night</u>, the announcement of new life towards the end of the novel, the birth of a first child to Charlie's younger sister in the midst of a police raid, underlines the theme of continuity and renewal.

Charlie Pauls is a less sharply realized figure than Mike Adonis. His general kindness and good-humour are at times too vague to be convincing. The real 'hero' of <u>Threefold Cord</u> is the shanty-town

community, whose sense of solidarity is emphasized by their participation and assistance at the funeral of old Pa Pauls. This solidarity (which does not preclude mutual hatred and violence) is sharply contrasted with the isolation of George Mostert, the solitary white owner of the petrol-station nearby.

Mostert, like the alcoholic Irishman in A Walk in the Night, is a white who has become marginal to white society, a failure in a world dedicated to material success. Unlike Mr.Doughty, however, (perhaps because he is a native South African) Mostert cannot overcome his race pride and so accept the friendship and warm vitality of the shanty dwellers. In his isolation and spiritual impoverishment can be perceived that of white South Africa.

Both these novels are characterised by an economy of plot and construction. While the narrative in A Walk in the Night maintains a driving 'up' tempo, Threefold Cord proceeds at a more leisurely pace, exploding into moments of brilliantly described action, such as the fight between Charlie Pauls and a local bully, and the terrifying episode in which a shanty burns out with two children trapped inside. These are examples of action in narrative of the highest order. However, as a whole, Threefold Cord does not attempt to create a plot as such, but takes up a selection of threads from the fabric of daily life, and pursues some of them to their 'end'.

The Stone Country may have been written as an attempt to create a more various pattern of events, and to portray actions rather than situations, by interweaving three story lines within a prison setting. There is some evidence to suggest however, that this structure was chosen so as to utilize earlier material. Some of the characters, and several entire passages, occur in the author's earlier story 'Tattoo Marks and Nails' and other of his prison writings. And the novel includes a whole story inset (and indented by the publishers)

rather in the manner of an eighteenth century novel. The result cannot be said to be completely integrated, a failure tacitly admitted by the author's division of the narrative into parts one and two.

The three strands of the novel include the arrest of George Adams, a militant caught organizing political activities, the rivalry between the two 'strong men' of the cell, Butcher Boy and Yussuf the Turk, culminating in the murder of Butcher Boy; and an escape engineered from the punishment block. A subsidiary theme is the portrayal of a teen-age killer, the product of a brutal society who yet retains an essential honesty of self.

The prison itself figures as an image of South African society, in the words of one character, 'a small something of what they want to make the country':

> It had been built ... during Victorian times, and over the years bits and pieces had been added to its interior, alterations made here and there, and because it could not expand outwards, it had closed in upon itself in a warren of cells, cages, corridors and yards.
>
> Outside the facade had been brightened with lawns and flower-beds: the grim face of the executioner hidden behind a holiday mask. 21

In this microcosmic world, George Adams acts as a catalyst to the main events of the novel. They allow the author to make certain moral discriminations, for instance between the thug Butcher Boy - who toadies to the whites - and Yussuf who, though equally ruthless, is less vicious. The first part of the novel, which concerns the rivalry between the two, is thus more memorable than the second, in which the account of an escape offers little more than surface interest.

La Guma's most recent novel, In the Fog of the Season's End, differs in many respects from his earlier work. The subject-matter is overtly political, an account of underground organization in the post-Sharpeville era. More ambitious in scope than the other novels, it centres on two main characters, an African, Elias Tekwane, and a Coloured man, Beukes. The novel describes the efforts of Beukes to

organise a secret distribution of leaflets, a meeting between Beukes and Tekwane, and the smuggling of a group of blacks out of the country to receive arms training abroad. Central to the narrative is the police break-in upon the meeting between Beukes and Tekwane. Beukes barely escapes, but Tekwane is captured. His death under Special Branch torture stands as the prologue to the novel. It is balanced by the successful getaway of the future freedom fighters, at the end of the book.

Thematically subordinate to these events is an account of Tekwane's childhood in the Reserves and his maturation into a political activist. Beukes' courtship and marriage of the young girl from whom political work has forced him to part, is also described. The former theme is the less successful, since La Guma, an author who typically relies on minute description and the aggregation of physical detail, is less able to reconstruct imaginatively the impoverished world of the 'homelands'. The treatment of Beukes' past, too, is sometimes perfunctory. He remains a less than distinct figure, despite playing so large a part in the action.

Indeed, character in this novel is largely replaced by a set of typical figures: The frightened middle-class home-owner, who goes back on a promise to hide Beukes; the taxi driver who helps him out of a sense of duty, and the simple friend who carries out courier tasks, although he thinks that Beukes is 'crazy'. Personal details are largely subordinated to this schema. Where characters are provided with a personal history, its function is to illustrate how they came to adopt their present stance. The characters are thus necessarily static, since the author's purpose is not to show the quality of their response, but the actions and positions they have already chosen. The novel is permeated with a sense of a new era, after the crisis, in which the battle lines have been drawn, so that

the action has become mechanical. The protagonist Beukes is separated from any identifiable locale, moving from place to place, never sleeping in the same bed for more than a couple of nights. Unlike the earlier novels, Season's End gains little from La Guma's profound feeling for atmosphere and location. The book is about the play of pure forces.

Viewed as a whole, La Guma's novels display certain regular features, especially in the use of the various elements of composition, as well as a definite thematic development. The technical features, which distinguish his work from other black South African writers, can best be considered in terms of the relative use of plot, character and setting.

All of La Guma's novels present a limited action taking place in a short space of time. Nor (with the exception of Season's End) are the events central to the purpose of the novel, though they are often violent and extreme. Neither of the two murders in A Walk in the Night is of as much importance as Adonis' decision to join the group of thieves. Similarly, the events in And a Threefold Cord are simply those of every day. In other words, La Guma does not aim to set up any central drama of events. In The Stone Country, on the other hand, the central character, George Adams, does set off a train of happenings in the prison; but as a political prisoner and an educated man he remains detached from them, a catalyst whose mere presence is sufficient to expose the workings of the jail. (Season's End, in many ways a departure from the earlier works, is a novel of action. It is discussed further below.)

The absence of a central drama of events in these novels has necessary consequences for the use of character. That the impact of events remains relatively muted, is largely due to the limited subjectivity which La Guma imparts to his characters. The inhabitants

of his slums live almost at the level of instinct. Their mental processes are minimal. Even Mike Adonis and Charlie Pauls, who undergo a change of consciousness during the course of the novel, are severely restricted in emotional range. La Guma's purpose is to enlarge our understanding not of the characters, but of their situation.

The main form of the relation between character and situation is a power equation, indicated precisely early on in A Walk in the Night. Adonis is confronted by two white policemen, who question him:

> You learned from experience to gaze at some spot on their uniforms, the button of a pocket, or the bright smoothness of the Sam Browne belts, but never into their eyes, that would be taken as an affront by them. It was only the very brave or the very stupid who dared to look straight into the law's eyes, to challenge them or to question their authority. 22

This power, to which the powerless hardly dare raise their eyes, defines the bounds of operation of the characters in the early novels. The form of their struggle is for the retention of their basic humanity. The characters are morally evaluated according to this minimal scale, each being tested as to how far he or she remains humane, in their instinctive self-defence.

Two broadly distinct reactions on the part of the powerless can be noted in all of La Guma's novels: the brutal gang leader who exerts an equivalent tyranny over his fellows while currying favour with the whites; and the self-assertive, basically decent character, often a worker, who attempts to exercise a humane influence and to preserve his dignity. These alternative responses are most clearly contrasted in the figures of Butcher Boy and George Adams in The Stone Country.

La Guma is unsentimental about his characters and acknowledges that a superior quality of reaction to the white power complex is usually the result of a superior education or of political experience.

He distinguishes consistently between those who live parasitically off the slum-dwellers - the crooks, pimps, informers,etc. - and those to whom manual labour has given wider standards of comparison. While these may be simple, as in the case of Freda in Threefold Cord, whose work as a domestic servant enables her to compare her own life with that of her employers, they are usually sound. In the case of the individual character, the ability to comprehend his situation enables him better to resist it.

Indeed, it would not be unfair to say that character in La Guma's novels is conceived broadly in terms of the values attached by Marxists to the various classes and social strata. Thus the lumpen-proletarian, worker and petit-bourgeois receive their various estimations. It is impossible to say whether this procedure is planned, or whether it is the result of habits of seeing deeply inculcated in the author (or the product of his own social origins). It has cost him some adverse criticism. It is thus important to point out that, firstly, this form of characterization is less obtrusive by virtue of the generally subordinate role of character in the novels; secondly, that it gives to La Guma's work an overall consistency and assurance which is often lacking in South African writing and, thirdly, that La Guma never artistically 'annihilates' any character, of whatever class or colour, thus revealing his deep humanism.

The quality of the characters' reaction to the power situation enables the reader to evaluate the moral dynamics of that situation. Thus moral action in La Guma's novels is defensive and passive, rather than active and assertive. It is the function of the characters to render visible the moral structure of the society. In this use of characterisation La Guma differs from the conventional concerns of the novelist. Although the primary function of character might therefore be described as 'reflective', La Guma also adopts a

more symbolic use of character. It is employed most clearly in the case of the boy Joe, in A Walk in the Night, but can also be seen in 'Dronk'Ria' and George Mostert in Threefold Cord, and Solly in The Stone Country. Joe is a type of the Strandloper, the Khoikhoin people who fished and gathered food on the Cape littoral at the time of the first white settlers. As a representative of the earliest forebears of the Coloured people, he speaks with the voice of the tribe, when he urges Adonis not to join the criminals. '"I'm you pal. A man's got a right to look after another man. Jesus, isn't we all people?"'[23] This instinctive force, which allows the lowly beachcomber to claim a right, is shown to be related, in a semi-mystical way, to his traditional closeness to the sea. George Mostert is a further illustration of this method. His isolation, inability to form simple human relationships, and desperate clinging to his decaying and outmoded petrol station, is contrasted to the living warmth of the shanty-town community. As Joe represents an aspect of the Coloured people's cultural history, so Mostert expresses the spiritual impoverishment of the white community, and its ultimate dependence on the blacks.

La Guma uses this type of static characterization to bring out the (relatively) unchanging aspects of the total situation which the novel illumines. The procedure gives an historical perspective to the portrayal of society.

If character has been a main instrument of moral analysis in the novel genre, the creation of a complete physical setting has also been seen as a major constituent of what Ian Watt calls the novel's 'formal realism'. In La Guma's novels, the physical setting is rigorously selected and meticulously drawn. Each novel has its typical locale: the urban slum of District Six; the rain-soaked Cape Flats of the shanty-dwellers; the world of prison walls and

bars (only Season's End, as has been pointed out, lacks such a typical milieu). Just as the description of the history of the prison in The Stone Country (quoted above) is a precise metaphor for the development of the apartheid society, so the shanty in which Charlie Pauls lives has a referential function:

> There were flattened fuel cans advertising a brand of oil on (the shack's) sides, tins of rusty nails which Charlie Pauls had pulled from the gathered flotsam and jetsam ... rags for stuffing cracks and holes, strips of bailing wire and waterproof paper, cartons, old pieces of metal and strands of wire, sides of packing cases, and a pair of railway sleepers. 24

It is the power of putting together, of assemblage, that is celebrated in this novel. The solidity of Charlie Pauls' shack is a measure of the solidarity of his community. The vitality and endurance of Charlie expresses the vitality and endurance of his community. The decrepit and decaying tenement in which Michael Adonis lives, on the other hand, is both a cause and the symbol of his moral decline.

The effective creation of a physical setting is one of La Guma's characteristic technical strengths as a novelist. Yet the function of La Guma's settings is not to give verisimilitude to the moral progress of his characters. Nor is it to create, in Lukacs' conception, 'a totality of objects' through which the protagonistmust struggle to gain anauthentic sense of self. Because of the very character of the South African situation (of which more below), the material environment of the novels has a force and function of its own. It is thus akin to the function of place in the social novels of Dickens, where the Marshalsea, or Tom-all-Alone's, for example, exercise the moral functions of character. The surface of slum life in an under-developed country differs from that of 'bourgeois society', in being not a'veneer', but the most direct expression of the quality of that life.

The relative functions of plot, character and 'setting' in La Guma's novels thus depart to some extent from their usual relation

in the novel. Character is subordinated to the task of portraying the specifics of the society, while the physical setting is so composed as to describe its material basis. This is obviously due to La Guma's desire to create what a Czech critic has called 'a revelation and analysis of facts'.[24A] La Guma's plots do not, in general, set characters in action one against the other, but present the actions by which they resist the weight of inequity. Where conflict occurs, it is usually based on conflicting forms of response to that inequity. The latter finds palpable expression in the evocation of plot and setting. Yet the elements of techniques of fiction are wholly retained by the author, making his work clearly distinct from the 'documentary' fiction of Can Themba.

La Guma's writing appears to flow naturally from his understanding of the world, which is deeply conditioned by his Marxist outlook. That this is part of the man himself, rather than a self-conscious pose, must account for the compassionate and humanistic light in which the author regards his creations, and the concrete and sensuous manner of his descriptive technique. Above all, Marxism has given La Guma's novels a self-consistency, assurance and cohesion which many of his contemporary South African authors, of all colours, notably lack.

Yet, like all things, La Guma's ideological self-assurance has its negative aspect. Critics have accused him, inevitably, of propagandist over-simplification, especially in Threefold Cord. Whether one finds the message of solidarity in that book simplistic, or even distasteful, will depend inevitably upon one's own outlook. Whether it is obtrusive, is a question of judgement. In my judgement, it is not. What cannot be denied, is that La Guma has the right to adopt a clear position on the situation of the black people in South Africa, and, if he is an honest writer, has an obligation to

express that view in this art. La Guma has himself said that 'commitment' in the South African context is, for the black writers; not so much a choice as a fact.[25] What certain critics in Europe seem unaware of, is that the denial of that fact means the death of art, whatever the aesthetic problems raised by its acknowledgement may be.

Of these problems, the most intractable is probably the necessity of resolving the moral and social problems which the novels bring to light. La Guma himself seems to be aware of this need, which reveals itself as a certain static quality in his writing. The answer supplied in Threefold Cord, the verbal expression of a simple rise in awareness on the part of the principal character, represents La Guma's first attempt to suppy this need. In The Stone Country, the author introduces a fully politicized figure, but restricts his role to that of catalyst. It is clear that La Guma is trying to avoid the pitfalls of creating a 'mouthpiece' hero. Yet the procedure here is less successful, for though George Adams' moral presence in the prison sets certain events in action, it is incapable of leading them to any coherent conclusion. It is in this context that the radical break which Season's End represents must be viewed. Here La Guma presents a novel of action in which, the 'problem' having been fully characterized (in structural terms, the prologue in which Tekwane is tortured to death by the Security Police defines the form of the State), the novel examines the mechanics of the 'solution'. Yet the result is a work which grips the reader, but fails to absorb him. It may be that, having moved from the 'revelation of facts' to the exposition of action, La Guma must needs rework and extend all the other elements of his art; the brevity of scope and duration which gave focus and force to his earlier novels is detrimental tothis new method, for the novel of action must be

extended and entire in order to achieve meaning and coherence. The significance subsisting in action necessarily reveals itself cumulatively.

In the Fog of the Season's End does not achieve such a cumulative revelation. Whether this most recent work represents a first attempt in a new extension of the author's range and art, or whether it symptomizes merely an aggravation of aesthetic problems felt in the earlier work, cannot yet be ascertained. What is certain is that Alex La Guma has the talents, imaginative power and dedication to make such an extension. He is among the most important writers to have emerged in South Africa in the post-war era.

Chapter IX - References

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Chapter X

Politics and Literature in South Africa

'These freedoms we will fight for ...'

(Freedom Charter).

Nobody who has written about South African literature has failed to notice its close relation to the political problems of the country. Most critics have felt that the writing has suffered as a result, and some have suggested that South African writers should turn away from political problems to 'more universal' themes. Others propose shelving literature and 'solving the political problem first.' Not infrequently, the impression is given that there is some impropriety in the South African writers' obsession with political questions, and obsession necessarily reflected by their critics.

Yet there is surely nothing improper or even unusual in the relation. Reflection upon political matters has always been a central part of the concern of writers, while no less a spokesman for British critical orthodoxy than Professor L.C.Knights has pointed out that 'the study of literature can properly lead beyond literature, to fields of interest common to all who ... reflect on life.'[1] What often makes those who discuss South African literature feel uncomfortable, however, is its dreadful specificity. Accustomed to considering politics in terms of general 'themes', the literary critic is disconcerted to find himself referred to Pass laws, the Terrorism Act, the Sophiatown removal and Bantu Education.
On this question two things can be said at once: South Africa's unique history as the earliest white-settler colony on the African continent has been, from the first, a chronicle of political divisions, violence and exclusivist ideology. This confrontation style of living has been undisguised, and is vaunted by the racist and settler mentality cultivated by the whites. Secondly, any literary work of fiction which set out to by-pass, ignore or 'transcend' that historical content, would be, at best, wholly formalistic coterie writing, more probably trivia. The preoccupation of the South

African writers with politics has, therefore, been inevitable. The quality of their perception and expression of that political reality - more precisely, of the experience of living in that reality - is the more important question.

Black writing in the fifties, the work of the writers associated with Drum magazine, had its origins in two underlying social and political processes. The first was the immense increase in the rate of industrialization which created the teeming life of the locations, throwing rural peoples precipitately into a new material culture, into industrial production and a cash economy. Their response to this situation was further limited and shaped by segregation and the denial of civil and social rights. Secondly, the response of the writers themselves was part of the world-wide climate of opinion created by the anti-fascist character of the Second World War. Ideas of the Popular Front, of the struggle to liberate Europe from Nazi occupation and of the Atlantic Charter's promise to the colonized peoples of the world, were widespread, even in South Africa, after the war. They promoted a fresh upsurge in the struggles of all African peoples for decolonization. In South Africa they were most sharply expressed in the Action programme of the ANC Youth League which defined the scope and direction of African politics in the decade of the 1950's.

Yet by a 'tragic' irony, the post-war years also saw the Nationalist party take over the direction of white domination. Malan's election victory of 1948 initiated a process of the systematization and extension of white power, governed by an explicitly racist ideology, and untrammeled by the residual, ritual deferences to British notions of democracy, hitherto expressed in the form of 'Cape liberalism'. As African demands for equal rights mounted, the government stepped up the flow of repressive legislation and the frequency of political police actions. The clash of these opposed forces has determined the character of South Africa's post-war political history.

Black writing was naturally influenced by the particular form of the social conflict. Ezekiel Mphahlele has, for example, explained how the lack of enthusiasm among South African black writers for the ideas and techniques of negritude flowed from their resistance to the bastard tribalization fostered by the government. The almost total concentration upon urban themes is another specific of black South African writing in this period, distinguishing it from writing by Africans in other parts of the continent. The fact that South African whites were intensifying their domination (at a time when British colonial policy began to don the cloak of 'preparing peoples for independence'), made the thinking of black South Africans defensive. This was not a period of 'cultural nationalism'. The black writer of the fifties defended his right of access to metropolitan cultural achievements, protesting against a policy which forbade (and forbids) black children taking part in a national Beethoven competition, on the grounds that this is not 'their traditional culture'.

These characteristics of the political situation shaped, to a large extent, the content of, and general thinking behind, the works of most black writers of the period. More simply, and yet more intractably, the sheer intensity of the intrusion of politics into the daily lives of black people, created certain technical and aesthetic problems for the writers. It is these problems that are most frequently mentioned when black South African literature is discussed. Lewis Nkosi's essay, 'Fiction by Black South Africans', remains the clearest exposition of the problem. It is thus worth quoting at some length. Nkosi writes:

> With the best will in the world it is impossible to detect in the fiction of black South Africans any significant and complex talent which responds with both the vigour of imagination and sufficient technical resources, to the problems posed by conditions in South

> Africa. ... If black South African writers have read modern works of literature they seem to be totally unaware of their most compelling innovations; they blithely go on 'telling stories' or crudely attempting to solve the same problems which have been solved before - or if not solved, problems to which European practitioners, from Dostoevsky to Burroughs, have responded with greater subtlety, technical originality and sustained vigour ...
>
> What we do get from South Africa therefore ... is the journalistic fact parading outrageously as imaginative literature. We find here a type of fiction which exploits the ready-made plots of racial violence, social apartheid, interracial love-affairs which are doomed from the beginning, without any attempt to transcend or transmute these given 'social facts' into artistically persuasive works of fiction ...
>
> Quite obviously literature as 'revelation' or as a 'maker of values' is not likely to result from a type of writing which relies on the technique of cinema-verite - a technique which consists largely in training the camera long enough on the passing scene in the desperate hope that art may result by accident. 2

After mentioning the achievement of black writers in non-fictional forms, Nkosi continues:

> Ezekiel Mphahlele is /keenly aware/ of the intractable nature of the South African experience when it has to be contained within an artistic form; and this intractability has something to do with the over-melodramatic nature of the political situation and the barrenness and infertile nature of tradition. It has always amazed me that bad writers should consider racial conflict a God-sent theme when prudent writers know how resistant this theme has proved to be to any artistic purpose. 3

It is clear that there is a contradiction in Nkosi's argument. While he criticizes black South African writers for not measuring up to specifically South African conditions, he also blames them for their failure to make use of techniques of European writers dealing with (presumably) different conditions. While it may be unfair to fault the essayist by referring to his own creative efforts, it is relevant to remark that Nkosi's attempt to adapt a Lawrentian concept to the South African situation - in 'Musi' - results only on obfuscation of the real potential of the story. Nkosi obviously has a certain type of 'European' literature in mind, since he mentions Dostoevsky, Kafka and Joyce (but not for instance, Thomas Mann). Yet he does not indicate in what way these writers' achievements might be applied by black South African authors.

Nkosi gets much closer to the heart of the matter when he writes of the intractability of the South African experience, as it confronts the maker of fiction. Whatever is meant by an 'over-melodramatic' political situation (what, one wonders, is a situation just melodramatic enough?), anyone familiar with South African literature will recognise the real technical problems that the presentation of stark, unmediated conflict entails. Racial conflict, moreover, since its subjective form is prejudice, presents special problems to the fiction writer whose <u>modus operandi</u> lies in the area of perceptions.

At its simplest level, this problem has been well described by Nadine Gordimer, who has written:

> ... living in a society that has been as deeply and calculatedly compartmentalized as South Africa's has been under the colour bar, the writer's potential has unscalable limitations. There are some aspects of a black man's life that ha ve been put impossibly beyond the white man's <u>potential</u> experience, and the same applies to the black man and some aspects of the white man's experience.(My italics.) 4

Beyond what is decreed by law, however, the habit of racialism severely cripples the perceptual capacity of South Africans, including many South African writers. It is equally true of those writers who sincerely despise and reject racist ideology. While Bloke Modisane in <u>Blame Me On History</u> makes effective use (in literary terms) of the ironies and absurdities of race conflict, habits of racialism, prevent the full exploitation of these themes. It is not a question of bitterness, but of incoherence. Where observation and description are thus hampered, it is not surprising that the creation of character, dialogue etc., should be more severely retarded. In this context the use of 'documentary' techniques, such as those of Can Themba, may be not just a 'fall-back', but the most effective way of writing. Yet to pin the shortcomings of black South African fiction on the habit of racialism would not only be an insufficient answer to the question, it would also fail to account for the strengths of that literature.

To appreciate the real merits of Ezekiel Mphahlele's work, for example, it is also necessary to consider the problem of under-development.

In the very thoughtful essay quoted from above, Nadine Gordimer attempts to pin-point one way in which the aspirations of the South African author may differ from those of the European writer. Quoting from Natalie Sarraute's plea for the nouvelle roman, free of naturalistic impediments, Miss Gordimer points out that

> ... we are still at the stage of trying to read ourselves by outward signs. To get at our souls it may still be necessary to find out how we do our monthly accounts. 5

The reason is that culturally, and in some other ways, South Africa remains an under-developed country. It lacks that continuity of cultural traditions, that dense social fabric, the elaboration of complex inter-group and inter-personal relations - in other words, all the mediating forms of what Marx called 'civil society' - which are the ground and field of operations of the novel. Of course, these relations are in the process of formation; Chapters Two and Three of this study have attempted to sketch the process. But at this stage the relations remain crude, contradictory, and thwarted and distorted by racism. For this reason the depiction of race conflict by South African authors of prose fiction (no more intense, after all, than the class conflict at the heart of Bleak House or Little Dorrit) can seem 'over-melodramatic'. The writer, seeking to work by 'outward signs' through to a deeper grasp of the significance of his subject, may find that there is nothing more needful of expression than what he confronts on the surface of life - the reality of conflict and oppression. Hence the genre of 'protest writing', the characteristic weakness of which is its lack of fable.

Can Themba's story 'Crepuscule' begins 'There is a law which says ...' and goes on to explore the ironies of the black peoples'

relation to that law. Ezekiel Mphahlele describes his work as developing, through protest, to the 'ironic meeting place of protest and acceptance.' Both writers, though varying greatly in style and method, seek to document the quality of the lives of black people caught in the apartheid mesh. (This, too, was the important function of Drum magazine, though a journal records unconsciously, a writer with deliberation.) The people are bound to the law, yet they escape it at every point, often at the price of self-hurt, both physical and mental. In these stories, the writers are beginning the task of exploring the relationship between private and public realities, Themba with a sharp eye and incisive phrasing, Mphahlele with a total commitment to authenticity of portrayal. At this stage it may be that the growth of a genuine South African culture requires the writer to be authentic, to tell it as it is:

> In South Africa, in Africa generally, the reader knows perilously little about himself or his feelings. We have a great deal to learn about ourselves, and the novelist ... must teach us. 6

Given the differences in the political situation, Nadine Gordimer's words are very close to those of Chinua Achebe:

> Here then is an adequate revolution for me to espouse - to help my society regain belief in itself ... And it is essentially a question of education, in the best sense of the word. Here, I think, my aims and the deepest aspirations of my society meet. 7

It seems then that the African writer who will 'go on blithely telling stories', in Nkosi's scornful phrase, is performing an important and very real function. It is a literary function. For it is the peculiar nature of prose fiction to draw out the connections between the conflicts of public life, those 'outward signs', and the inner continuum of human existence. There, in the context of black South African writing, is the 'ironic meeting place of protest and acceptance'.

One further point emerges from a consideration of Miss Gordimer's and Mr.Achebe's views of the novel in Africa. Chinua Achebe seeks to help his people 'regain belief in itself', while Miss Gordimer wishes the novel to help the reader 'learn about' himself. The distinction indicates the lack of any established tradition, living or at least accessible, by which the South African may gain an image of himself. Black South African writers have not turned to the past for any image of their national revival. The reason lies not only in the depth of the white penetration but also in the extent of its impingement, through urbanization and industrialisation, upon the African present. The absence of a modern myth of the black past - even in contemporary 'black consciousness' poetry - is striking indeed.

This lack of a contemporary national mythos may also have been responsible, at least in part, for the relatively limited achievement of black South African writers in the novel form. It seems that the more extended demands of the novel require principles of organization and presentation of content derived from more profound resources than those of documentation. Thomas Mann called myth 'a vital element in the epic form today', and some such transcendant image has often been the sustaining and organizing force in the modern novel. A coherent philosophy or world-outlook can clearly serve a similar function. Such a coherent over-view has mostly been lacking in South African fiction. The narrow confines of racist ideology, an example of such an over-view best typified in the work of Sarah Gertrude Millin, are inherently hostile to the procedures of the novelist. (Racism stifles creativity in the novelist's essential domain, that of character, because prejudice denies full humanity to its objects.) Among black writers there have been attempts to create some bogus myths -

the 'Drum style' based on the Hollywood movie, or the cult of the tsotsi fabricated by Can Themba, and described by Lewis Nkosi as 'cultural underworldism'. The shortcomings of these bogus myths have been analysed, but the seriousness of the need which inspired them should be respected. In Ezekiel Mphahlele's work there has been a consistent struggle towards some all-embracing vision, though the author cannot be said to have found it yet. The persistence of autobiography in his work points to this failure, though The Wanderers comes close to enunciating a theory of the wandering artist/teacher.

It is hardly unexpected, therefore, that Alex la Guma, who has used the novel form more frequently than the short story, should also display a higher degree of coherence on political and moral questions than his contemporary writers. La Guma's Marxism provides him with a ready test of the moral stand-point of his characters, as well as enabling him to depict the social reality without pessimism or cynicism. It has allowed him, moreover, to preserve the essentially humanist vision of the novelist, while perceiving the limitations (though not the negation) of the individual character, in the present racist impasse. This is not to argue that Marxism has any exclusive ability to further the literary comprehension of the South African experience. One might imagine a militant Christian author, a South African Katzantzakis perhaps, achieving similar results. The Christian fatalism of Alan Paton, however, by taking change out of the hands of conscious individuals, has precluded the author from portraying black characters as other than passive victims.

If La Guma has been reproached (sometimes justly) for being facile, it is perhaps because his novels remain very limited in their scope. The Marxist novelist is bound by social realities. La Guma's work predicates a revolution, but of course it cannot make one. The

world of In the Fog of the Season's End is one in which what has not happened, is as important as what is happening.

The late Amilcar Cabral described the colonial age in Africa as one in which the African peoples had been taken out of their own history and made objects of the history of other nations. His struggle, he said, was to return his people to their history. Black South Africans have been taken out of their own history for over three hundred years. The 'epic form' of the South African novel may well prove to be the chronicle of their return to themselves. Such an account would transform the arid epoch of the settler colony into an epic of struggle, connecting the future of a free people to the resurrected image of their past.

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