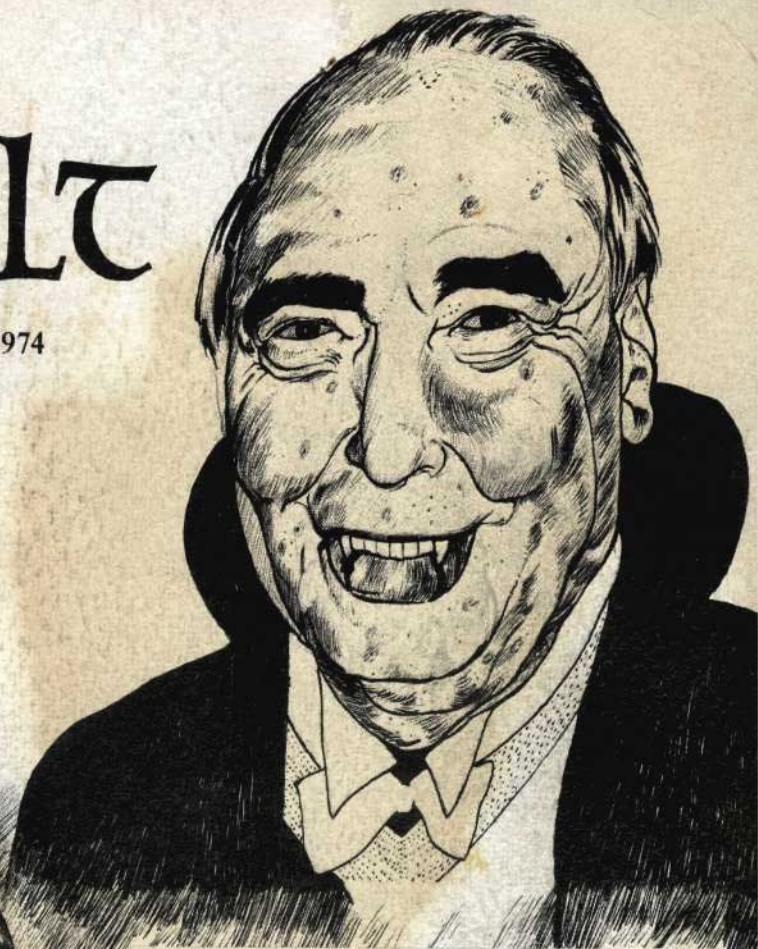


# BOLT

No. 10, May 1974  
60c



'Growl more softly, you machines;  
Because the White men are as stone.  
Can you, of iron, not be gentler?  
Hush your roaring in the mines  
And hear what we would say to you  
When that far day, now hidden, dawns,  
And we, at last, will cry: Machines!  
You are ours, the Black men's, now!



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# BOLT

MAY, 1974

No. 10

EDITORS : MIKE KIRKWOOD  
TONY MORPHET

## POETRY

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# Imprisoned by the Dictators of Apartheid Ahmed Timol Considers the Art of Eduardo Paolozzi

*Lessing in the Laocoon saw  
the strangulation of aesthetic law.  
The pistol of his argument?  
Oral and ocular orifices, he complains  
damn the artistic rules for the depiction of pain.  
The vergilian shriek that raped the air is lost  
in Laocoon it's a sigh, damp, crippled and soft.  
Pigment is treacherous, fresco betrays  
portrayal of the lacerating cry  
the painted scream is but a botchy hole  
mouthing nothing of rippings, lashings and stings.  
And so Lessing strives to divide and geometrize  
which art should do what and how and why  
engineering a tinny mathematics of taste.*

*Through the windscreen of Paolozzi's brain  
Ahmed views the Pergamene Laocoon  
all that anguish blooms again  
and crashes into the window pane.  
In the scene he catches sweating Hamlet  
Struggling to kick off his mortal coil.*

*From the scrapbook of Paolozzi's mind  
Ahmed summons and teases forth  
other fierce images smudged with life and death  
like frantic postcards jostling upon a barber's wall.*

*Wittgenstein at the casino welds  
laboured polysyllables of metal  
Psthetairos at Ypsilanti  
a steely linguistics for the discussion of pain.  
The huntress chased  
Diana is as an iron engine cast  
                  “What maidens loth?  
What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?”  
And the bayoneted boy hangs from the window-sill.*

*The blubbering matron Medea  
is pictured in corpulent convolutions, in tubular forms  
lead flanks and limbs lunge out at the sky  
heave up and thrash the ground.  
Surmounted on this straining, twitching bulk  
collared by crenellations and serrated contours of chrome  
is the rectangle of Medea's face  
defeated.*

*Caged by the dictators of apartheid  
Ahmed gazes through the bronze grid of the tyrannical tower  
and discerns in the etched tandem images catalogued there  
the bottle-pieces and junk-metal of his death.  
The automobile engine of the brain  
spilled across the pavement stones  
like a diagram half-erased upon a mechanic's board.*

*“I have been half in love with easeful Death”, he maintains  
but anticipates in vain  
to cease upon the midnight with no pain.*

HARRY OPPENHEIMER

---

## Carletonville

Dear Miss Platzky,

Thank you for transmitting to me a copy of the resolution passed at a Mass Meeting of the students of the University of Cape Town in regard to the tragic events at the Western Deep Levels Mine of September 11th, and for your covering letter.

I note that this resolution was passed in the belief that the cause of the disaster was "inadequate wages and the absence of worker organisation". In my opinion the belief that inadequate wages were the root cause of what took place is ill-founded. I would agree that wages in the gold-mining industry have for many years been too low, and – to a lesser extent than they used to be – are still too low today. The fact remains that over many years during which wages were much lower than they are now, the labour force in the gold-mining industry has generally speaking been extremely orderly, and that the disturbance at Western Deep Levels occurred at a time when wages had risen far more sharply than at any time in the past. It is also interesting to note that the level of black wages at Western Deeps is, with one exception (also in the Anglo American Group) higher than at any other gold mine in the country. The immediate cause leading to this disaster was a sense of grievance among the machine operators at the mine arising from the belief that they had been treated unjustly in relation to the underground winch and loco drivers. The dispute turned not on the *absolute* level of wages but on a comparison between the wage rates of these two classes of underground workers. Over the past 15 months the average cash wages of machine operators have risen by 46% and now stand at R51,70 per month. Over the same period the cash wages of underground drivers have risen by 60% to an average of R41,60 per month.

In each case their wages are *exclusive* of payments in kind to the value of R25 (approximately) per month. You will see that although machine operators are still paid substantially more than the drivers, the differential between them has been reduced, and this was the reason for the sense of injustice felt by the machine operators.

The decision to raise the wages of underground drivers by a higher percentage than others was not taken lightly but because careful examination by experts in the field of job evaluation had shown that these workers were *relatively* underpaid. It is however,

obvious in the light of what has taken place that we failed, in spite of strenuous attempts, to communicate the solid reasons behind the wage changes that were made, – to persuade the machine operators anyhow that they were fair and reasonable.

This is a very serious state of affairs which we must do our utmost to remedy and the students may very well be right in supposing that the difficulty in communication we have experienced is due to the absence of an adequate worker organisation. I am enclosing a copy of a press statement I issued on Friday dealing with the steps we are taking to improve matters, and I am also enclosing a copy of my last Anglo American Corporation Chairman's statement (referred to in the press statement) which deals at some length with the employment policy we have adopted. These papers give the necessary background information and will I hope be of interest to you.

I shall discuss later in this letter the possibility of promoting a Trade Union for black mine workers but here would simply point out that since there is obviously no chance in practice (whatever the rights and wrongs may be) of a black trade union being established and operating on the mines for a very considerable time from now, it is necessary and urgent in the meantime to improve existing lines of communication or establish new effective lines of communication between management and the black mineworkers, in order to minimise the risk of the recurrence of a disaster such as this.

I now come to the specific points on which the students seek assurances from me.

I will deal with the second point first. I can state definitely that a programme has been initiated and will be strenuously pursued to raise all workers' wages to an acceptable minimum level, and – in addition to that – to establish a hierarchy of jobs, scientifically conducted and fairly paid, so that wider opportunities may be opened, to those with the ability and application to take advantage of them. Between the beginning of 1972 and the present time minimum cash wages in the Anglo American group gold mines have been raised by 60% and average cash wages by 42%. The starting level was however very low, so that minimum cash wages are now R20,18 per month and average cash wages R31,72 per month. These figures are of course exclusive in each case of payments in kind to a value of R25 per month.

A further substantial wage increase is scheduled to be granted before the end of the year. This is planned as part of a continuing process, of which the speed and scope will be dependent on circumstances and in particular the degree of success we achieve, through improved training and job-structuring, in improving efficiency. It goes without saying that our thinking assumes

that the true market price of gold continues to be very much in excess of the official level.

The second point raised by the students – that in relation to trade unions for all workers – involves complicated issues. I firmly believe that a strong and responsible trade union movement covering all workers is desirable in any industry. It would however be disingenuous if I was to suggest that I think this will easily or quickly be achieved in the gold mines. When I consider the future of the Anglo American group it seems to me that progress in relation to trades unions to represent black workers is likely to come much sooner in our industrial undertakings than in our mines. There are difficulties in regard to industry also – in particular the attitude of the Government which while not forbidding the formation of black unions certainly makes it difficult for them to operate effectively. And there is the extremely important question of whether there should be separate unions for black workers or whether (as I would hope) the same unions should represent all workers in their fields without distinction of race.

The Gold miners would face these general problems and also a great many of their own. Let me enumerate some of them. The mines are manned largely by migrant workers, and this system with all its grave faults could certainly not be abruptly terminated, whatever the Government's policy might be. These migrant workers are tribesmen, largely illiterate and with small industrial experience. A very large percentage of the total come from outside our borders – particularly from Moçambique and Malawi – under conditions which either positively forbid or immensely complicate trade union organisation. There are wide differences of language, culture, customs and ideas among this huge labour force which would make a responsible and united labour organisation difficult to achieve.


Now I do not say this in order to argue that Trade union representation will never be achieved or that we should not work towards it, I believe on the contrary that we should. I do feel, however, that it must be recognised that it will not come very quickly – certainly not quickly enough for us to look at this time exclusively to the growth of Trade Unionism for the improved communication between management and miners which it is so vital and urgent to achieve. The panel of independent advisers, black and white, which we are to appoint, to work with our group employment practices committee, will certainly give attention to this matter of Trade Union representation for black workers and I shall encourage them to do so. They will also examine the possibility of improved communication through other channels – and this I would judge to be the more urgent though probably not ultimately the more important task.



Your letter reached me at my house a few hours before I leave for England on a ten days visit. I hope therefore you will excuse my replying in my rather difficult handwriting.

I have done my best to reply fully and frankly to the students. I feel strongly that fundamentally in these matters we all — or anyhow most of us — stand together. It would certainly be a great help and encouragement to me to be able to feel that in dealing with these complicated social and human problems I had the support of the students of U.C.T.

Yours sincerely,



*The Oppenheimer letter, and Eddie Webster's reply, reached us after last year's Carletonville shootings.*

EDDIE WEBSTER

---

## Dear Mr Oppenheimer,

I have read with interest your analysis of the tragedy at Carltonville last September and your rejection of the U.C.T. students' explanation of the conflict in terms of 'inadequate wages and the absence of worker organization'. While you raise some interesting points which deserve further consideration, I think the students are on the right track and you are rather ingeniously confusing the issue with half-truths and omissions.

It is true that the precipitating incident was the rejection by the machine operators of a wage increase that narrowed the small but status-wise significant gap between them and the underground drivers. But to suggest that this was the result of a failure in communication is misleading — one could equally well argue that they rejected the wage change because they disagreed with it, not because they did not understand it. The wages people get for work is not something that can be 'scientifically evaluated' — of course it can be made more precise if you divide the job into 24 factors and allocate points for each one — but in the final analysis you are dealing with management's systematic guesses not science.

Precisely because it is not scientific, workers through trade unions are, in the capitalist world, brought into the process and an evaluation of a job is reached through collective bargaining. The machine operators are something of an elite on the mines as they perform the tough and dangerous job of cutting the rock face. If wages are to be changed workers must participate in the process that determines their outcome – and it is particularly important that a traditionally militant and respected group of workers such as machine operators be brought into the collective bargaining process.

You seem to support the formation of African trade unions but imply that unionization would be difficult on the mines because of migrant labour and ethnic diversity. Whatever the significance of these factors, they seem to be heavily outweighed by the fact that closely packed compounds facilitate communication between workers and often encourage the emergence of strongly felt feelings of collective solidarity. This may be the reason why the most successful African trade union to date in South Africa was the African Mine Workers Union (A.M.W.) which was able to bring 76 000 mine workers out on strike in 1946. The mine owners' response was to refuse to negotiate with the union and instructed its officials to ignore the union's letters. The strike was broken when the police went into action with rifles and clubs. Nine Africans were reported to have died and 1 248 injured. No policeman or civilian was attacked and no property was damaged. Yet, strangely, the Gold Producers Committee, argued that migrant and tribal miners were not sufficiently advanced for trade unionism.

The sensitive cost structure of the gold mines has rested from its earliest days on the exploitation of cheap African labour. For fifty years the real per capita income never increased. Pressure from overseas and spectacular profits due to the increase in the price of gold, led to two modest increases in wages last year. The minimum wage for an underground worker now stands at R48,40 per month (this includes R25 for board and lodging) – this gives a cash minimum wage of 90 cents a shift or 11 cents a hour. These figures only really take on meaning when you compare wages with profits – in 1972 the African wage bill was R40m. and the profits R235m. (nearly six times as much) – the profits of Western Deep alone were R45,6 million. Even if we take into account the fact that the mines are a 'wasting asset' and their slightly higher capital investment this is an extraordinarily high profit!

Given these low wages and high mortality rate – barely a day passes without the newspaper reporting a death on the mines – why has this huge army of peasant-workers been prepared to sacrifice health and life in the bowels of the earth for nearly a century? The first point to get clear is that very few men have gone to the mines out of preference. Since the beginning of

the century nearly two-thirds of the miners have come from underdeveloped areas outside South Africa. If it was not for 'influx control', which makes it difficult for rural Africans in South Africa to work in a factory, recruiting officers would find only a trickle of men prepared to go to the mines. That influx control is an important factor in influencing the relative supplies of unskilled labour to the mining and manufacturing sectors was tacitly admitted by the Mining Journal in 1959 when among the reasons for the sharp increase in the Black labour supply it concluded 'the government policy of repatriating unemployed Natives in the towns . . . Once repatriated, it is possible for the Natives to apply for work on the mines.' For nearly a century the mines have been subsidized by peasant families throughout Southern Africa, who produced 45-60% of their household income and depended for the rest on money earned by the working miner – usually about 28% of the cash income of the cash income of the miner is remitted to his family! Thus men go to work on the mines because obstacles are put in their way when they try to go to town and if they are to survive and pay their taxes they need to supplement their sub-subsistence economy with a cash income.

It is popular in liberal circles to condemn the government for 'job reservation' and the restrictions it places on upward job mobility – what is often omitted, as in your letter – is any mention of the wage colour bar you and your fellow mine-owners practice. The mine-owners are the most powerful and cohesive group of employers in South Africa. Your colour-bars are basically two-fold: firstly, the maximum average system – a collective agreement of the mining companies not to permit the average wages of African workers to exceed a very low maximum rate – said to be 95 cents a shift; secondly, the recruiting monopoly – a buyer's monopoly over the recruitment of African labour to prevent the competitive determination of African wage rates through a freer relationship between supply and demand. The gold mines have done more than any other industry to shape the structure of the whole South African labour market into the form which it exists today.

For too long liberal critics such as yourself have hidden behind the rhetoric of anti-apartheid criticism, thus obscuring the very real collaboration between the mine-owners and the basic institutions of labour repression in South Africa – the Reserves, influx control, migrant labour, the compounds, etc. It is not government policy to pay African miners well below P.D.L. figures and there is no reason why your group should not commit itself to a Minimum Effective Level (M.E.L.) by the end of the decade – on my calculations it would mean increasing wages by a third every year thus off-setting a 12% p.a. rate of inflation. The law does not prevent you from negotiating with a miners trade union. We have still not heard the miners' explanation for the conflict that week in September at Western Deep.

Hopefully, in the not too distant future, we will drop our foolish facade of over-sophistication, and question the wisdom of causing so much suffering simply to take a yellow metal from the bowels of our part of the earth to another. It seems such an absurd way of keeping the world economy moving and such a useless way to use the productive capacity of half a million men when so much productive work needs to be done.

You ended your letter with an appeal to students and I feel the need to end mine with a warning from the absent miner's voice:

*'Growl more softly; you machines;  
Because the White men are as stone,  
Can you, of iron, not be gentler?  
Hush your roaring in the mines  
And hear what we would say to you  
Or else we may not care for you  
When that far day, now hidden, dawns,  
And we, at last, will cry: machines!  
You are ours, the Black men's, now!*

*(B. Wallet Vilakazi, In the Gold Mines)*

Eddie Webster

**EDDIE WEBSTER** — lectures in Sociology at the University of Natal, Durban

**LAURINE PLATZKY** — is president of the S.R.C. at the University of Cape Town.

**HARRY OPPENHEIMER** — is still Harry Oppenheimer.

## POEMS

### RAINY MIDDAY, JERUSALEM

for Roy Isacowitz, South African in Israel.

There will be no midnight pounding on the door.  
No-one will lock me into silence. Still,  
there are things I must not note too carefully.

Unsupervised children slushing the soil  
yellow in the rain remind me  
of the different games I played

kicking into grass-covered earth as brown  
as the woman sent to watch over me. I  
must not note these things too carefully:

I might gag on this meatless lunch  
and soggy dessert, might  
find myself pounding some midnight

trying to enter a faultily locked,  
months dumb door.

### TWO NIGHT WALKS

Three years later when the rain-flecked wind  
on my face and the sudden quick bursts  
of a distance locomotive accelerating  
shunted the bar's piss-swept alley from me,  
and that train with its narrow bunk where our bodies  
swayed together thundered in, I marvelled  
at wind and sound that could flick back  
the concrete-weighted railroad points with an ease  
which would've had those muscular drinking railwaymen  
gasping had they known. As I marvel now, six years on,  
at wind and sound which shunt nothing in or out  
in this city where there are no bars.

Brakpan '70, Jerusalem '73



FROM THE SAD SONGS OF  
SIMON AND HIS WOMEN  
(for John Berryman wherever he is)

I

Our boy Simon sat on Shit Street  
from which, though hailed he  
taxi and bus, he coult not go. Called  
he then to every ex-girl passing by  
each of whom said: 'You left me  
where you are now, why should I help  
you to bid it goodbye?'

2

General Simon fighting on three,  
or was it five, fronts  
puffed pipe smoke in and out as he travelled  
from one to another, and thought:  
'This kind of fighting may be good for victory,  
but my mind was so diffused  
that while she died and died and died  
I only cruised.'

3

Sits in the library scholar Simon  
and hates the wind thumping the world up  
and down at its slightest whim  
as his thoughts of his women him.

4

Henry, a friend, put in his apartment chairs, beds  
sumptuous as a king's court but couldn't understand  
why there no woman would even sit, let alone lie.  
'To get one to die,' explained (scholar again) Simon  
to Henry of help in need dire, 'you have to furnish  
your head with lies even King Claudius would admire.'

## II

### I

In post-Passover Jerusalem the afternoon wore the same  
as the six weeks of afternoons gone before:  
hot, cloudless, with an occasional wind that came  
to keep some girls in bikinis on the balcony  
barely alive. And with Pious Simon Jew  
trying to sleep, his head clouded still then  
by that time on her he had cheated. At night  
also it burnt away his rest and will. And when

he started suddenly to see  
the sun unseated, the limp wash carousing  
over the lines, and everywhere desert dust,  
smelt he Red Sea in the air and thought:

'The Rules I should not have bust  
of all places in this city.' And knew  
Simon Pious Jew was in for a sousing.

### 2

O Pious Simon Jew aware in the Lord's eye  
he would not like Noah grace find, cowered away  
from the people who after Sabbath synagogue  
suddenly flooded the sluggish carless road  
with colours bright for the Spring Holy Day. But

then: 'If die I must, I might as well choose where.'  
So girded he his loins, removed he his shoes,  
and taking his staff in hand sculled onto  
The River of Sighs where when the waters came  
he threw himself off between the banks of Her Thighs.

## A Landscape Painter

The first thirty miles are on excessively beautiful tarred road. This strikes one by its contrast with the architecture and the soil around it. For the road runs through black spots and locations. Nevertheless the strip of tar seems to have some kind of justification in the life around it for, looked at from the road, the life in the locations seems to centre around the bus-stops. There are buses, too, but there is plenty of chance to pass them as they heave to the side of the road for a long-winded embarkation. When the thirty miles are up, you turn on to a dirt road that is also good. When you've gone through the village and get to the top of the valley-side it's time to turn left and left again. By this time the road is terrible. You see two storks and a heron. When you get to the top of the ridge the Berg is in front of you, the giant's chin prominent, otherwise invisible irregularities in its face picked out by slivers of snow that are like the blows of an axe in its wooden profile. Down again. The cottage is visible on the left and you have a choice between bumping over the river bed through a film of water, or going round by the gate. I choose to avoid the water.

He's standing painting in the field by the road, with a romantic painter's hat on. That's what it looks like, anyway, an old photograph of Renoir. It's a brown felt hat with a high crown and a broad brim sloping down on all sides. Come to think of it, it must serve the entirely useful purpose of keeping his head warm — perhaps the apparent romanticism is due to my excessive suspicion. Apart from the hat, he has on a stringy-looking jersey and over it a grey sports coat, which is too small, on account of the jersey. His hands stick out of the end of the sleeves rather nakedly, and are slightly reddened by the cold.

I think first that he's painting in that spot because he's waiting for me. But he says he hasn't had my letter. He hasn't been down to the village lately. However, he's done all the painting he wants to do that morning, and so he packs his things into a tough-looking khaki rucksack, which he hitches on to his back. "Courtesy of the army," he says with satisfaction. "This is old stock. It'll last forever. The new stuff they're bringing out is rubbish."

When we get to the cottage he cleans his brushes and his palette. I suppose this is a familiar routine, but it's a routine I don't know, so I watch it. He first cleans his brushes, one by one. His movements are slow and deliberate, methodical. He finds he has left one brush out. This entails opening bottles again, etc. He does this with exactly the same rhythm that he has used before. There is no haste or impatience such as with most people would characterize the 'second-time-round'. What he can scrape off the palette with a pen-knife he deposits in the little sections of a white-enamelled container. Then he rubs off the remainder with a turpentine-impregnated piece of toilet-paper, until the palette is clean. As the palette is a kind of pad, with many sheets of what looks to me like grease paper, this strikes me, till I really think about it, as excessive economy.

The same deliberateness characterizes his movements as he prepares to make tea. It occurs to me that one of the consequences of living as he does is that a large part of your time will be taken up with purely practical and purposive activities, simply in order to keep yourself alive and to produce the few Spartan luxuries that keep you feeling human. This means that little time is left over for the activities you perform for their own sake. As a result, the nature of an action performed for its own sake starts moving over into the sphere of your minute practical actions.

The tea is made over the fireplace. This is a big chimney and he builds the fire only in the front part of it. Three chunky logs fence off the back, I don't know why. He says the chimney is very good and only smokes when the wind comes from a particular direction, which is fortunately rare. Beside the chimney an ingenious scraping instrument and a large flat pan hang on nails in the wall, black against the dull white. On the other side is a small twig broom. The broom and the pan are presumably for cleaning up the ashes, but he doesn't seem to have used them recently, as there's a fair-sized mound of fine ashes heaped up against the middle one of the three logs. On these ashes he first arranges a couple of handfuls of dry grass, and then builds a stack of twigs that he's broken off what looks like half a tree in one of the rooms off the main one. He gets down on all fours to blow up the flame under the twigs. It doesn't go too well. "If I cleaned out the ashes I might save time and matches" — a grunt. Then he says: "I don't know what kind of tea you're expecting . . ." But he says it with *schadenfreude*, not apology. "Is it rooibos?" He shows me a handful of what looks like twigs and bits of bark. "It's rooibos, yes. But it's not the leaves — it's the tree. They also put in the flowers." He drops it into the kettle and fetches water from a large bottle. "Turner got it for me from the Eastern Transvaal. It comes in a big packet, about **this size**" — he indicates a space about two feet by one foot by four inches — "and all that comes for R1,40."

The kettle hangs on an iron bar across the fire, suspended in the middle by two chains from the top of the fireplace. He does most of his cooking in pots hanging from this bar and is irritated because he isn't satisfied by the balance he gave it when he made it. A pot on the one end tends to jerk up the kettle on the other.

He boils the tea in the water, and the longer he boils it the stronger it gets. He says he frequently uses the same 'leaves' for days on end, just filling up with new water.

When he reckons it has boiled enough he asks me whether I take milk. He has the milk in a billycan and it looks good. Still, I get more milk than I'd bargained for. But with the rooibos flavour the tea in the enamel mug tastes rich and full. We're both enjoying the fire, as might be expected with that wind outside. The room is dim, and so the fire becomes the centre of the lighting, as well as of warmth.

This room is obviously where he does most of his indoor living. It is so sparsely furnished that each object draws attention to itself as a separate thing — each object has been thought of. There is the fireplace in the one corner, which I've described. In front of the fire we've drawn up his two chairs, which he has made himself with sticks tied together with string and some dense and tough sacking to sit on. The sticks he uses are 'ntingu', wattle or gum saplings such as are used for the runners in thatching. The chairs are skilfully constructed, with the small of the back well supported, so that they're extremely comfortable. He says it took him some time to get them right, trying out the sticks in various angles to each other. There is a tendency for the chairs to shift alarmingly under one's weight, however — I start to feel guilty about weighing more than he does. He intends still to bolt the wood together, to make them stronger. One has a skeepskin tied over the back, and that's where he hangs his hat. There are also some skins on the floor. On the opposite side of the room from the entrance there is a shelf with a compact library: quite a few artbooks, including two large books on Cézanne; Van Gogh's letters; Dostoyevsky; Nietzsche; Mann; an anthology of Chinese literature, obviously well read; Bashō's *Narrow Road to the Deep North*. He has hung some of his recent canvases on the walls to be considered further. But the light is bad. The only 'decoration' in the room consists of a few asymmetrical pots he has hand-built — he is an excellent potter. Most of them are unglazed.

However, to understand the mood of the room you need to take into account the texture of the floor, which is hard earth, probably mixed with dung, and the walls that are plastered with the same substance. There are subtle variations in the surface, that cast soft shadows, and there are cracks at the joins. It is this texture, in part, that gives the room its gloom, and dampens the glare of the one window and the one door to the outside.



The next biggest room is where he sleeps. It has a mattress on the floor with an old carpet as cover. At the other end of the room is a largish desk. He hasn't yet made an upright chair in order to sit at it. Still, it is the one thing resembling a table in the house.

Next, there is the room with the wood in it. He dislikes this room because it is built-on — with 'breeze block' instead of stone, and with a concrete floor. It has no texture. The other rooms are crudely finished, with doors and windows deep set into the wall, but this room looks cheap beside them.

There is a square hole in the corner of the floor, covered with an iron sheet, which is his refrigerator. You lift the piece of iron and there are his milk and butter. His motorbike is parked outside the window.

The last room is a small one in the front of the house, where he keeps the rest of his food in a chest, and also his painting materials; beside this room there is a stoep, a stone floor dusty with old manure. He can sit on a crude bench that he has made out of two logs. He says he eats lunch when the shadow of the roof has reached a certain point on the stones.

The cottage has neither electric light nor ready water. He battles the light problem with two paraffin lamps one of them good and one of them bad. (Under the conditions of the life he leads, the quality of manufacture tends to take on an ethical flavour.) He gets his water from the river. As he says, you taste the mud, but there are no ill effects. The cottage has no lavatory of any description, which means he sets out with an axe — he has no spade — and digs himself a hole. He uses the same toilet roll that he uses for cleaning his palette.

He has a good saw as well as the axe, and when he needs wood he goes out and gets it. He says he enjoys this particularly, finding it an exhilarating late afternoon sport. Wattle trees, being wattle trees, are always falling down, and wood is plentiful.

He pays 6c a day — the price of a pint — for milk, which he can fetch in any quantity from the farmhouse in the morning. This is full cream milk which he skims with a spoon so as not to have too much butter fat in his milk. He uses the cream to make butter and he makes skimmilk cheese. Apart from that, his diet consists of chapattis, maas, cold porridge, and home-made jam or marmalade. The chapattis are an Indian bread, made from  $\frac{1}{2}$  kilo of kuhne meal, a tablespoon of salt, a tablespoon of sugar, and enough water to make a thick dough. He takes a piece of dough the size of a bantam egg, squashes it flat into a disk, and fries it on a tin sheet. The point about the chapattis is that he has no oven for baking bread, though he is planning to build one on the Rumanian model, one that'll keep the room warm as well as cook his food. The porridge is mealie-meal with mabela seeds in it — he can't make too much at a time, as it ferments if kept

too long. But he is forever singing the praises of mealie-meal: "A bag of mealie-meal is a good thing. A bloody good thing. It's cheap, and it's filling, and weevils don't easily get into it. It's one really good South African product, that is." The maas comes naturally. It is the unadulterated sort, just plain sour milk, though he sometimes adds Tiger Oats. The cream cheese has onion and parsley in it. It tastes a bit raw, though otherwise good. He eats canned fish as a meat-substitute, though he says he only needs minute quantities. While I was there he made a stew for the evening meal with rice, cabbage, and extras from cans — the canned food he considers, I think, a remnant of sinfulness. Occasionally he has eggs, which he never fries, but boils or scrambles. (He has a horror of washing up greasy dishes — "Grease is the beginning and end of washing up"). The eggs come from three fowls in a little hokkie behind the cottage. "I'd rather have them out in the open, but they get into the trees, and then you lose the eggs." He leans over and peers in. "Aha! Thank you, thank you!" And he shows off his Zulu: "Amaca-anda, Amabi-ili." He reckons one can live comfortably, still with some luxuries, on just under R7,50 a month.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Can you talk a bit about your cottage: how you found it, why you like it, whether you're satisfied with it?"

"Well, we liked the place, and liked the area visually. We could have had other places cheaper, some for nothing at all. But they were mostly large — this cottage was smaller. Obviously, one makes do with what is available, but the ideal would have been a single room in which one would have everything one needed for living. The point is one chooses what one wants to see around one. These tin mugs, for instance, will have to go once I've made some pottery ones. The bowl I've got is a pleasure to eat from, and what's more also something that it gives pleasure to wash, because when it's wet the glaze comes out more strongly. What one wants to avoid is the position of the suburban householder, who has to have all sorts of things around him that he doesn't want to see, and in fact hides. First of all the lavatory and the bath, that he encapsulates very carefully in their own rooms, so that the rest of the house can ignore them. Then the place where the food is made — he doesn't want to see that either, except when it's absolutely necessary — who would want to look at anything so ugly as a fridge or a modern stove? — so he has a separate room for that. He even has a separate room for sleeping. With all this, life becomes more and more complicated, and intrinsically worthless in its components. Whole areas of one's life become **not worth it**.

"Now, one wants instead to weigh over every article one has, like a Chinese sage — or a miser. One must consider whether one has got a good bargain. We got a cheap paraffin stove and it stank every time we used it. Also it had flimsy plastic controls and the

dirt would get behind them, and you couldn't clean it properly. We took it back and the people in the shop said: What could we expect at that price? I'm glad now that we didn't exchange it, or get money back for it — we threw it away. It wasn't worth it. There's the story of an old Chinese sage, who had absolutely nothing. An old woman saw him one day scooping up water to drink in his hands. She was sorry for him, and gave him a scoop — or a calabash or something — to fetch his water with. And he was glad of this — it saved him a lot of trouble. So he hung it up on a tree outside the cave he was living in. But one day while he was sitting there he became aware of the clonking noise it made as the wind knocked it against the tree. So he threw it away. It saved him trouble, but on the other hand it disturbed the stillness. It was a bad bargain — for him.

“This is largely a personal matter. For instance, I wouldn't set out to go imitating Thoreau. Thoreau — in Walden — spent his time digging outside so that he'd have beans to eat and to exchange for other necessities. I wouldn't want to do that, as the day's the time I want to paint. So I get my fish from tins, for instance, instead of fishing for it, or hunting for meat. It's worth it for me. But maybe not for another person. However, most people make their bargains badly. It's always a temptation. It's always the tangible advantage to bargain against the less tangible. Most people bargain away the intangible piece by piece, until there's nothing left.”

“So you think more people should be living like you? ”

“I certainly don't think everybody should live as I do. They have to work out for themselves what's a good bargain for themselves. But I think very few people actually carry through what they imagine about living. One has a dream about how one would imagine one's life. I would have a dream, for example, of sitting in a pleasant chair, say an upright chair, looking out of a window while music was playing. They're useful things, these dreams, they're worth striving for. But too many people, they have their idea, and then they feel conflicting pressures on them. And so they settle for the dream that is really the hire purchase man's dream, not their own dream at all.”

“And how difficult have you found it to realize your own idea of how to live? I mean not practically now, but in terms of inner resistance.”

“There is always plenty of inner resistance that one brings with one. A while ago I was sitting fishing and suddenly got caught by a horrible feeling of guilt. It was the eight-to-five complex, that wouldn't let me rest. But I thought about this and it struck me that I was after all fishing for food, fishing to get myself the materials for living. So I wasn't wasting my time at all, actually. I was doing the same as the office-worker, only not in such a roundabout way.

"I've learnt not to begrudge time, and so to use time. I find myself sometimes (when I go down to the river to wash) sitting a long time, hardly conscious, watching the sandpipers in the river, that come to regard me as a sort of rock, and so come up real close. There's a difference in one's kind of consciousness between here and the city. In the city one's aware of being conscious, and what this really means is that there's such a mass of conflicting impressions around one, some of them hostile, that one is actually cutting many of them out, and fixing one's concentration, one's consciousness, on a few of them. Whereas here one can let the totality of things flow into one. It feels like unconsciousness, but it's actually a consciousness of everything."

"Have there been other things, apart from the necessity to overcome the feeling of 'wasting time', that you've found difficult in your way of life?"

"I sometimes find the loneliness difficult. But at least that's something definite to contend against. In fact I've started to wonder about the nature of loneliness. I sometimes feel it when I've taken Janet back to town after the weekend. Then I come back and am rather painfully aware that I shan't see her again for a whole week. But if she weren't there at all, I shouldn't have that particular feeling, though there might then be other problems I don't know of as it is. Again, it's usually on dull days when I can't paint that I feel the solitude. So there's that, too – the irritation at not being able to work – that's what the feeling of loneliness thrives on."

"So there are problems to be faced that one can't gauge until one has actually met them."

"Yes. I find what's necessary is to trust to one's moments of inspiration or clarity, and then – to try to trick oneself. I've had to trick myself – often. In certain bright moments I've realized that in the long run something will be better a certain way. You **know** that that's right – but at the same time you're conscious that there'll be a whole lot of practical difficulties, and what you're about to do could be destroyed. So then you've got to set about fooling yourself. Let's say: you have a stove, which saves you a lot of time, is quite helpful, but it occurs to you, well, why not cook over the fire, or that without it you'd have much more space over **here**, or something like that. So instead of – then – sitting down and worrying over the pros and cons of it, and getting together all the difficulties to back yourself up, what you do is you take the stove and throw it away. And **then** you work out how to live without it. Now that applies also in the sense of the whole way of life. What happens is, you take the leap. You worry about what happens when you land. You resign, you see. Then you've just got to. You haven't got an option, you've got to find a way of doing it. So, in your best moments of making a decision then you should act impossibly. Start it, so that you've tricked yourself into

the situation where you must carry on. And then, when you've got into the life, you overcome all the feelings – we carry an awful lot of social prejudices with us, particularly living in this country.”

“Would you feel that South Africa is particularly this way?”

“Yes. Well, first of all the Whites don't have so much justification for being in the country. And they don't have any history, they don't have anything to fall back on. They don't have much culture – their interests are pretty material.”

“Do you find that, living this way, you can actually escape what's unpleasant in South African life?”

“No. You can't escape it. You just need to stay in a place for a short while, and the poison starts springing up around you. At best you can participate in it as little yourself as is possible.

This farm must have had a fine history, that's now been truncated. At one time – years back – it must have had an owner who liked trees and planted a lot of them. There are all sorts of pines and firs etcetera on the place, and an orchard with many different fruit trees. And the last owner went in for experimental farming. He paid his labourers better wages than anyone in the district and had a system of bonuses – for taking produce in to sell it and so on. One African whom I'm friendly with used to earn about R40 a month, and then also had his cows on the farm. The farmer was generally hated. While we were asking round, looking for a cottage, we kept hearing remarks that went to indicate how much he was hated by just about everybody in the district. But two years of freak hailstorms cleaned him out before he could really get started. So he had to sell the farm.

Now it's been bought – as an investment and holiday house – by a wealthy Durban businessman. He has land all over the place that he treats in just the same way. And there's a lot of this going on. He's stopped working the land altogether. He sometimes comes up for the weekends to shoot guineafowl. He's sent off half the African labourers, and has turned the rest into glorified gardenboys. He pays them R10 a month and charges them R3 rent for each cow. That means that in the case of the man I know, he has R4 a month on which to keep his family.

The labourers are also very lost and insecure as things are now. They're always trying to get me to offer to manage the place, and then farm it again. I've been tempted – but that's another of these things that it's easy to get into, but damn difficult to get out of again.

No, my justification for living as I do isn't that I believe I can escape the poison. It's a matter of imagination, of living the kind of life that can appeal to one's imagination. By exploiting as little as possible, one can free oneself of a certain amount of the personal guilt. One can't drop out entirely, as is always



being pointed out to me. One's always dependent on society to some extent. But that's not the point. The point is minimum dependence. Then you can stop blaming yourself for what society does. And once you have a life that's imaginatively attractive in this and other ways, that then becomes a basis. It's not in itself a political act, or an end. But it's a beginning, a clear step. And it would perhaps be the ideal ground from which to try other political actions. If you wanted to write in a political sense, you would put yourself in a better moral position by taking as little part in the exploitation as possible. For instance I've got on very well with the Africans here because all my dealings with them have been level dealings. I've not taken on any servants – although they keep asking me whether I don't want a toch worker. But that shows that they don't see entirely what I'm doing – that I don't want to be at all like that.

You cut down and live with the minimum destruction possible – not just in the South African sense, but in the broader sense. We all exploit in some way by being alive. We all use some resources up. Whether it's by using other people's labour, or by using up land, by putting up buildings, changing the countryside, or whether it's by using petrol – all the different things by which we use up the earth's surface. With the growing consciousness of the effect of man on his world – the fact that man has got to the stage where he's actually expending his world, and you can actually see it, it's probably a good thing to consciously use as little as possible. It's a difficult question because, if you recommend that people live out of town, if you offer this as being a good way of life, then at the same time you must qualify it by saying: Don't use up the country. Don't go and build your country cottage, because that is just what other people are doing, and what is causing a lot of damage. But there are a lot of little places like this one around. I've never had to search for more than a month for a suitable place – and usually by that time I've had a choice of about four. On the other hand, if one builds, then I think one should build with local perishable materials, so when you leave one decent veld fire destroys the roof, two years of rain destroy the mud walls. In that one can see a possible advantage in building with mud and thatch. Apart from that, a mud house is an excellent insulator, it's easy to build, and then the inside – you see how the walls are all modulated. They have a texture, and an unplanned, unexpected texture, that's more faithful than any architect's tachist attempts at forming a texture.”

“Is your refusal to sign your paintings a part of your withdrawal from a society you feel is corrupt?”

“Well, one reason why I don't sign my paintings is that there's no room for a signature. Up till now, all my paintings have been very small – and besides, once you've gone to all the trouble of balancing your composition, why muck it up with something that doesn't belong? But you're right. Yes, it is a partial

attempt to put a spoke in the wheels of the dealers, who build up the reputation of single painters for their own ends, which are extraneous to painting itself, and which force the painter to paint for a ready-made public. Signatures are a part of that. The most obvious example is Tretchikoff kissing his hand to the ladies while he signs his prints. My refusing to sign my paintings is part of my reaction to the whole of society, which is particularized in the attitude of people to painting. It's a distaste that I have towards the art 'world'. What's been created **out** of painting. The superstructure of business and 'culture' – what's been built on top of the actual product. Painting itself has become a raw material for another industry. For a whole lot of dealers, and a whole lot of – critics." (This is a dig at me, so I grin as hard as I can.) "Painters, for instance, are often forced to make public statements about their work. Cézanne would probably never have made so many misleading statements if he hadn't been forced to pronounce by his friends. Then you got people latching on to things like 'everything in nature is formed in correspondence to the sphere, the cone, and the cylinder'. But I think the only real advice Cézanne would have wanted to give the painter is that he ought to paint in front of his subject."

"Do you think you'll always be painting in front of your subject? "

"Well this week I've taken one painting, and brought it home and painted here. Continued with it. In this case I'd decided I wouldn't be able to make the trip again. And rather than throw it away I decided to do it at home. And I found that I have already learnt quite a bit on the spot, and that when I'm at home I'm more relaxed. I can balance things better than when I'm on the spot, because on the spot I'm faced with too much. Not only that, but faced with the importance of each thing. And I don't want to miss a particular nice curve or some colour which, when you think about it later, it's a lovely colour but you've just got to disregard it. In order to get something out of the picture. I think that's a matter of maturity. Obviously a person like Cézanne who paints on the spot is not overcome by what he sees because he's learnt how to see. I think it would still be the thing to aim at – to be able to paint on the spot."

"Does this also connect up with your idea of being unconsciously conscious of as much as possible? "

"Yes. I'm still conscious, on the spot, of seeing each thing, and I haven't reached the stage yet of being less conscious, and still able to organize. But that is my ideal – to paint on the spot."

At school they taught us something that was wrong. They told us that since the camera had been invented, painting should no longer be concerned with recording the actual appearance of things. But this is nonsense. The camera doesn't record the actual appearance of things at all. It's the painter's job to do that, and it's only by doing it that he can learn about things and about painting.

I no longer believe that the painter has the right to change anything he sees, unless by changing it he can tell you more about what it's actually like. For instance, this blue sky we have today is extraordinarily difficult to paint. Paint it the blue you think it is, and it won't go with any of the other colours. You have to put other colours into it. You have to put in ochre and red and cadmium orange. You have to look at it until you can see the other colours that are in it, and then put those in.

A person who buys a painting always buys more than his money's worth. He pays for what he can see. But there's always more in a painting than can be seen, and this will have its effect on him in time.

But to return to the way of life — do you think there are other people who are interested in living this way? I could give all sorts of practical advice on detail. Perhaps if someone is interested, they could write to me via *Bolt*, and I could prepare some sheets on how to go about it. I'd be prepared to spend quite a bit of time on that."

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When I finally left the farm the next morning, I had an encounter that made me consider the landscape painter's life from yet another angle. I was out of my car and opening the gate, when an African leaned over the fence and greeted me. We conversed as best we could in bad kitchen kaffir. Had I been visiting the baas down in the cottage? "Yes." Good, good. Was I his brother, or his friend? His friend. Good. Did I also paint pictures? No, not me. That man, he paints such very nice pictures. Yes, I said, very good indeed. You're not his brother? No, I'm a friend of his. A pause. **Where** did his parents live? I said, in — — — —. He's got a mother and father? Yes. A mother — and a father? Yes, both. Oh. I thought his mother and father were maybe — in England. A tone of outrage crept into his voice: **Why** does he live down in that house, with no water, just water from the river? I thought: Was this the man with the two cows and ten rand salary? Did he have water in his house? I started finding it difficult to explain. How could I make it clear that my friend was living as he wanted to? The African continued, now troubled: **Why** did he not marry that tombazana? I fumbled a reply: "I don't know. He doesn't want to." Now he thought he had upset me with his questions — but I had only been at a loss for a comprehensible reply. The conversation ended with his making attempts to convince me that he approved of the baas down in the cottage. But I knew that already. His affection was obvious. But he couldn't, and never would, understand from his point of view why anybody should want to live like the landscape painter.

## Dear Sirs,

*Shortly after concluding my article on the landscape painter, I received this curious document from one of his friends, a married man called Dave Potter who is setting up a pottery in the village of Impendhle. He asked me whether I would send it on to you. I may add that, like the painter, he is a man who lives in accordance with his principles as far as circumstances (and his wife) permit. It is a curious document, weird to the thinking of a suburban householder like myself. It seems such a mixture of accurate analysis of the situation, together with the construction of the wildest and, to me, most unattractive utopianism.*

*I am not sure whether the utopianism is self-satirical or not: I rather suspect that up to a certain point it is not. But here his style must tell its own story. Perhaps he is writing with hope, but also with the self-satire of despair. For myself, I can see no possibility of a society that is not made up of exploiters and exploited, where this society is not based on industrialism and modern technology.*

*However, I must report that the article has stimulated my own thoughts considerably, and I do not know whether this has been due more to the realistic analysis or to the utopianism and the glorious prospect of playing with mud.*

*Yours faithfully,*

PETER STRAUSS

# Consumer Homes or Peoples' Architecture?

This article attempts a partial analysis of housing economics in South Africa and seeks to remove two fundamental bourgeois mystifications. The first, that consumption is a voluntary act, is shown to be untrue. The second, that industrial civilisation fulfils needs better than primitive subsistence culture, is also shown to be untrue.

## Part I                    COMPULSORY CONSUMPTION

The economics of the consumer home in South Africa today is best analysed with the help of the idea of compulsory consumption. This is the economic form where the state forms an alliance with capital, both monopoly capital and small capital so as to force a commodity, in this case the consumer home, onto consumers. The state uses its legislative power directly by framing nation-wide laws, or indirectly through municipalities and city councils. Thus the law prohibiting the subdivision of relatively cheap agricultural land for building purposes has the effect of keeping the price of town land high. The Pietermaritzburg regulations require registered wiremen to carry out electrical wiring and registered plumbers to put in plumbing. Plastic water pipe is banned. Steel pipe, being more expensive, is required. Brick walls and tile roofs are prescribed. These regulations are enforced, as far as their administrative capacity permits, by a corps of specialised police, the building inspectors and health inspectors. The payoff to Coronation (the Maritzburg brick and tile monopoly) is obvious.

The payoff to small capitalists, plumbers and wiremen, consists in the creation of a guaranteed market for their simple services which could otherwise be performed by the consumer himself. The payoff to percentage men (architects, land speculators, building societies) is assured by keeping all prices high and rising. I shall show later just how high.

The payoff to the state, the last member of the consortium, comes in the form of transfer duties on land sales and a heavy cut of company profits.



Formerly compulsory consumption of homes was limited to the cities and towns, but recent legislation has extended the system to all country districts. Thus a farmer may not put up so much as a haybarn without submitting plans to the specialised police, who, again as far as administrative capacity permits, enforce the use of those materials produced by the monopoly sector of the economy. This is the real reason why the countryside is being fouled with concrete block and corrugated asbestos. Mud brick is banned outright. Thatch is frowned upon. The only local material permitted is stone. The use of wood as a walling material provides a neat illustration of the consistency of the system. Round poles and squared logs which can be cheaply produced in wooded districts are banned. Second-hand railway sleepers, which are technically ideal and very cheap, are also banned. But wood that has been transformed into a monopoly commodity is permitted.

Thus the new hospital at Estcourt and a certain private school are constructed of Masonite.

In case there are readers who still believe that health regulations are passed in the interest of health, I would like to point out the case of Nottingham Road. By a curious administrative failure free building was allowed in Nottingham Road for a period of ninety years up to about 1970. Everyone drilled his own bore-hole and dug his own French drain. There was no system of refuse collection. The main street was and is dominated by the stockyards. Public health remains unaffected.

The victim who buys the consumer home is the successful bourgeois earning say R4 000 per year or more. The cost of his home is around R20 000; say five years pay; say ten or fifteen years savings.

Without quibbling over arithmetic we may claim that his home is likely to be the largest single item in his budget. The price of R20 000 is more or less arbitrary. That a home does not commonly cost R100 000 or fifty years' savings merely shows that monopoly conditions among the percentage men are not fully mature.

The victim's analysis of his situation takes the form of a bleat "What else can I do?" and although this analysis lacks depth it is quite accurate. He has to live near his job. There are no peoples' dormitories. There are not even any Youth Hostels. There are laws to prevent him sleeping in the park. There are more laws to prevent him living in one room with his family. So long as he is ruled by the consortium consisting of state, monopoly capital, small capital and percentage men there is nothing he can do.

The consumer's fundamental bind, that he must work years or decades to get a house cannot be simply resolved. It would be simplistic to infer that the repeal of legislation or the breaking of the monopoly grip would result in cheaper houses. In the study of exploitation one must not confuse mechanism with motive force; and the motive force which traps the consumer is his own greed. For at heart every homeowner is a speculator who is going to sell at a profit in five years' time. Watch him at your next party twittering about profits and prospects: he resembles the baboon in the calabash trap who could be free if he would but relax his hold on the bait.

For people who hold straight jobs and live in cities there can be no peoples' architecture until the politics of the future allows the establishment of the cooperative commonwealth. This utopia will involve the abolition of almost all forms of work; and the re-establishment of culture. One of the first tasks of cultural reconstruction will be the burning of the consumer suburb. Until then peoples' architecture is only possible for fringe people who are able to migrate to country districts where the administrative powers of the specialised police do not penetrate.

Economic freedom starts as simplification. Its hallmark is modesty and frugality. One's house will have only use value and no exchange value. It is not a marketable commodity and does not hedge against inflation. For mind-straightening one goes to Thoreau or to the Japanese sage who was satisfied with a ten foot square. For guidance in construction practice one goes not to the School of Architecture but to the simple people, the people of the reserve. Not forgetting a permit. The reserve people teach about mud and how to use it; about clay and how to use it for plaster and paint, about poles and thatch. In Lesotho they teach stone-dressing. The reserve people teach about the earth, about things under the earth, about things that grow in the earth. These are the materials of peoples' architecture.

The cost of a mud hut is so low that even the very poor can scarcely be bothered to calculate it. I know a village of very poor people where the ratio of huts to people is higher than one. Two peoples' houses were costed by their white owners at R20 plus free sawmill offcuts and R70 plus free local materials. These are both houses, let me repeat, not huts. They consist of several rooms. There is hot water. Under South African capitalism one works years or decades for a house. By the methods of primitive subsistence economy one works a few weeks or months.

For those who doubt the technical qualities of mud I would

like to point out that there are mud arches in Mesopotamia which are five thousand years old, also that in the Hadhramaut there are mud skyscrapers, also that there exist special laterite muds in the tropics (Cambodia, Amazonia) which withstand high rainfall. The peoples' science of the future will include an Institute for Mud Research.

The aesthetic qualities of peoples' architecture are best studied in situ in the reserve and in books such as "*Architecture without Architects*" by Bernard Rudofsky and "*African Art*" ed. André Malraux.

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NKATHAZO KAMNYAYIZA

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## The Weekend at Mpumalanga

Friday  
Afternoon: Though not working  
they are there;  
chatting and smiling  
with friends,  
while waiting for the 4.30 p.m. hour  
to strike; and pour out  
those border industry workers.

"Twenty-nine cents!  
and thirty-six cents a dozen!"  
shout the farmers  
waving hands  
to those marketers;  
while young lads  
sell their monkey-nuts  
along the bus queues.

Up there at 'Umgababa'  
the auntie-chic looking  
mama smiles  
and cracks jokes with her  
'IJUBA' clients;  
who are doomed by  
Dema's hit parade,  
and cheek-long eyelashed chics  
who dance with  
the mbaqanga/soul rhythm.

Step into the township  
to see the boys standing  
here and there  
on the shop verandahs

listening to our township  
music as darkness  
creeps in; giving lovers  
the chance to embrace  
and kiss each other good-night.

**Night:** "One man one bottle! "  
is the motto of the boys  
at Sis Beautiful Woman's joint;  
as they sip their drinks;  
laughing and shouting happily.

Down by Mlahlanga stream  
screams a 'girl for help';  
asking passersby to  
'help her deliver her baby'  
while 'her'  
colleagues  
wait;  
wielding pangas and knives,  
for the Samaritans  
to be robbed and  
battered to death.

**Saturday:** Saturday morning  
unveils the happenings  
of the previous night;  
with corpses sprawled  
along the tarred and  
broken-bottle jewelled streets.

**Afternoon:** Look at the gals  
as they stroll  
with the setting sun;  
giving them the glamorous  
beauty; matching  
their fancy fashions  
and plaited heads;  
and though some short,  
they look tall  
in high wedged-sole-sandals.

Oh look at that laughing throng,  
with that breast-clad auntie 'e  
shouting:  
I'm gonna bash yo'brains out,  
if yo' think yo' gonna take ma man  
like that! "

Wedding ceremonies  
are now in full swing,  
with children and women  
singing and rejoicing

while beer and grog  
has made  
the old folks to prattle  
and dance.

**Night:** Today's Saturday night,  
there's no sleeping  
for those party lovers  
who'll swing all night  
with Jimmy Smith's  
jazz L.P.'s;  
while those asleep  
will be woken by  
the sound of the Zionists  
goathide drum beats,  
with tremendous brazen-voices.

Then there come the drunkards,  
shouting and singing  
discordantly;  
swearing  
to be not the same  
no more.

**Sunday  
Morning:** The hour strikes  
and the church bells toll;  
but few attend the ceremony.  
Some complain  
of stomach and head aches,  
while some are still exhausted  
by yesternight's sprees.

**Afternoon:** Weariness and aches  
have gone;  
and now they gracefully  
walk steady with their belle,  
to the mustered soccer stadium;  
to watch  
the 3.30 p.m. match.

**Monday  
Morning:** Play it cool man,  
'cos they can't wake up early;  
then they queue for hours  
for buses and taxis,  
and arrive late,  
frustrated, fatigued  
and sleepy at work.  
What can be said?  
Even the mlungu knows!  
He's been grooving too!

## John Berger's 'G'

In much of the serious writing going on at present, there seems to be a rapprochement between fiction and non-fiction, each of the two opposites shifting from its traditional position toward the other, as though they wished to blend in the middle. Norman Mailer calls his *Armies of the Night*, which is an account of a demonstration against the Pentagon, a novel — and films with actors in the main parts incorporate old newsreels, or shots of actual events taken on the spot. It doesn't seem to matter so much any more whether an event or character is portrayed from life or imagined: the same rules apply, in both cases, for their realization.

This rapprochement between fiction and non-fiction is not simply a matter of adaptation to each other. It is not simply a matter of the documentary going romantic — as autobiographies went romantic and existential after Rousseau. Nor is it a matter of the novel falling back on documentation. It is rather that both are accepting the same rules — the rules that apply in the science of comprehending a person other than oneself. It is largely the Marxist conception of the social and historical determination of the individual that has been responsible for a new clarity about this science: if the object of the writer's attentions is conditioned by his milieu and by his place in history, then this is equally true of the writer himself. From this it would follow that the only way for the writer to avoid distorting the experience of the people he is writing about is for him to get to understand his own subjectivity in an objective fashion. This is perhaps even more difficult than to regard another objectively — it implies an objective understanding of one's own place in society and in history.

Inevitably one will ask oneself whether it is true that the practice of writing novels must necessarily require such theoretical self-consciousness. Judging by the novelists of the nineteenth century it has not always been true. But with each new thing that comes to consciousness, some earlier naive power is lost. The Marxist analysis has given new clarity to the problems of the writer — and with the new clarity has come a loss of innocence. Writers have come to distrust the intuitive imaginative leap into the personality of another and tend to stress — or exaggerate — the near impossibility of the feat.

Let me try and explain how Berger sets about trying to discover the centre of his characters in his new novel, *G* . . . Imagine that

a person is most unknown at the centre of his being. Around his edges, in his social and physical interactions with the world, he can be perceived. Berger draws a circle round the unknown centre of that person, at first quite a wide circle. Then he draws a circle that is a bit smaller, so that he is now encroaching on as yet uncharted ground. The circles get smaller and smaller. At a certain point he must stop, being unable to get closer, unable to imagine further. At such a point, he might write as follows:

“To describe the nature of his memories of Beatrice would require a book with its own uniquely established vocabulary. (It would be the book of **his** dreams, not mine or yours.)”

To a large extent the modern novel, or biography, or history tends to be **about** the impossibility of one person entering into the experience of another. It is possible to express this in a more positive form, however: the modern novel tends to be about the tension between the writer and his subject. Out of the dialectical relationship between the writer's own consciousness and the other consciousness to which it applies itself arises the novel's new vision. The tension even exists in the extreme case of the autobiography, in the impossibility of recalling one's own life as one had lived it. To some people this minimal but appreciable tension has a special fascination. Hence Sartre writes his own autobiography and also writes autobiographies for others, drawing fine layers of later consciousness over the past, always using the tension to probe deeper. On the other hand more robust writers will be attracted to the form where the tension between writer and subject is greatest – the historical novel. *G.* is an historical novel, but an historical novel aware of its own difficulty.<sup>1</sup> Berger puts this differently:

“All history is contemporary history: not in the ordinary sense of the word, where contemporary history means the history of the comparatively recent past, but in the strict sense: the consciousness of one's own activity as one actually performs it. History is thus the self-knowledge of the living mind. For even when the events which the historian studies are events that happened in the distant past, the condition of their being historically known is that they should vibrate in the historian's mind.”

But where are they all gone, then, the born novelists, the storytellers, the instant character-painters? They are still there – the Roths, the Malamuds, the Updikes, the Vonneguts – but they must live under suspicion of frivolity, with their verbal brilliance and their virtuoso ease with imagery. At any rate, they are threatened – the reputation of their artistry is threatened – by the writers who are not born novelists and yet will claim the novel as one of the many ways of express themselves and their knowledge of the world. Berger has published three books of essays: about art, about artists, about revolutionaries, and about less classifiable things. He has published two books each about a single artist, and each combining portraiture, politics, and art criticism.



He has written a book which is a study of a doctor: his personality, his social function, and the sociology of the area in which he practises. The books about the artists and the book about the doctor were both made in collaboration with the photographer Jean Mohr. It is characteristic that he should combine genres in this way, and that it should be the democratic art of photography that he should choose as accompaniment to his writing. He has also written four novels. What must be infuriating to the fellowship of 'born novelists' – and also to the aficionados of the novel as a pure and separate form – is that he has done this using the same kind of intelligence which he uses for his non-fictional works.

It is not just that the novel *The Foot of Clive* could also be a sociological study of the life in a hospital, given Berger's probable methods of making such a study. *The Foot of Clive*, in spite of some interesting observations, is the duller of the novels – and unfortunately the most easily available in South Africa at the moment. Let's take Berger at his best. Berger does not often present us with characters that are convincing in the ordinary way – a matter which I'll come back to later. However, two characters stand out in his oeuvre as more than ordinarily real: the painter in *A Painter of Our Time*, and the doctor in *A Fortunate Man*. The point I am making is that the first of these is a fictional character; the second is not. **And they are both real in the same way.** They are real by their function. The painter is real as an artist. One of the most exciting elements in that book is the description of the growth of a large painting. Now this is really remarkable. Writers have always liked to have artists as their heroes. But this is normally nothing less than a confidence trick. We cannot really believe that the writer has created an artist unless he produces the evidence, the artist's work. Why should we believe Salinger about Seymour, when he doesn't produce that wonderful double haiku that Seymour is supposed to have written? But in *A Painter of Our Time* we feel as though the paintings really exist, though there is no one artist in existence on whose works Berger could have modelled his creations. Fernand Léger is in his mind, certainly, and the method of using paint reminds one of Stanley Spencer. But the paintings in the book seem as real as the paintings of either of these men. The painter, as a painter, is as concrete as any actual worker in his field. We also know that the **situation** of this painter (though not his personality), his position as a Communist artist in exile, is based on the life of Berger's friend Peter Peri, the sculptor, whom Berger describes in a short essay. The theme is thus doubled in Berger's work, appearing once in fictional terms, once in non-fiction. The painter in *A Painter of Our Time* is as real as a non-fictional character. On the other hand the doctor's conversations with his patients in *A Fortunate Man* are so significant and alive, as a result of being so sensitively chosen and recorded, that they have the effect of having been created.

Cross-reference between his fictional and non-fictional works is a constant part of Berger's procedure. The novel *Corker's Freedom* is his most sparkling work, full of brio and true gusto, and rising to an orgasmic climax when the hero's consciousness, which has been divided against itself, gradually unifies itself while he is speaking at a church function. It seems a novel written for the sheer joy of it. But in fact Berger is pursuing a theme that he has thought about deeply in theoretical terms, as becomes clear when one reads the references he makes to the book in *A Fortunate Man* and in an essay on Léger.

I have not yet mentioned one of Berger's books of art criticism, entitled *Ways of Seeing*. This is based on a television series given by him, and is propaganda. It seems to me by far the worst thing that Berger has ever done. This is not on account of its being propaganda. Berger is one of the few artists who could make propaganda that is intelligent, sensitive, accurate and thought-provoking. But in this work he consistently exaggerates, distorts, and leaves out large portions of the truth. The book is an attack on property-consciousness in European fine art, a theme that is itself of considerable importance, particularly after the television series on 'Civilization' given by Kenneth Clark. But one imagines Berger as having been infuriated by Clark, and determined to fight him with the crudest weapons available. This is one battle that Berger fought and lost, and deserved to lose — not on the merits of the case, but on the merits of the pleading. This is not to say that there aren't passages of interest in *Ways of Seeing*, bold and revolutionary statements. The pity is that one feels the television series, the book, and its publication in *The Listener* will not receive the honing resistance that the work's boldness and occasional wildness demands. Among the book's most interesting passages there is one about the divided consciousness of woman — which appears verbatim in *G.*. It is impossible to say which book is quoting which.

This pattern of mutual stimulation between works of documentation and works of the imagination should prepare us to understand why Berger was interested in writing an historical novel like *G.*. The individual adventures of his imaginary characters are set against key historical events, recreated from research and, on one occasion, given in the actual words of a journalist on the spot.

Berger was also interested in writing a historical novel because he wanted the creative tension that arises when a modern consciousness explores and judges the past. One of the reviewers, on *G.*'s first appearance, wrote that it was "a roman à thèse along the lines of John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*." One can see why the comparison was attractive, but it is unfair to Berger. Fowles's book is almost completely derivative, whereas

Berger's *G.*, insofar as this can be said of any literary work, is wholly original. Fowles set out to write a nineteenth-century novel, which is absurd; and his expertise and energy in the undertaking only makes things worse. The book really becomes interesting when the impossibility becomes obvious, when it becomes clear that the heroine is acting in a way that she herself is historically incapable of understanding, though the author can understand it much more fully. At this point it becomes a historical novel of the modern, analytical kind.

The comparison with Fowles's book may also have been inspired by the sexual theme that plays such an important part in both novels. But here there is a wide split in significance. Fowles's heroine is a sexual revolutionary in the sense of prefiguring the new woman and the sexual revolution of the twentieth century. As far as this theme goes, Fowles's book is strictly for teenagers. But the sexual theme in *G.* has much wider ramifications of significance. *G.* is driven (or enabled) to find an absolute significance in sexual experience because of his rootlessness. He is the illegitimate child of an Italian father and an American mother.

The parents part on his conception, his mother is at first kept from any real community with the child by the "sheer force of routine in a rich nineteenth-century household" and gradually loses interest in him, leaving him to grow up in an English country house. *G.*'s first love is his governess, Miss Helen:

"A pre-condition is necessary for a five-year-old boy to fall in love. He must have lost his parents or, at least, lost any close contact with them, and no foster-parents should have taken their place. Similarly, he must have no close friends or brothers or sisters. Then he is eligible. "

*G.*'s rootlessness later gives him a significance in his relationships with women which he could not have if he accepted himself as filling a fixed social role. He is able to make the bourgeois woman, who is continually looking at herself as others – men – look at her, lose her social consciousness and become 'solitary', become herself. He is able to approach the working woman as the stranger who appreciates in her the identity that she will never fulfil in the limited course that her life must take:

"When Zeus, in order to approach a woman he had fallen in love with, disguised himself as a bull, a satyr, an eagle, a swan, it was not only to gain the advantage of surprise: it was to encounter her (within the terms of those strange myths) as a stranger. The stranger who desires you and convinces you that it is truly you in all your particularity whom he desires, brings a message from all that you might be, to you as you actually are. "

Such a lover is like a revolutionary agitator – he makes people aware of their unfreedom by making them aware of their potential

selves. And it is with revolution that the sexual act is compared in this book. The act is a consciousness of the future, and the potential in the present.

The lovers speak as follows:

“The world is not as we have subsided into it. Within us there is the keenness, the sharpness to perform surgery. Within, if we have the courage to wield it, is the cutting edge to sever the whole world as it is, the world that pretends to be part of us, the world to which by compromised and flabby usage we are said to belong. Say now to me. Now to me say to me.”

The future in the present is the mode of the book. The narrator says again and again that he is seeking for a style of simultaneity rather than one of continuity. The sexual act makes nonsense, for the time being, of the sense of continuing time.

“In sex, a quality of ‘firstness’ is felt as continually re-creatable. There is an element in every occasion of sexual excitement which seizes the imagination as though for the first time.

What is this quality of ‘firstness’? How, usually, do first experiences differ from later ones?

Take the example of a seasonal fruit: blackberries. The advantage of this example is that one’s first experience each year of eating blackberries has in it an element of artificial firstness which may prompt one’s memory of the original, first occasion. The first time, a handful of black berries represented all blackberries. Later, a handful of blackberries is a handful of ripe/unripe/over-ripe/sweet/acid, etc., etc., blackberries. Discrimination develops with experience. But the development is not only qualitative. The qualitative change is to be found in the relation between the particular and the general. You lose the symbolically complete nature of whatever is in hand. First experience is protected by a sense of enormous power; it wields magic.”

How far has Berger succeeded in creating this quality of ‘firstness’ which is so important to the meaning of his book? He himself seems to despair at certain moments. At one point he makes graffiti-like drawings and writes: “Through these drawings, what I have called the quality of firstness in sexual experience is perhaps a little easier to recall.” But perhaps Berger is being unjust to himself. Perhaps he doesn’t really need such drawings. In talking about *G.*, one must at some stage discuss the particular, extraordinarily fine, poetic voice that Berger has developed.

“At that place the minimum of flesh covers the bone of the skull, but even on this thin, thin soil the fur grows. The bone casing is almost concave. On either side of the space is an eye, large with its depths uncovered. It is the frontal centre of the head.

In man there is no equivalent place. The sense organs are too concentrated, the eyes too close together, the face too sharp. By contrast the face of a man is like a blade with the cutting edge facing whoever approaches.

On this almost concave field of fur with its thin soil, you rub your hand and the animal nods in accord. But the palm of the hand is too soft: its pads muffle the contact. You clench your fist and rub again: this time with your knuckles grazing against the animal's skull. His eyes remain open, placed and undisturbed because for him there can be no danger which is that close.

It begins like this in childhood. But grown men, overcome by grief or remorse, thrust their foreheads, skullbone to skullbone, between a cow's eyes.

The term 'dumb animal' sinks deep into Beatrice's mind. It implies neither condescension nor pity. But the animal's inability to speak is somehow related by her to the almost concave field between the eyes. Until puberty the horns mystify her: or rather, not so much the grown horns but their growing: the stumps which she feels with her fingers like rock beneath the fur. During adolescence they supply her with a model for what is happening to herself. "

There are writers who are so materialist in their conception of the world that the nature of things is, for them, no more than the accidents of matter, matter working mechanically on matter. Robbe-Grillet is such a writer. On the other hand there are writers — Norman Mailer is one — whose romanticism is so intense that it burns up the material existence of an object in the imaginative perception of it. Such writers don't give the materiality, the deadness, the element of the banal in objects a chance to coexist with the vitality of their eye. One cannot imagine Mailer's style being able to cope with the simple, peaceful death of a man in his bed, for instance — death for him could only be a violence, a truncation. His style lacks a sense of the necessary partial deadness of things, which is a part of their familiarity and their reassurance, and which reassumes its rights, in peaceful death, over the body that has been no more than half transformed by life. The inability to accept the mechanics of the sex act — so frequently writers talk of its ridiculousness — perhaps derives from a similar inability to accept the simply material and mechanistic aspect of the world. Such writers expect the magic of desire to transform and indeed to remove the weightiness of the merely workaday body. That Berger does not make this mistake can be seen from the following passage from *Ways of Seeing*:

“ What is the sexual function of nakedness in reality? . . . What does this sight of the other mean to us, how does it, at that

instant of total disclosure, affect our desire?

Their nakedness acts as a confirmation and provokes a very strong sense of relief. She is a woman like any other: or he is a man like any other: we are overwhelmed by the marvellous simplicity of the familiar sexual mechanism. . . .

We did not expect them to be otherwise, but the urgency and complexity of our feelings bred a sense of uniqueness which the sight of the other, as she is or as he is, now dispels. They are more like the rest of their sex than they are different. In this revelation lies the warm and friendly — as opposed to cold and impersonal — anonymity of nakedness.

One could express this differently: at the moment of nakedness first perceived, an element of banality enters: an element that exists only because we need it.

In *G.*, for reasons that I shall return to, the sanity and intelligence of Berger's vision and style — his voice — are less evident in the evocations of the sex act than in descriptions that are more peripheral to this centre of his characters' aliveness. So let us go back to his description of the cow's skull. The most obvious thing about it is its anatomical, almost geometrical, precision and suggestivity. This is the aspect that establishes the familiar partial deadness that is so important and necessary in our perception of things. But this material and measurable skull is not dead. Almost imperceptibly, we are made to feel its life, for instance in the implied comparison of the fur to grass. A tenderness and mystery is there in the exposure of the eyes on either side. There is tenderness, too, in the way the head is made tactile. The sensations of fondling the head with a man's brow or hand are not simply the friction of material (though perfectly precise in these terms), but a process of discovery and reassurance passing from the man to the cow and from the cow to the man.

Berger seems to me to be modern in the best sense of the word. His philosophy, his science is up to date. He writes:

“ You clench your fist and rub again; this time with your knuckles grazing against the animal's skull. His eyes remain open, placid and undisturbed because for him there can be no danger which is that close. ”

Here his use of the phrase “for him there can be no danger which is that close” creates the cow and the shape of its head in terms of the most living modern preoccupations. He has explained the placing of a cow's eyes in terms of its evolution for survival in a world apart from man, has conceived the advent of man into the life of the cow as being the advent of a new relationship that the cow is not prepared for and that passes his defences — that

for this reason depends on a trust which is built into the cow's nature because it is built into its anatomy. For a moment we get a vivid sense of how a cow sees, and of what it is incapable of seeing. (This theme links up by contrast with the killing of two horses in a later incident. It makes that killing a betrayal.)

The comparison of man with animal is made in a highly original form. It is made by a comparison of the shape of their skulls and the placing of their sense organs. Hence it is a comparison of two worlds of perception. And through the metaphor – “the face of a man is like a blade with the cutting edge facing whoever approaches” – the more prehensile consciousness of man is explained. “But the animal's inability to speak is related by her to the almost concave field between the eyes.” Such a relating of anatomy, the psychology of perception, and the intuition of an evolved spiritual nature, was perhaps impossible before our time. It is the great opportunity, in poetry, of our time. The head is function, shape, and spirit together.

Not that Berger's leaps of intuition don't sometimes strike one as chancey. “During adolescence (the growing horns) supply her with a model for what is happening to herself.” At this stage I am no longer sure whether Berger is guessing or whether he really knows. And this goes for very many ideas in the book. It is partly the book's newness. Presumably later on one will be able to judge such ideas with more sureness.

Why is one least sure of Berger's success when he is evoking the act of sex? I think it is because, whatever may be objective and more than personally familiar about the event, sexual desire does cause a highly subjective distortion of time, of the desired person, of sensation, of proportion, and of movement. Berger recognizes this and is intensely interested in it, but here the scientific, objective element of his style seems to be split away from the lyrical element. In *Success and Failure of Picasso* Berger describes a picture as follows:

“The scene is now portrayed entirely in terms of **sensation**. The distortions serve this end: one might describe them as tumescent – for the women with their small heads and expanding breasts represent very accurately the sensation of a woman to a roused man.”

I am not sure that Berger arrives at this accuracy in his descriptions. And in his more lyrical passages, there is a lack of solidity, a lack of any known and recognizable structural frame for his poetry to rest on. He has gone too directly into the unknown.

Whom were we walking?

I was a knee which wanted the thigh on the other leg.

The sounds of my most tender words were in your arse.



Your heels were my thumbs.  
My buttocks were your palms.  
I was hiding in one corner of your mouth. You looked  
for me there with your tongue. There was nothing to be found.  
With your throat swollen, my feet in the pit of my stomach,  
your legs hollow, my head tugging at your body, I was your penis.  
You were the light which falling on the dark petals of your  
vagina became rose.  
The blood-vessel was lifted up in the lock of your flowers.

What Berger is creating here is the body of two lovers become one  
in movement, the beast with two backs, the hermaphrodite. One  
might compare this with another prose poem which is perhaps  
about a hermaphrodite, this time called *Antique*:

“Gracieux fils de Pan! Autour de ton front couronné de fleurettes  
et de baies tes yeux, des boules précieuses, remuent. Tachés de  
lèvres brunes, tes joues se creusent. Tes crocs luisent. To poitrine  
ressemble à une cithare, des tintement circulent dans tes bras  
blonds. Ton cœur but dans ce ventre où dort le double sexe.  
Promènes-toi, la nuit, on mouvant doucement cette cuisse, cette  
seconde cuisse et cette jambe de gauche. ”

Our first thought is that Berger comes to us more direct. He has  
dropped the conventionality that (for all the poem's undoubtedly  
astonishing **unconventionality**) Rimbaud maintains by his evoca-  
tion of the classical – by the French nostalgia for the calm and  
vivid Greek world. If we see the two poems as statues, Rimbaud's  
is Hellenistic, Berger's is modern. And yet Berger's poem is  
inferior. He has dared more, but achieved less.

Berger does not seem to me to have solved the problem of writing  
directly about sex, if the problem is soluble. This is less disastrous  
than it might seem, however, as G.'s sexual experiences (undoubt-  
edly the **centre** of the novel's intentions) are given equivalents in  
the events that occur simultaneously with them, or simultaneously  
because they are in the same book.

“ The relations which I perceive between things – and these often  
include casual and historical relations – tend to form in my  
mind a complex synchronic pattern. I see fields where others  
see chapters. ”

It is from this declaration that we should start analysing the form  
of *G.*

I have said that for Berger sex reveals the future in the present. So  
that the events that correspond to it have the same function: riots  
in Milan, the start of the First World War and the unrest of that  
time in Trieste, the first flight across the Alps.

This last is a brilliantly written episode. Geo Chavez, the pilot,  
reaches a point at which he is no longer prepared to turn back,  
and Berger describes how the wind gradually forces him further  
and further into the gorges of the Gondo, as into an inescapable

corner. It is as though his own courage and stubbornness are forcing him into a crash at the corner of the gorge. That would be the logical way for the writer to make things happen. But Chavez somehow escapes, crosses the Alps, and most mysteriously crashes as he comes in to land. He lies in hospital with two broken legs, repeating the struggle in his mind, largely unaware of what is going on around him, quite conscious that he is going to die.

“His temperature is only slightly above normal. His brain is lucid. Time and again his imagination approaches the irreversibility of the events since he announced ‘I’m going now’. Their irreversibility confronts him like a rock face which moves with him as he turns his head or shifts his gaze. However high he climbs, however daringly he breaks through the wall of the wind westwards, it is still there, in front of his eyes and above his swollen lips. He repeatedly makes the approach but the geology of the events never changes. Meanwhile these silent endlessly recurring private approaches make everything else said or seen in his room seem as far away as the words he cannot read on the telegrams. ”

There is a similar inexorability in the rioting crowd in Milan.

“The crowd see the city around them with different eyes. They have stopped the factories producing, forced the shops to shut, halted the traffic, occupied the streets. It is they who have built the city and they who maintain it. They are discovering their own creativity. In their regular lives they only modify presented circumstances; here, filling the streets and sweeping all before them they oppose their very existence to circumstances. They are rejecting all that they habitually, and despite themselves, accept. Once again they demand together what none can ask alone: Why should I be compelled to sell my life bit by bit so as not to die? ”

Later, in the barricade scene, this sense of inexorability is taken up in individual acts of defiance, usually ending in death. It is a long time before G. is prepared to let his own battle of defiance carry him as far as death. But this is what it comes to before the end of the book.

But before we come to this, I'd like to discuss the strange way in which Berger directs our perception of his characters. It's as though he only lets us see them in a fragmentary way. His fliers are perhaps the most conventionally 'real' characters in the book. This is because Berger sees people in terms of what they do – and the courage and skill of flying are the qualities of a concrete activity, and we can evaluate them and perceive the different forms in which they appear. It is otherwise with the women in the book who are portrayed in terms of their significance in relation to the sexual theme. They are portrayed physically – through the originality in the features of their body which will

become a recognized and awakened originality through their encounter with G. . Hence we remember Camille through her nail-bitten hands, Nusa through the gaucheness (in society) of her peasant body, Marika through her extraordinary mouth and nose, and through the following:

“ Marika made her entry five minutes after G.’s arrival. She walked like an animal. I find it hard to describe her walk because the resemblance was not to one animal but several. She resembled a composite animal like a unicorn, but at the same time there was nothing mythical about her. She was no apparition among flowers on a tapestry. Her legs were large-boned and very long. Sometimes I have the impression that they began at her shoulders and that, like the four legs of a horse, they were triple-jointed. As she walked she held her head very still; her neck was thick and muscular; she held her head like a stag; above her red-deer hair you might see invisible antlers. And yet she moved unsteadily, she swayed from side to side, her foothold never appeared quite sure enough for her height and bulk — and in this she resembled a camel. ”

As I suggested above, Berger sometimes writes like a sculptor. For me there are hints of Neizvestny’s striding man. But it is such an extraordinary way of presenting a character that I simply can’t, at present, evaluate its validity as an imaginative, sympathetic creation.

G. himself is distinguished throughout by his leer. It is this leer that makes other men — the bourgeois husbands of wives about to be seduced by him — speak of him as ‘that unsavoury Casanova’. Actually he has not Casanova’s sophisticated cunning — what he does have is Don Juan’s daring, his revolt against the mystifications of his society. On one occasion he actually says he is Don Juan. It is his leer that makes him into this figure.

G. gets his leer — Berger says his leer is ‘born’ — when, as a boy, he falls off his horse and loses several teeth. This fall is the pact that this Don Juan makes with the Commendatore, or that Faustus makes with the devil. The price will be claimed at the end of the book with his death.

I wish I understood the symbolism of this passage, the account of the fall, a little better. Berger writes:

“To hunt is the opposite of to own. It is to ride over. To dart in the open. To be as men as free as the straight-necked dog-fox is as fox.”

This analysis seems all wrong to me. Surely to ride over is the most reckless and confident form of ownership. The landed aristocracy has never seemed more to me than a special form of the bourgeoisie, and the romanicism of the aristocracy seems a mystification. But, being a non-European, I am no doubt simplifying.

But is it the animal vitality of hunting — or rather riding — that seals G.'s fate as an enemy of the bourgeoisie, or is it his meeting with the old man farm-labourer in whose cottage he recovers that is the significant part of the happening?

“Who are you?” he asks the old man.  
The old man comes to the bed and sits on it. In face of the arrested time just ending, the boy may be as old as the man.  
What the old man says I do not know.  
What the boys says in reply I do not know.  
To pretend to know would be to schematize.”  
And later:

“The last barrier against consequence is the home. This is why the dying want to die at home.  
The boy is not dying.  
But he is in a home in bed with the bedclothes that small of damp foul cloth over him.  
In the time which his fall and his pain arrested, he found a home. The old man was there as the boy emerged from his estate. They met as equals. No rules governed their encounter. Bone to bone. But when the boy's sense of time began to revert to normal, he became young again.”

And when this happens, their conversion returns to the tone between servant and young master. We are perhaps to imagine the pact as having taken place while the old man and the boy are speaking as equals, an exchange which Berger confesses he is unable to imagine.

G.'s hatred of the bourgeois is conditioned by another incident from his childhood. He is forced by two strange men to witness the killing of two horses that have fallen, a killing that takes place with cold and efficient brutality. For G., the brutal and dehumanizing humiliation which the bourgeois husbands practise on their wives is connected with this incident, and on one occasion, quite late in the book, a husband's behaviour makes him smell once again the reek of the paraffin lamp with which one of the men had led him away from the dead horses.

Now we come to the end of G.'s life, the Commendatore's response to Don Juan's invitation, Mephistophilis' appearing to claim Faustus' soul. To indicate that this aspect of the myth is drawing near, the narrator breaks out of his narrative completely, and relates a personal autobiographical experience: it is entitled *The Stone Guest*.

“I want to a friend's house to look at the photographs he had brought back from North Africa. When I came in I said hello to his eldest son, aged ten. A little while later I was concentrating on the photographs and had completely forgotten about the son.

Suddenly I felt a tap on my arm, a rather urgent tap. I turned round quickly and there, the size of a child, was an old man, bald, large-nosed with spectacles. He stood there holding out a piece of paper to me. Let there be no mystery: the ten-year-old son had put on a mask. But for the duration of perhaps half a second I did not realize this. I started. When the boy saw me start, he burst out laughing and I realized the truth.

I was surprised and shocked by the old man's presence. How had he arrived so suddenly and silently? Who was he? And from where? Why was it me he had chosen to approach? There was no satisfactory answer to any of these questions, and it was precisely the lack of any answer which startled and frightened me.

This was an inexplicable event. Therefore it suggested that anything was possible. I was no longer protected by causality. Probably this was why his size — the most improbable thing about him — did not surprise me. I accepted his size as part of the chaos his very presence proposed.

I do not retrospectively exaggerate either the complexity or the density of the content of that half-second; when profoundly provoked, one's memory and imagination reproduce one's whole life in an instant. No sooner had he frightened me, no sooner had he pulled away causality from under my feet, than I recognized him. I do not mean I recognized him as the ten-year-old son of my friend. I recognized the bald old man. This recognition of him as a familiar in no way diminished my fear. But a change had taken place. The fear was familiar too now. I had known both man and fear since my earliest childhood. I had the sensation of not being able to remember his name. A small socially conditioned part of me had a reflex of embarrassment. For this part it was no longer a question of how and why he had found me, but a question of what I could say to him. Where had I first met him? Here it is impossible to avoid paradox. But a single glance back to the depths of your childhood will remind you how common paradox was. I recognized him as a figure in the infinite company of the unknowable. I had not once, long ago, summoned him up in the light of my knowledge; it was he who had once sought me out in the darkness of my ignorance. ”

“ There was nothing objectively menacing about him now. But he was threatening because he had figured in a contract to which I had agreed. I had forgotten the circumstances which led to this contract. Hence the initial mysteriousness of his presence. Yet I was able to recognize — without being able to remember — one of its principal clauses; hence his familiarity. The old man, the size of a boy, bald, large-nosed and with absurd round spectacles, had come to claim what that clause promised him. ”

G.'s entrapment and death in Trieste is something rather more untidily symbolic than this passage. It is something in the nature of a black ironic comedy.

“ He became impatient to leave London, as he eventually always became impatient to leave whatever city he was in. What, however, was unprecedented was that his impatience now included a slight but persistent anxiety. . . . There was a further new element in his predicament. The number of places in Europe to which he could go was strictly limited because of the war. ”

For G. freedom of movement in Europe is a condition of his life and of the battle he is fighting. The First World War, which will eventually destroy the society he is fighting against, starts to destroy this freedom of movement. He goes to Trieste, and there he sacrifices this freedom of movement by making a bargain.

He gives away his passport for the possibility of finally and irrevocably insulting the society which he moves within. He has also become involved in a political conspiracy — for reasons of his own which have nothing to do with politics. He is eventually murdered by his fellow-conspirators who mean less than nothing to him. The last part of the book has a Conradian atmosphere, and is impregnated with Conradian irony. Perhaps this ironical atmosphere heralds the beginning of a new style in Berger's already well-stocked armoury.

\* \* \* \*\* \* \* \*

Looking back on this essay I have done little to evaluate Berger's book as an imaginative achievement. In crude terms I have tried to describe the book's ideas and structure. That I have taken so many pages to do so can stand as proof of how much the book has fascinated me. Fascination is a beginning, and I have to start somewhere, if only for myself. It is a patchy book, I think (and think very roughly and arbitrarily) — from the point of view of the realization of its themes I think its success is unequal. I have given my criticisms of the handling of the sexual theme — the 'language of seduction' used is particularly irritating and sobering, perhaps because Berger has deliberately 'dated' it, and has done so without giving it present life. Some things in the book are more real than others. The fliers are the most real. The description of the collapse of the landowning class is perhaps romanticized, but there are aspects of that part of the book — for instance the quasi-incestuous relationship between Beatrice and her brother Jocelyn — that are very real and mysterious. The riots in Milan are an interesting attempt, and perhaps a success — at any rate I still see that ugly woman who pretends to herself that G. is her 'fidanzato', she is unforgettable and somehow a part of the whole event. But one aspect of the book is very thin. Berger hates the bourgeoisie so much that he is incapable of describing them and their affairs without making them sound like puppets. It seems at times that he believes that to be part of an exploiting or oppressive class is necessarily to stop being human — which is simply untrue. One need only

have a slight acquaintance of the works of Thomas Mann in order to see how shallow Berger's evocation of the bourgeoisie of that era is. It is the greatest weakness of the book. This is the best I can do in the way of criticism and evaluation of the ideas and the creations of the book. To be able to bring so little intelligent resistance to the book is a failure particularly in view of the kind of writer Berger is.

Here is Berger's situation: A man who might learn to be a splendid swimmer if he were in water is placed in free fall with a parachute on his back — or, worse still, he is floating in space. Of course he will throw his limbs to all four points of the compass, he will thrash about, he will scratch at the air (or at space) with his hands, he will twist his torso like a dolphin. And he will make some pretty discoveries, but he will never learn to swim. He lacks the resistance from which alone he can learn. Or say that by chance he is swimming like a champion, he still will not know it — there will be no resistance, granting or withholding approval, to let him know. And so he will start to distrust himself, and to make more and more desperate movements, and if he was swimming before, he will no longer be swimming now.

This is the situation of a British Marxist. He can have no first-hand knowledge of the processes of revolution, of the fight he wishes to fight, so he cannot learn from that. He must learn from the resistance of the intellectual world. But is there any resistance to bold ideas in Britain beyond indifference? Berger needs a man to criticize him who has the discipline of a literary critic behind him, but also that of a historian.



DOUGLAS LIVINGSTONE

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# Giovanni Jacopo Meditates

(on his Weighting in The Last Great Scorer's Book)

*When my Corpse and Soul unwind  
In that final Dialysis  
And my Case is being divined  
Will the Charge be 'Satyriasis'?*

*At the Moment of Transshipment  
When the Bench takes Quill and Vellum,  
Will 'Sins' head such Equipment  
As this Leg-hooked Cerebellum?*

*Are 'Napes of Necks' an Issue  
To be raised at my Correction?  
Is 'Dawn's erectile Tissue'  
An inadmissible Connection?*

*Will there be an outraged Ripple,  
Forensic Chins in Lapels tucking,  
As each non-maternal Nipple  
Is called where I've lain sucking?*

*Should the First-Cause prove Feminist  
– Madame-Generalissimo! –  
Will the Alternates be 'Chauvinist',  
'Oral Hang-Ups' and 'Machismo'?*

*At the End of this Compacture,  
In my new Rôle of Deponent  
I must plead Non-Manufacture  
Of each happy strange Component.*

# The Elephants Are Taking Driving Lessons

I have just returned from an exhilarating week at the University of Cape Town where poets of varying statures were attacked, applauded, encouraged and provoked. I have seen established poets' reputations held up to the closest scrutiny to be confirmed or undermined. I have heard predominantly middle-class audiences assailed, mollified and disturbed by what must surely be the most radically differing group of poets ever to have gathered on the same platform. On one night, in particular, I had the pleasure of being seated, during one of the three public readings given at the University, between Guy Butler and James Matthews. My pleasure at the spontaneous reaction of the audience to such extraordinarily disparate verse was redoubled as I gazed at the engineers of the SABC who had arrived with all their apparatus, and, one must presume, in all ignorance, to record what from all other evidence they must surely have come to regard as the customary sweet and harmless gentilities to which the English give voice at their infrequent cultural gatherings. Well, this was one time that it did not work out that way. Of the six hours or so of poetry recorded, I doubt whether more than half of it will meet the SABC's antediluvian standards of acceptability.

The poetry that we heard in Cape Town had just one common feature: it was, all of it, written in English, in South Africa. And, as such, it reflected in microcosm the rich possibilities of the language. Whether you speak it as pidgin, or BBC, or Gammat, or American, or African, the language offers a potential for raw expression together with a vocabulary which enables the most delicate precision. It is no closed system, no artificial construction; indeed it thrives upon abuse and assault. It looks to those who undermine and subvert it for new energy and new forms. It is emphatically not in need of protection. That is why it appeals so little to those whose bent is totalitarian; and it is to be expected that there should have arisen a shrill clamour against the poetry conference in Cape Town from those who see it as a manifestation of agitation and anarchy and left wing politics. I suppose that it was also inevitable, though regrettable, that those people at the conference who style themselves as protectors of English in South Africa should have come away bitter and disenchanted. For these unhappy poets, one must presume that what they heard they considered not to be poetry; indeed, one suspects, that they considered much of what they heard to be positively harmful to English poetry in South Africa. I must confess that my sympathy with these aggrieved souls is limited. Apart from the absurdity of their paternalistic feelings towards English on the subcontinent, their attitude, its inherent philistinism aside, begs the question which was so vigorously debated in Cape Town: *What do we mean when we talk of South African English poetry?* What became clear in the debate was that English verse in South Africa was going in innumerable different directions at once. It was no-one's special preserve and would obey no rules. Also, the notion that poetry was some sort of special life apart, a game reserve to be visited occasionally when one wanted to peer at the animals from behind one's armourplated car windows, was very firmly knocked on the head: the apes, it was observed with astonishment, are walking upright; the elephants are taking driving lessons; and the animals look just like you and I.

Back from Cape Town, as the last of the adrenalin drains out of my bloodstream, as it must, I return, as indeed I must, to the poetry. Those who considered the conference a waste of time may reflect that time spent examining the ground upon which verse is based in this country may be fruitfully recovered by refocussing attention on the poetry. An excellent opportunity for doing so is provided by the appearance of each new volume in Jack Cope's Mantis Editions of Southern African poets, numbers 3 and 4 of which, featuring Jennifer Davids and Stephen Gray, have been published recently.

In Jennifer Davids\* verse there are numerous images of sun, but very little light. In 'Star' she silently encounters the '... fury / of the sun's'; her 'Camp Site' she locates 'in a corner of the day / where the sun never reaches'; while 'Searching for Words' she contemplates '... a face / black as the sun'; in 'As If This Were Brightness' she hears 'the only voice I want / of an up-moving sun / breaking my horizon'. I could multiply these instances of her solar obsessions as they recur throughout the book.

Miss Davids writes a verse made of lines which contract and expand between one word and three and, more rarely, four, which pull the eye down the unpunctuated page through the inverted and wrenched syntax:

*I can interpret  
even your darkest gaze away  
and offer myself  
an answer*

*How  
can I now utter  
pain  
and make you rise  
and open  
to words     you say*

*(To Diana Away)*

There is, undeniably, a seriousness in Miss Davids' struggle to articulate the unutterable. She is after the quality which she cites in her introduction to the book as one which was characteristic of Rilke: the quality of 'praising'. There is too, in her work, an intelligence tinged with austerity, rare enough. Yet, remarkably, she is capable of achieving, for all her few words, a certain flatulence which perhaps derives, with a nod to Sydney Clouts, from the poet's pantheistic tendencies, what used vulgarly to be called the wish to commune with nature, that same pathetic fallacy triumphantly committed by Wordsworth, yet so much of a trap for poets after him:

*I ache out into the bright flux  
all my sharp extremities  
catching fire  
                                  for words  
words to pinpoint  
                                  and coalesce  
many lives and loving  
one life or one day  
  
while birds draw  
                                  their intelligent parabolas of prayer*

*(Clear)*

It was this sort of thing which led that percipient literary critic, Nigel Molesworth, in his remarks on it in his book *Down With Skool!*, to contend that poetry was soppy stuff put out by people who went around saying, "Hello birds, hello flowers, hello trees."

Too many of Miss Davids' poems are not poems at all, but rather notes on the difficulty of writing poems. No particular harm in this, and in her *Poem For My Mother* she succeeds triumphantly. Paradoxically, her severity betrays her and she succumbs to an urge towards wordiness. It is as if she longs to be rocked in the cosmic cradle:

*I'm in it  
my blood and breath  
all my tangled pulse  
eases with the ache  
of sensing as I walk  
stones and stars* (Given Dark')

The poet's emotions are probably more interesting to the poet than to anyone else. The words which Miss Davids has found in her search seldom make poetry. I hope, however, that she will go on searching.

As Douglas Livingstone remarks in his introduction to Stephen Gray's book\*, it is only on the printed page that the poet can be measured, finally. It is all he can measure himself against. The appearance of poets such as Davids and Gray at some length in the Mantis Series, and elsewhere I hope, will enable readers and poets to gauge the state of South African poetry. It will be good if one book leads swiftly to the next. We have one hell of a lot of catching up to do.

As with Jennifer Davids' verse, Stephen Gray's is distinguished by an intelligence altogether rare in South African verse. Similar too, at least at first glance, are his syntactical experiments: the lines flexing on and into one another, releasing and gathering energy as they go, in a push pull caterpillar motion brilliantly exemplified in the poem *'In Praise of Archaeologists'*:

*there is only refinement after that be these fragments  
that composed a crater lips like flamingoes  
with breasts exactly where you need them  
containers for mass production intercalated  
skin on skin thrust one into the other*

Here and elsewhere, as in *'Hospital, Luderitzbucht'*, and most notably in *'Cleo Of The Swamps'*, there is an inviting density, complex themes being unified with admirable deftness:

*Under a pile-up of cumulus drifts  
the makoro with Mrs Cleo whose duty  
of a child borne a husband broken  
done takes her privileged ease*

As the poem ends there is the sense of that ease amid menace, a nervous temporary affluence set against the most terrible patience characteristic of the situation of the European in Black Africa to which Campbell testified in his *'Zulu Girl'*. Mrs Cleo is propelled by her far from Venetian gondolier ever deeper into the swamps:

*her servant feeds off her at 60c an hour  
he'll uncurl his other leg and double speed  
on the last lap but meanwhile his surety  
is the suck of sand and patience on trial  
between her teeth is enough gold  
as the sky closes for his final tip.*

Less successful, in my opinion, is the cycle of poems which concludes the book. Entitled 'The Beast's History', these seven poems annotate the past and present history of white settlers in Southern Africa. Too many lines are there merely to make the rhyme:

*but every pioneer who left his burning seed  
contributed his worth to a brand new breed*

(*'2. The Horny Crew'*)

Mr Gray is least happy working in unheroic couplets. What are perhaps attempts at a forthright colloquial verse emerge as a kind of breezy chattiness. Although occasionally it pays off, as with the ascension of the Virgin Mary from Cecil Rhodes's Kimberley:

*and as you're ascending wrapped in your gold  
we kiss your bequest the biggest hole in all the world.*

(*'4. Cecil John'*)

Considerably more satisfying is the wit and charm of poems such as 'The Tame Horses Of Vrededorp' in which Mr Gray demonstrates how it is possible to write sharply observed, hard-edged poems about the very ordinary things he sees about him, without trying to be at all 'poetic', locating his poem in a recognisable here and now, and yet not sacrificing richness of reference or emotional power:

*shame you'd think they'd let a gelding retire  
on the highveld where lucerne's so high but  
that sack of worms knock-kneed shrunken-withered sight  
makes a last obliging haul past Piel's Wholesale  
to the abattoir mark X on his forehead and Petz-D-Lite.*

Let no one underestimate the difficulty of doing this in the face of opinions current for years in South Africa about what poetry *ought* to look and sound and smell like. All of us, Mr Gray too, have been to some extent infected by osmosis, as it were, with these impoverished and ill-informed notions. Now, on the basis of the poems in this book, Mr Gray has undertaken to point a way out of the morass. And it's indeed about time.

\* *Searching For Words* by Jennifer Davids, Mantis Editions, published by David Philip. R1,00 (paper)

\* *It's About Time* by Stephen Gray, Mantis Editions, published by David Philip. R1,00 (paper)

# The Beast of Satire

Dimly foreseen, long awaited, the monstrous beast of neo-South African satire has been born. The beast is called *Cape Drives*, and these are part of the trail it treads, as it prowls our most familiar and favourite haunts with basilisk eyes – the beach, the drive, the street – and leaves them places filled with a new unease. The beast is not afraid of naming names. Hout Bay, Constantia, the windy cities of Durban, Cape Town, P.E. and East London, our own Smith Street by the Durban Club, a woman

*“facing the Post Office,  
At the corner of West and Gardiner Streets,  
On a bench adjacent to the men’s public lavatory”* –

you can pinpoint them – these places will never be the same again. The light of the beast’s understanding has passed into them, and they stand denuded of the comfort they had given. These, we had said, are Us. Yes, says the beast, and what may You be? It is not a pleasant question. The beast knows us well. He calls to us as he passes in the dark – calls (as if from like to like) to our pet visions and nostalgias. It is a treacherous appeal, for the next moment he will make us recoil from these very emotions with disgust. He dreams our own nightmares, but he dreams them with lip-smacking relish and lust.

The beast is an elegant beast: London Magazine editions have done him proud. The book appears in an orange-and-crimson cover, with a photo of the poet, Christopher Hope, at the back. It’s a good photo. Durban is there behind the Victoria Embankment, and the sun is shining on the Dick King monument, on Chris Hope’s hands and on the folds of his pants. And under the office buildings and the robots, looking rather aggressive like an exposed and civilized cave-dweller dwarf – in fact, looking a lot more bristly than in real life – yes, on the Whites Only benches of the Victoria Embankment, daar sit Chris. It is excellently done.

It is a different level of excellence in production that we find inside, even if we are reminded of the cover. Again the façade is one of elegant vulgarity – barbarous rhymes and painfully dissonant metres nursing broken plants of sick-flowering lyricism, evidence of the cheapness and fragmentariness of our dreams. It takes some time to register just how powerful the poetic voice is, how stubbornly it lodges in our consciousness. The proof that the verse works, that the technique is good, lies in the memorableness of the phrases. You find yourself whistling “Sweeter than all legal grasses”, or stopping to mutter: “Steady yellow stains white marble in silence”. The lines leave an inexhaustible residue of fun.

Nevertheless, it is a beast we have to deal with, the brutal and subtle beast of satire, savaging the achievements that we hold dear and familiar. What does it amount to, our civilization, our Apollonian achievement, the myths and cultural values that we have manufactured in our brief time of safety and material comfort, we South African Whites? What does it amount to in the eyes of the beast?

*Time, fathers of the windy  
Cities, to tighten your trusses,  
Straighten topees, apply smiles and allow to harden;  
To leave plinth and pedestal and stand by the Voorlaaiers;  
to think*

*Khaki: time, fathers, to  
Allot yourselves a mood.*

The beast of satire is allied also with that of history, and speaks sometimes in a prophetic mood. Here the satirist sees White English South African culture as caught in a historical trap. Its opulent position has been forged in mediocre brutality, and this mediocrity and brutality it can never quite forget. For it is always on the defensive, and the reality of its one-time crudity still haunts it, a nostalgia with a smell all of its own. For the moment we impose on that nostalgia our visions of gentleness, culture and refinement. But the challenge will come again – and how easily we shall slide back into our old image of ourselves, the image that we have never quite abandoned or lost. How our sense of purpose and identity will be quickened! The ‘civilized’ interim will seem to have been a dream. We shall stifle our ‘pre-war loves’, and plunge into complacent barbarism.

So much in interpretation of *A Crazy Soothsayer Addresses The Ephora*, because I think it is a poem in which Christopher Hope is attempting major satire: that is, satire which has as its core a concern for civilization, and at its best a clear conception of what civilization is. *Kobus Le Grange Marais* and *Regional News* are minor satires: they attack, either viciously or playfully, particular evils, particular hypocrisies, mediocrities of a special flavour. But the intensity of most of the work in this volume compels us to regard the writer as too much of a poet to be satisfied with mere criticism – he clearly has an urge to move towards the root of things, to the feeling of life, to the meanings that men allot to the lives they live. Like all true poets, he is groping towards a statement of a major kind. Sometimes his poems are such that they cannot be adequate tools in such a search. *A Crazy Soothsayer* is exceptional in the ironical unity of its stance, its tone, its lyricism, its lash. Most of the other poems are not yet conceived sufficiently as wholes for them to be true instruments in a search for meaning – their construction is wild and opportunistic. The satirist is an opportunist – he must be – yet he can be more. It is this extraordinarily delicate business of finding himself, with each new poem, the relevant fictitious role.

The more serious question, perhaps, is whether the poet has in himself the qualities of humanity requisite to writing major satire. Is the beast no more than a beast? The power we feel – how far is it mere cleverness: a knowledge of the psychology of others (and how to manipulate it effectively) that may go only too well with the poet’s writing advertising copy; a sense of the dramatic and the elegant; an adept’s skill for the turning of a phrase? And this coupled with a large fund of negative emotion centred around distaste? From what I have said already it will be clear that I think that very much more is involved than these. Yet it is hard to get to the central positive core of the stuff, from which the power must ultimately derive. What, I found myself asking, if anything, does Christopher Hope actually like? Well – there is a basic sympathy with the basic mechanisms of life. This is the starting point of charity, maybe, that the poet needs to work down to. Yet written large in an adult being or in a civilization, the poet finds these mechanisms ugly



enough. Here is one satirist who finds plain greed or power lust or ego as unlovable as the hypocrisies that hide them. But the basic identification with mankind is there: "everything not the end is a bonus".

Christopher Hope also seems to like children. This is the one positive nostalgia in his work; the nostalgia for childhood, when "*Life was a matter of mouth and teeth*". His lyricism often has the quality of a child's feeling for his neighbourhood, however ugly that neighbourhood might be. And he ends one poem, *Views of a Black Country Housing Estate*, with a description of children "*making an adventure playground*":

*"Across the road the children are working with hammers,  
nails and saws  
Fastening bits of wood into branches,  
Roping nylon vines to swing from in a jungle  
Safe enough to take their weight:  
Building trees."*

One considers that there might be elements in British 'progressive' education of which the poet would whole-heartedly approve. Yet the slight sentimentality of "Building trees", the slightly over-obtrusive pathos in the phrase, shows that he does not yet possess this vision in the same sense as he possesses his anger against so much else.

Christopher Hope is leaving South Africa for England, perhaps in search of a vision of civilization that can appeal to his adult and serious self. We hope (without too much hope) that he will find what he is looking for. Meanwhile, he has left us something to remember him by.

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