

## The Work of Cultural Criticism: Re-visiting *The South African Opinion*

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*The South African Opinion* (later re-named *Trek*) was one of the first periodicals in South Africa to give serious attention to South African writers. As such, it has significance as a founding moment in the history of South African canon-formation and the development of a distinctive South African aesthetic. To revisit *The South African Opinion* in the present is not only to witness the early articulations of an indigenous South African criticism, but also to re-enter a moment of acute cultural anxiety—the efforts of English-speaking South Africans to forge a ‘national culture’ and the associated struggle to define an indigenous South African ‘essence’ or ‘geist’. This early English South African National project takes on additional interest in the light of more recent attempts to define an inclusive South African nation in the post-apartheid period. Genealogies of South African criticism aside, to return to *S.A. Opinion* in the present is also to confront the figure of the English-speaking white South African literary critic engaged in the business of criticism. It is here that the magazine raises a set of issues which speak directly to contemporary concerns—the social position of the critic, the postures and contexts of critical reflection, and the on-going work of cultural criticism itself.

*S.A. Opinion* was launched in November 1934. Its editor, Bernard Sachs—less famous brother of radical trade unionist Solly Sachs—ran the paper for twenty years, no mean achievement for a periodical of its kind. *S.A. Opinion* began as an English bi-monthly literary-political review covering local and international politics as well as the arts. Described by Stephen Gray as ‘embattled’ and ‘courageous’ (Gray 2002:15) it faced the

usual difficulties of any serious publication in South Africa: lack of advertising support, paper restrictions during World War 2, and a small reading public easily tempted by a less arduous read. In August 1937, unable to impress its advertisers sufficiently to count on their support, it found itself in serious financial difficulty, and was forced to close down. Resurfacing briefly in the early 1940s as *The South African Spectator* and *The Democrat*, respectively (Gray 2002:15), *S.A. Opinion* was officially re-launched in March 1944. The second series, which now appeared once a month, offered a more attractive layout, a wider pool of contributors, and interesting visual material, that included hand-drawings, black and white photographs and wood-cuts, as well as dramatic and memorable cover pages depicting images of South African life, and some excellent political cartoons. In 1947, *S.A. Opinion* merged with *Trek*, a left-leaning bi-monthly critical review which had recently lost its editor, Jacques Malan, after a costly libel suit brought against the paper by four Johannesburg mines<sup>1</sup>. Claiming to combine what was best in both publications, the new magazine was in fact a continuation of the old *S.A. Opinion* under a new name. What is particularly significant for the shape and direction of its cultural discussion is that, in 1950, the editor decided to drop all political content, with the new *Trek* focusing exclusively on literary-cultural issues. The fruitful proximity of a cultural and political discussion which had been such a successful innovation of both publications was replaced by a cultural debate which had less and less to say about contemporary socio-political affairs.

The 1929 Wall Street Crash, the world economic depression, and Hitler's unexpected success in winning a frightened German middle class to the cause of National Socialism were the decisive elements in the early formation of this long-running South African periodical. In the early period at least, local politics took something of a backseat as the magazine negotiated the threat to democratic ideals posed by world economic crisis and the rise of Fascism in Europe. In the words of the opening editorial: 'These are confused and unsettled days when ideals and traditions which past generations have taken for granted are being ruthlessly tested for their right to survive' (1 November 1934:1). Politically, the magazine positioned

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the history and significance of this publication, see Sandwith (1998).

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itself within the broad ambit of a 'progressive' or 'liberal' outlook, while simultaneously asserting the virtues of its impartial, 'non-political' stance. Like many liberals, it sought to occupy the higher ground of the reasoned moderate who, from a position above vested interests, offers dispassionate comment, avoiding the perils of both partisanship and fanaticism: 'Our task [is to] supply an ordered interpretation of vital issues, based on fact, and informed with a progressive point of view'. With 'no axe to grind', and 'committed to no platform', the paper sought to bring a 'calm and reasoned logic' to bear on contemporary social questions, thus maintaining a balance between the various 'extreme viewpoints to which our disturbed epoch has given rise' (1 November 1934:1)<sup>2</sup>.

A critical review rather than a newspaper, *S.A. Opinion* offered clarification, interpretation and critique in the interests of democratic change. In an effort to garner support for what would be a fairly risky venture, its opening editorial sought out both the concerned liberal and the cultural snob, addressing itself explicitly to

those thoughtful South Africans who refuse to be smothered in the complacency of the closed mind and who do not derive aesthetic pleasure from endlessly eating chewing gum while reading endless stories of snakes, tigers and more snakes (1 November 1934:1)<sup>3</sup>.

Progressive politics were allied to a 'high-brow' cultural aesthetic, forged in response to commercial culture and a substantial appetite amongst white South Africans for exotic colonial fare.

The marked preference in *S.A. Opinion* for the apparent virtues of the moderate 'middle way' can be traced to the personal history of the editor himself. Sachs's autobiographies, *Multitude of Dreams* (1949) and *The Mists of Memory* (1973) offer interesting accounts of the origins of the periodical.

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<sup>2</sup> This self-positioning as a neutral, reasonable voice in a sea of rabid extremisms was not an uncommon rhetorical strategy during the period. See, for example, *Trek*-forerunner, *The Independent* and United Party publication *The Forum*.

<sup>3</sup> It is possible that the popular South African magazine, *Outspan*, was the target of this particular attack.

As he describes it, the start of the magazine marked a turning point in his own political and intellectual life, when after many years of conscientious involvement in left-wing politics, a growing disillusionment with the Communist Party led to an outright rejection of socialism. Bernard Sachs was born in Lithuania in 1905, one of the many Jewish immigrants to South Africa who went on to make a significant contribution to South African life, particularly in the forging of political resistance. Sachs grew up in the Johannesburg working-class suburb of Ferreirastown and attended Jeppe High School where he met Herman Charles Bosman, with whom he shared a long (if not always harmonious) friendship. Inspired by the drama of the 1922 Johannesburg strikes, Sachs joined the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) in 1923. As he wryly recalls, the extent of his youthful activism during this period was confined to anti-war demonstrations and meetings in front of the City Hall. Nevertheless, his commitment to the cause of social justice, heightened by his family's experiences of persecution and oppression, was always sincere.

Like many others around the world who had been inspired by the events of the Russian Revolution, Sachs watched the changes under Stalin in the early 1920s with growing trepidation. For Sachs, it was a tragic decline as the tremendous hopes of the Russian revolution of 1917 were gradually replaced by power struggles, paranoia, and increasing bureaucratisation. The vilification of that most splendid example of Bolshevik heroism', Leon Trotsky, was something which he found impossible to accept:

One of the saddest moments of my life was the news ... that Trotsky had been banished, first to Siberia and then to Turkey. A whole world, into which had gone my most precious dreams and the full ardour of my spirit, was visibly collapsing before me. I continued to hang on to my membership of the Party. But there was no longer any enthusiasm or a will to sacrifice myself (1949:158).

By contrast, Stalinism was like 'dust and ashes from which no phoenix could rise' (160).

As a member of the CPSA, he felt the immediate effect of the 'revolution betrayed' in the arbitrary and authoritarian way in which Comintern policies were handed down to the South African Party, often with

very little knowledge of local conditions. The controversial 'Native Republic Thesis' of 1928 was especially problematic as was the Party's increasing bureaucratisation and coercive reach (Drew 2000: 94-108). In his autobiography, Sachs finds an echo for his deep pessimism and despair in the character of Prince Andrew in Tolstoy's *War and Peace* who, after witnessing the collapse of Europe at the hands of Napoleon Bonaparte, turns his back on politics, choosing instead to 'live for [him]self' (cited in Sachs 1973:155). As he goes on to explain, an overwhelming interest in politics and philosophy during his years as a 'dedicated soldier' in the war against capitalism had eclipsed any desire to read 'pure literature' or to engage with 'the mysteries and mystifications of the human soul'. In fact, as he records, his attitude and that of his fellow comrades towards the middle-classes 'was one of utter and complete hostility'. As 'the propertied section of society' they were amongst those 'whom history had consigned to the dustbin'. Furthermore, since the established literary canon 'dealt almost entirely with the hopes, fears and iniquities of this class, it was of no greater concern to us than the fate of an African is to an Afrikaner in our remote hinterland'. After his eventual emergence from the Communist Party, he writes, 'it was as if something constraining me had snapped' and he was free to 'bound forward into a new area of interest and a clime much more equable and suited for reflection' (1973:157). Significantly, for Sachs, this meant the previously scorned examples of bourgeois high culture: *Madame Bovary*, *Crime and Punishment* and *Sons and Lovers*.

Whether it was the disaster of the Stalinist period, or the familiar tempering of youthful radicalism that was to blame, by 1932, Sachs had abandoned left-wing politics altogether. In one sense, then, the periodical, which was to occupy him for the next twenty years, marks a significant rupture, its inception coinciding with a conscious retreat from any kind of political involvement save that which was the accidental result of his brother's continued activism. Equally significant, as his autobiographies make clear, the appreciation of literature and leftist politics are understood as belonging to entirely separate realms. If for Sachs Communist sympathy entailed the stifling of literary and aesthetic reflection and pleasure, the abandonment of left-wing activism marked his entry into the world of the imagination and the unfettered exploration of individual as opposed to communal concerns. In its immediate location in this 'post-Trotsky'

moment, then, *S.A. Opinion* was a reaction to Stalinist constraint, and its basic opposition between Communism and individual human freedom provided the blueprint for its engagement with South African politics and culture. While Sachs retains a strong commitment to social justice, the 'narrow' obsessions (and failures) of twentieth-century Communism are cast aside in favour of a more 'humane', more open, and more individual response. His position could only have been strengthened by Hitler's rise to power, providing as it did yet another powerful confirmation of the need to champion the rights of individuals in the face of looming totalitarian rule. These sentiments form the broad backdrop of Sachs's own worldview. However, in so far as one can infer a unitary 'voice' or 'persona' from the many contributors to the periodical, a similar consensus emerges: *S.A. Opinion* is a magazine which regarded its own political approach as more reasoned, accurate and objective than that of a range of left- and right-wing 'extremisms', and as the years went by, its opposition to left-wing politics became more and more entrenched.

In his introduction to a collection of Bosman's sketches and essays—part of the recent centenary re-publication of the complete works of Herman Charles Bosman by Stephen Gray and Craig MacKenzie—Stephen Gray provides a glimpse into the early twentieth-century Johannesburg literary and social scene as a backdrop to Bosman's life and work. According to Gray, *S.A. Opinion* formed a significant part of this world—a Johannesburg paper<sup>4</sup>, it reflected in detail on the local socio-political and cultural scene and, fortunately for Bosman, offered a platform for his various literary interests which became something of a lifeline in what was always a precarious career. *S.A. Opinion* combined the talents of what Gray describes as 'those three B's of the South African newsprint industry' (2002:17), Bernard Sachs, Edgar Bernstein and Herman Charles Bosman. While Sachs and Bernstein concentrated on local and international politics, Bosman took care of the newspaper's literary and cultural offerings. Bosman's contribution to *S.A. Opinion* was substantial: as literary editor, he was in charge of the overall cultural content which included regular cinema, theatre, and book reviews; he also contributed short stories, reviews, essays, poetry

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<sup>4</sup> The paper had a branch office in Cape Town in the mid-thirties, but the centre of command was always in Johannesburg.

and sketches under the various by-lines of Herman Malan, C.M. van den Heever and 'Spectator'. His presence in the periodical was clearly a strong selling point: Gray describes him as the paper's 'star-turn', his latest contributions eagerly awaited by enthusiastic fans. The combination of political comment and cultural analysis which characterised *S.A. Opinion*, at least in its early years, was adopted by many other South African publications including Jacques Malan's *Trek*, *The Forum*, and *Fighting Talk*.

While Sachs's brief induction into the world of the South African Left made him less, rather than more, likely to champion a left-wing approach in his magazine, his indebtedness to Marxism is nevertheless very apparent. Sachs's political editorials in the mid 1930s offered a left-of-centre interpretation of local and international events, which drew at times on a Marxist approach. His economic analysis recognised the failings of Victorian economic liberalism, which had led to world economic crisis, widespread unemployment, and the paradoxical problem of 'too much capital seeking foreign markets' (28 December 1934:1). Instead of looking to the 'revolutionary impulses of Communism', however, he argued in favour of a Keynesian 'planned economy', and advocated international economic reform. In the mid-1930s, Sachs was deeply troubled by the growing talk of war amongst the European powers and the failure of international peace efforts. Locating Hitler's rise to power in Germany's economic collapse, he drew on a Leninist understanding of the function of war in the modern global economy:

We must make it abundantly clear ... that if South Africa is to sacrifice the flower of its manhood, it will not be in a war where behind glittering facades painted with such fine phrases like 'Freedom of the Seas', 'Make the World Safe for Democracy' or 'National Honour', fresh markets are being conquered apace (8 March 1935:1)<sup>5</sup>.

Furthermore, his outspoken condemnation of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia

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<sup>5</sup> In this sense, he echoes both the (early) Communist and Trotskyist positions on the war question in South Africa. At the time this was a deeply unpopular response (see Drew 2000:226-238).

demonstrated an acute understanding of the function of Europe's colonies in the grand scheme of imperial squabbling.

Reflecting a common tendency in many publications of the time, Adolf Hitler and Nazism were the frequent recipients of satirical cartoons and scorching critique, as were the many local Nazi sympathisers in Malan's Purified National Party (which emerged in 1939, a breakaway from Hertzog's National Party). As you would expect from a liberal publication, the magazine's political analysis drew much of its force from its reaction to an insurgent Afrikaner Nationalism. Here, the likes of Oswald Pirow were easy targets in an economic analysis which emphasised the absolute necessity of South Africa's transformation from a 'feudal', agrarian economy (based on an outdated racism) into a modern, industrialised nation (14 June 1935:1). Like many liberals in South Africa, Sachs believed that the segregationist goals of a powerful South African land-owning class were detrimental to the political and economic progress of the country. This argument, which drew on the lessons of the American Civil War, became one of the periodical's strongest themes, increasingly defining the ambit of its political engagement in the 1940s, the preoccupation with modernity and industrial progress gradually taking it further and further away from an explicit engagement with questions of race or class. Whilst many of the discussions of the 'Native Question' during the 1940s have all the benevolent patronage, muted Social Darwinism and tell-tale vagueness of the South African liberal tradition, the editorials of the pre-war years freely exposed the disingenuousness of South Africa's racial policies and condemned the farce of South Africa's race relations. For Sachs, the notorious Native Bills, passed in 1936, for example, 'would do justice to Hitler himself' (22 February 1936:1). A paper which consistently promoted the value of democracy over other available alternatives, and which was frequently critical of developments under Stalinism, it was nevertheless careful to retain a distinction between 'dictatorships from the left and from the right', asserting that while Nazism 'is but the gigantic preparation for war, the world would some day profit in one form or another from the vast social experimentation that is the feature of Soviet Russia' (4 September 1936:1). The article, however, goes on to suggest that it is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish between the two dictatorships, stating further that Stalin's efforts to reassure the West of its non-imperialist aims

was a strategic ploy to secure much-needed support<sup>6</sup>.

In addition to the three B's', the periodical relied on contributions by Witwatersrand professor and liberal philosopher R.F.A. Hoernlé, art historian Dr. Joseph Sachs, Professor Max Drennan (Head of English at the University of the Witwatersrand), Professor J.Y.T. Greig (Drennan's successor) and A.C. Partridge (lecturer in English at Pretoria University). It also attracted the notice of some of South Africa's leading Left intellectuals. These included J.G. Taylor (lecturer in Psychology and husband of Marxist literary critic and activist, Dora Taylor), Benjamin Farrington (Classics lecturer at the University of Cape Town who was closely associated with journalist, Ruth Schechter), Eddie Roux (one-time Communist Party member and author of *Time Longer than Rope*), and Frederick Bodmer (Physics lecturer at UCT; for more on this group, see Baruch Hirson (2001). Whilst their contributions remained small (many of them did not submit more than one article), they were a noteworthy and often controversial feature of the periodical in its early years. Some of the more contentious issues which these, and others, took up included women's oppression, censorship and free speech, the so-called immorality of contemporary cinema, the causes of poverty, Olive Schreiner's interest in socialism, and Karl Marx's association with South Africa. For the rest of the magazine's contributors, the great socialist experiment on the other side of Europe was viewed with caution, and some distrust. If there was interest, it is tempting to see it as part of the general upsurge of 'Left' commitment which characterised the 1930s Popular Front period when even the most resolutely apolitical were forced into some kind of heightened awareness as Fascism strengthened<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Hyman Basner, a Johannesburg lawyer and member of the Communist Party, wrote a scorching reply in the following edition, in which he accused the editor of being a Fascist.

<sup>7</sup> One particularly intriguing discussion which I think was more indicative of the peculiar strains of this historical moment than suggestive of any genuine engagement with socialist ideas is to be found in an article on democracy and Fascism by A.C. Partridge in which he offered a left-wing attack on the limitations of democracy while at the same time rejecting the ignorance of 'mob' leadership and advocating the rule of an intellectual aristocracy (*S.A. Opinion* 17 April 1937:7-9; 1 May 1937:5-6).

One of the journalists who sums up both the openness and the ambivalence of the mid-1930s period is regular literary critic, Cyril Kantor, whose numerous positive reviews of books like L.F. Celine's *Journey to the End of the Night* (16 November 1934:21), Ignazio Silone's *Bread and Wine* (3 April 1937:15), Jack Kirkland's adaptation of Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road* and Liam O'Flaherty's *Famine* (17 April 1937:14) brought the classic texts of the 1930s muck-raking tradition to the attention of South African readers. Kantor seems genuinely appreciative of a new 'revolutionary trend in modern literature' which is committed to social equality, and seeks a balance in 'our muddled and stormy decade' between rapacious individual greed and communal obligation (12 June 1937:14). Positioning himself as robust people's champion against those "'anaemic" critics who write for the vulture press', Kantor applauds fiction with a radical political purpose and rejects 'escapist' art (17 April 1937:14). On other occasions, however, he struggles to find words adequate to express his antipathy for Marxism and Communism, rejecting Marxist intellectual traditions as programmatic and authoritarian (1 May 1937:8, 29 May 1937:12) and dismissing certain Marxist 'cranks' as 'tract-writing, hair-splitting, platform-strutting socialists ... who eulogise the glories of machines and industrialism and splash about in the sea of dialectical materialism' (15 May 1937:14). Kantor's review of socialist theatre director, Andre van Gyseghem's production of *The Hairy Ape* by Eugene O'Neil at the Bantu Men's Social Centre in Johannesburg offers a further elaboration of his position<sup>8</sup>. Invoking the dubious notion of racial 'backwardness', Kantor castigates the director for attempting to 'cram [the] unready minds' of his African cast with 'the half-digested seeds of revolution' (6 February 1937:13). Instead of strutting around as 'revolutionary marionettes... mouthing without feeling or sincerity the diatribes of [left-wing] writers', these African actors, 'but recently emerged from the sanity of the Kraal' should concentrate on the 'unexplored material of their own background' (6

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<sup>8</sup> Van Gyseghem was a socialist theatre director from Belgium who arrived in South Africa in 1936 under the auspices of the British Drama League (Couzens 1985:176; Peterson 2000:160). The theatre group with which he worked was the Bantu People's Theatre, not the more well-known Bantu Dramatic Society.

February 1937:13). After at least three years of enthusiastic reviews of the 1930s 'social problem' novel, Kantor almost breathes an audible sigh of relief when, in the late 1930s, he feels able to move on to books 'that are non-political in character and which reproduce the essential beauty of fiction in its pure and uncontaminated form' (12 June 1937:14).

Aside from the articles by the UCT radicals, most of the 1930s leftism of *S.A. Opinion* seems to have been little more than a desperate gesture in the direction of social equality which was provoked by the crisis of a particular moment. With *S.A. Opinion*'s re-emergence in the mid-1940s came a substantial change in political orientation, editorial preoccupations having shifted from questions of social justice to the characteristic caution of South African liberalism. This identity grew more assured as National Party policy began to take shape in the years that followed. This more conservative political direction was cemented in 1947 when *S.A. Opinion* merged with *Trek*. The new magazine was to continue in the footsteps of both its predecessors, but for many of *Trek*'s faithful subscribers, the 'old gods of "Trek"' had been 'effectively exorcised' (*Guardian* 22 May 1947:3).

Its politics aside, *S.A. Opinion* was also noteworthy for its active promotion of South African literature and culture. In this, it shared a preoccupation with several other publications of its day, including *The Forum* (a United Party magazine edited by J.P. Cope); Jacques Malan's *Trek*; *The Toulleier* (a Johannesburg magazine edited by Charles Blignaut and Herman Charles Bosman), the Afrikaans literary journal *Standpunte* and *Vandag*, a bilingual literary magazine edited by Uys Krige. This emphasis was conspicuously at odds with an academic orthodoxy (in South African English Departments especially), which insisted on the importance of maintaining cultural ties with Britain, and gave little serious attention to local writers (Doherty 1989; 1990). The opening editorial of the newly-launched 1944 *S.A. Opinion* declared: '[a] field in which we aspire to perform a pioneering role ... is in the developing of an indigenous South African approach to matters literary'. This included the 'cultivat[ion] of South African short story writing and poetry that can be truly called South African and attains to the necessary standard of literary quality' (March 1944:1). From its inception in 1934, *S.A. Opinion* had provided a platform for local writers through its regular short story and poetry slots, publishing work by Bosman, Nadine Gordimer, Bernard Sachs and Uys Krige, to name

only a few. In the mid-1940s, this coverage increased dramatically, with writers given further encouragement in the form of short story and poetry competitions, the first of which, launched in March 1944 and judged by Professor Greig, was won by Gordimer for her story, 'No Luck Tonight'. Herman Charles Bosman, as the magazine's enthusiastic literary editor, was at the centre of this cultural project, seeing it as an opportunity to kick-start a South African cultural renaissance (*S.A. Opinion* April 1944:25-26).

An indigenous South African criticism in *S.A. Opinion*—developed mainly in relation to English South African writing—was pursued through regular book reviews and essays on South African literature, theatre and art. The earliest attempts to engage with South African culture in *S.A. Opinion*, however, were much more exploratory, focusing mainly on the preliminary questions of whether there was such a thing as South African culture and, if so, was it any good?<sup>9</sup> Articulating what was a dominant position in South African English departments at the time was Witwatersrand English Professor, J.Y.T. Greig. Largely unpersuaded by the merits of South African literature, Greig was insistent that it retain its position as a minor off-shoot of the dominant British tradition and argued for the maintenance of European-derived standards (*S.A. Opinion* 1 November 1935:17; June 1944:22). Those in the very vocal South Africanist group—which included Herman Charles Bosman, Edgar Bernstein, poetry anthologist and journalist Charles Gulston, Scottish-born poet Francis Duncan Sinclair, and Johannesburg poet and journalist Charles Eglinton—defended the existence of an 'indigenous South African culture' and argued that it was going from strength to strength. In the late 1940s, there emerged a much more confident cultural theorising as critics turned their attention to the analysis of individual authors and texts. Most noteworthy amongst these efforts were several pioneering survey-type studies of South African literature and culture. In this regard, Edward Davis's 'English Writers of South Africa' (December 1946-April 1947), Edgar Bernstein's 'Steps to a South African Culture' (March-May 1950), J.P.L. Snyman's 'The Rise of the South

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<sup>9</sup> A selection of these include: 'There IS a Growing S. African Culture' (*S.A. Opinion* 14 November 1936); 'This Indigenous South African Culture' (*S.A. Opinion* June 1944:22); 'Steps to South African Culture' (*Trek* March 1950); and 'Is there a South African Culture?' (*Trek* February 1951).

African Novel' (August-November 1950), a series on 'Post-War Literature in South Africa' (March-July 1950) and 'The Pulse of Africa' (May-August 1950) by Joseph Sachs represent some of the earliest efforts to define the content of a national culture.

The intensity of the earlier mid-1930s debates—in which the measured reserve of the anglophiles met the energy and hyperbole of the patriotic South Africanists—suggests that there were larger issues at stake. An important marker of 'civility', literature also acts as a form of 'cultural self-recognition', one of the means by which a national group can 'know [itself] and verify [its] national consciousness' (Lecker 1990:662). The value of a national literature is that 'it reflects the value of the nation' (662). Literary criticism in this context becomes a 'displaced form of Nationalism' (664). For those English-speaking white South Africans who could not rest on the cultural achievements of Britain, the project of identifying and promoting an 'indigenous' culture was an urgent one. This incipient nationalist project was drawn into even sharper focus by the rise of a powerful Afrikaner Nationalist movement—dramatically signalled by the 1938 centenary celebrations of the Great Trek and the National Party victory ten years later. Here too, the proximate example of a vigorous Afrikaans literary tradition was a frequent source of concern and envy, something which put English-speaking South Africans to shame. As one commentator put it, only the work of Afrikaans writers 'rings true' (*S.A. Opinion* 22 February 1936:6)<sup>10</sup>.

A further spur to the mainly South African-born promoters of South African literature were the frequently patronising attitudes expressed by members of the dominant British culture towards the lowly cultural efforts of its 'backward' dominions. Here, an English South African literature struggled not only to define itself against the much more powerful English tradition, but also had to contend with condescending English critics who tended to dismiss the cultural products of the commonwealth as second-rate and insignificant. This cultural snobbery was undoubtedly reinforced by the

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<sup>10</sup> In the wake of the 1938 centenary celebrations, a number of other English publications in South Africa also woke up to the need to invest more in the promotion of a South African English culture. See for example *The Forum* and *Trek*.

many British-born academics who filled important posts in South African universities at the time. It was also uncritically reproduced by English-speaking South Africans themselves, hoping to bolster their social position at home by insisting on their primary cultural allegiance to England.

The response from the English 'South Africanists' was the reverse of the traditional colonial cringe, a somewhat exaggerated and defensive stance which in its early stages argued its case on the grounds of a popular anti-elitism. Thus Germiston-born Edgar Bernstein, who was the first to take up the argument for an indigenous South African culture, rejected the 'snobbish bigotry' (*S.A. Opinion* 14 November 1936: 11) of men like Greig, and asserted (in a later article) that an indigenous culture cannot simply be 'scuffed out of existence by the higher brow of Johannesburg's Parktown or the colonial outlook of Durban's Berea' (*Trek* March 1950: 24)<sup>11</sup>. Like many others, Bernstein's response to South Africa's cultural snobs was to suggest that in the work of artists, poets and writers like Olive Schreiner, Thomas Pringle, Pierneef, Roy Campbell, and Sarah Gertrude Millin, the foundations of a 'specifically South African culture' had already been laid (*S.A. Opinion* 14 November 1936: 11).

These confident assertions, however, are betrayed by considerable anxiety. Despite their vigorous defence of South African culture, most commentators were in agreement that literature produced by English South African writers was simply 'not South African enough'. These writers, they argued, had failed to come to grips either with their location in South Africa or with the reality of South African experience. Suffering from a kind of 'spiritual colonialism' (*Trek* May 1950: 26), and over-identified with Europe, they relied too heavily on English models with the result that much of their writing was derivative, stereotypical and uninspiring. For Edgar Bernstein, echoing Olive Schreiner's comments in the Preface to *The Story of an African Farm*, '[t]oo many books written before World War II could have been written in London or in Timbuctoo' (*Trek* May 1950: 26). This reliance on imported literary models had given rise to an 'underbrush of

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<sup>11</sup> Certainly the periodical (mainly through the efforts of Herman Charles Bosman) revelled in a kind of anti-intellectualism, a carry-over from Bosman's days of writing articles for Aegidius Blignaut's the *Sjambok* (see de Kock 1988).

cultural inconsequence': romanticised portraits of 'sun-dappled farm-houses' and 'rolling veld', and a colonial literature of 'brawny farmers and 'savage' blacks', histories which are 'too often only a whitewash of chauvinism' (Bernstein, *Trek* March 1950:25). Attempts to insert a 'background of local colour' along with a 'few good Zulu or Swazi names' and a little 'folkore' were equally unsatisfactory, serving only to confirm the universality of European themes (Feldman, 22 February 1936:6).

Weighing in on this debate in a highly emotive article published in 1944, Herman Charles Bosman located the problem in a disconcerting cultural hybridity: English South African writing was 'neither European nor African', but rather a 'mongrel product' with little 'survival value as a culture' (*S.A. Opinion* April 1944:25). Using an image which was congenial to many participants in this discussion, he argued that South African literature should be 'rooted' in the South African soil or, in his words, 'torn from the stark womb of the earth', its 'roots deeply entangled with the dark purple of the raw tissue of the life that is at hand' (*S.A. Opinion* April 1944:25-26). In taking this line, *Trek-S.A. Opinion* echoed an embattled minority position in South African English Departments which was represented in the mid-1940s by critics like Guy Butler. At the 1948 conference of English teachers held in Pietermaritzburg, for example, Butler exhorted his audience to remember that '[w]e are Europeans living in Africa'. Like Bosman, Bernstein and others, he criticised the desire to 'escape to Europe in imagination', concluding that 'we should not be exiles on a mental St. Helena—neither Europeans nor Africans' (1949:59).

The notion of a 'truly indigenous' South African culture—and the definitions of 'South African-ness' with which it was inevitably associated—was a multivalent and contradictory idea which simultaneously encompassed a range of political-aesthetic requirements, including, for example, a demand for national identification, the requirement that literature engage with concrete socio-political realities and the privileging of the aesthetics of realism over the romantic, sentimental or exotic. For the most part, however, the version of indigeneity to which most commentators appealed was the far more mystical requirement that literature convey a particular South African 'atmosphere' or 'spirit'. Edgar Bernstein's discussion of this problem begins with the argument that South African literature should 'savour of the spirit of the land' (*S.A Opinion* 14 November

1936:11). In support of this rather vague assertion, he draws on the example of 'Bantu music' and 'Bushman painting' to make the argument that culture 'arises whenever a people ... are so affected by the impact of their environment ... that they seek to express it in artistic form' (*Trek* March 1950:24). While the definition of 'environment' used here includes brief references to its human and socio-economic dimensions, it is to the impact of the natural environment that Bernstein most consistently returns. Like many others in this debate, the surprising and rather banal resolution of this quest for indigeneity is the requirement that literature involve detailed descriptions of the South African landscape, which is variously (and repeatedly) figured in terms of drought, 'decay', 'blistering heat', 'vastness', 'emptiness', 'dullness' and 'power' (Poyurs, *S.A. Opinion* October 1944: 27; Bernstein, *Trek* March 1950: 24-26; Sinclair, *Trek* May 1949:27).

Such a context—in which 'nature exerts so imposing a form' (*S.A. Opinion* 14 November 1936:11)—demands stylistic experimentation and originality:

The artist has a new land to interpret. A strange land, a land that has slumbered indolently for centuries, dark and unknown .... It is a land where the bigness is overwhelming, and in the end, it will only be in terms of that bigness, and the dark brooding spirit of eternity it carries with it, that great South African art will be created (*S.A. Opinion* 14 November 1936:11).

According to Bernstein, Olive Schreiner's 'tragic' realism comes closest to capturing this 'dark brooding spirit' (*Trek* May 1950:26), and key to this success are her attempts to forge new novelistic forms appropriate to a distinctive South African experience. One of the more interesting outcomes of this preoccupation with landscape, therefore, was a literary aesthetic capable of appreciating the development of innovative form<sup>12</sup>.

That landscape and the physical environment should appear as such strongly charged terms in these efforts to define a national culture is

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<sup>12</sup> Unlike many later critics, Ridley Beeton also gives serious attention to Schreiner's stylistic experimentation in *The Story of an African Farm* (*Trek* August 1948:28).

intriguing. The pleasures of recognition are an undeniable part of the fascination of culture and, for a literary institution seeking to establish itself in the shadow of another much more powerful, the reflected (realist) image is a potent confirmation of self-worth (Lecker 1990:662). In this case, however, the literary discussion is conspicuous for its exclusive focus on natural landscapes and the startling absence of the human. In the face of considerable odds, these early literary nationalists privilege the geographical and geological over the human and social worlds, and blithely ignore the proximate realities of rapid urban-industrial change. The uniqueness of South African society lies not in its peculiar relations of production and exchange (brutal labour recruitment practices, legislated racism, poverty wages in mining and agriculture) but in some mystical spirit of ecological place. Interestingly, the same (essentialist) markers of authenticity employed here—land, specificity, experience—are also invoked in on-going constructions of an inclusive national identity in the post-apartheid present, a repetition which, at the very least, serves as a reminder of the enormous complexities of the South African nationalist project itself<sup>13</sup>.

From landscape description, of course, it is only a small step to the banality of colonial myth. According to Edgar Bernstein, South Africa is not only sparsely-populated, beautiful and overwhelming, it is also ‘savage’, violent and unpredictable, a place in which humans feel their true insignificance in relation to powerful ‘elemental forces’. The image of Africa central to the construction of a national culture in this instance is the primitive, slumbering, inscrutable ‘other’ of Europe, a new world ‘still as it was in the first day of creation’ (*S.A. Opinion* 14 November 1936:11), a place where nature is ‘no kind and soothing mother’ but a ‘peasant nurse rudely castigating her charges’ (*Trek* March 1950:25). Bernstein’s

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<sup>13</sup> See for example, the Statement of the President of the African National Congress, Nelson Mandela at his inauguration as President of South Africa, 10 May 1994. <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/speeches/inaugpta.html> [Accessed 16 January 2008] and the Statement of Deputy President Thabo Mbeki on the occasion of the adoption by the Constitutional Assembly of The Republic of South Africa Constitution Bill, 8 May 1996. [http://www.info.gov.za/aboutgovt/orders/new2002\\_mbeki.htm](http://www.info.gov.za/aboutgovt/orders/new2002_mbeki.htm) [Accessed 16 January 2009]

commitment to place and his avowedly realist aesthetic, defined against both popular Romance forms and modernist experimentation, is undermined by a romanticisation of Africa drawn squarely from Victorian myth. While this particular rendering of the colonial stereotype may be the most elaborate, the basic structuring oppositions between 'culture' and 'nature', 'reason' and 'irrationality', 'confinement' and 'space' (which also rehearse an equally powerful stereotype of a somnolent and irrational femininity) are evident across a wide range of texts. Like many other emerging 'nations', this founding moment in the construction of a national identity, therefore, encompasses a racist and sexist construction (Baym 1978).

These colonialist assumptions also determine the scope of the magazine's critical interests: the discussion of black South African culture is always confined to pre-modern or traditional expressive forms and, aside from the occasional reference to the work of Peter Abrahams, the growing body of contemporary black literature—which, at the time, included the likes of Es'kia Mphahlele, Thomas Mofolo, R.R.R. Dhlomo and others—was completely ignored<sup>14</sup>. A series of articles by Joseph Sachs on African culture entitled 'The Pulse of Africa' was even more explicit, reproducing all the familiar Manichean binaries of a racist cultural vision including the dichotomies of body and intellect; expressiveness and restraint; and intuition and rationality (*Trek* June 1950:25). In 'Primitive Negro Sculpture', Sachs goes as far as to deny African consciousness and spirituality in his emphasis on the 'intuitive', 'instinctive' and 'unthinking' nature of the 'African response' to his or her environment (*Trek* July 1950: 9; August 1950:26)<sup>15</sup>.

These examples, as well as many others of casually (often unconsciously) expressed racism, give some sense of the racist underpinnings of a benevolent South African liberalism. There were some challenges to this dominant consensus. In his discussion of South African literature, Herman Charles Bosman artfully sends up the absurdities of colonialist stereotypes of the 'Dark Continent' and African 'savagery' in the manner of his Marico tales (*Trek* September 1948:24). In similar fashion,

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<sup>14</sup> An article by H. Poyurs was the single exception to this rule (*S.A. Opinion* October 1944:27).

<sup>15</sup> These racist binaries (and mystifications) are repeated in Sachs's monograph on the paintings of Irma Stern (Sachs 1942).

Durban author and journalist Oliver Walker chooses satire over moral condemnation in his regular column 'Leaves from my Diary' which he used to attack assumptions of African inferiority and the associated stereotypes of psychological mystery and physical resilience (*Trek* October 1948:10).

Two other writers who are equally suspicious of the colonialist mentality—and who provide a very different reading of the failure of South African literature—are R. Feldman and Frederick Bodmer. While Feldman invokes a widely-used stereotype in his comment that the many themes of South African life offer 'a mighty sub-continent to explore and conquer', he takes the debate over national authenticity back to more concrete (and less spiritual) concerns:

[t]he first and fundamental cause of our literary poverty is due to the fact that writers here hold aloof from portraying the reality around them since the social theme of master and servant, and the racial theme of white and black would not be welcomed.

This is particularly noticeable in the representation of African experience: 'We get stories of Native life, are told of the witchdoctor, of "lobolo", of beads and skins, and assegais, and the patriarchal life at the kraal' but are seldom troubled with the terrible stories of rural poverty and desperation which feature so frequently in the daily press. 'These and a thousand similar themes are shunned by South African writers because they do not wish to offend the ruling cult' (*S.A. Opinion* 22 February 1936:6). Feldman singles out the work of Irma Stern both because it avoids the temptation to depict Africans as 'grown up children', and for its commitment to depicting 'social life and social problems', working as she is within a tradition which generally 'fights shy of the painful and the tragic' (17 May 1935:10).

Feldman's realist aesthetic arises out of his conviction—shared by many on the Left during this period—that the contemporary socio-political scene called for a more politicised literary response. Echoing the debates in the British *Left Review* and the US *Partisan Review*—and anticipating a contentious debate in the Jacques Malan's *Trek*—Feldman rejects the 'art for art's sake' approaches which advocate 'a free, aimless art, bound to no subject or ideal, free from the problems of the day' and offers instead an ideal of committed political engagement: 'It is no longer feared to be called

“tendentious” since to have a “tendency” means to have an outlook, means jumping off the fence and taking a stand’ (*S.A. Opinion* 22 February 1936:6).

A similar emphasis on a radical political commitment and the related preference for realist modes is to be found in UCT academic, Frederick Bodmer’s discussion of South African painting. In an essay which appeared in 1936, Bodmer also takes issue with an artistic tradition in which beauty is privileged over ‘social reflection’. This failure to engage with the reality of South African experience is most conspicuous in the preference for images of naked ‘noble savages’ in environments of rural simplicity over the representation of African modernity:

[The South African artist] never echoes in the least the Native as we know him from the factory, the police court and the petrol pump. His exact genesis and habit are difficult to state. Maybe the artist actually catches him where he is said to exist in the raw, unharmed yet by the wiles and vices of white civilisation. Then he develops him in the purifying medium of his creative vision whence our canvas-native emerges full of that shining glamour and unaggressive dignity which so much enhance the charm of the South African drawing room (*S.A. Opinion* 11 January 1935:15).

Despite the fact that ‘European and Native are bound together by the most intimate working ties, in industry, in agriculture, in the kitchen, even in the nursery’, they remain completely separated in South African art (15). Bodmer’s determination to acknowledge the reality of contemporary urban African experience not only challenges the romantic (and racist) distortions of a characteristic white South African aesthetic, but also repudiates a powerful political consensus which hid its repressive social aims behind the liberal rhetoric of ‘indigenisation’ and ‘retribalisation’. As Bhekisiswe Peterson has argued, the political aims of a supposedly ‘benevolent segregation’ (2000:162)—premised on the myth that a ‘pure’ African culture had to be protected from the corruptions of modernity—also found parallel expression in the arts. The explicit encouragement of traditional African art forms was just one of the many ways in which the South African state sought to entrench cultural difference as part of its broader segregationist

goals<sup>16</sup>. Bodmer's and Feldman's insistence on the need to recognise the reality of African modernity, and their corresponding distrust of rural constructions are part of an important counter-tradition in South African criticism, which was also articulated in magazines such as the early *Trek*, *The Voice*, *The Torch* and *Fighting Talk*.

Further reflection in *S.A. Opinion* on the 'art and society' debate was prompted both by a turbulent international political context and by the contributions of its deliberately controversial literary editor. For Herman Charles Bosman, one of the chief pre-requisites of a 'truly South African culture' was that it should be free from all 'political ideologies'. Literature is at its best when there is no politics at all, just 'that gaudy, frightening, suffocating, incredible, catastrophic vortex that goes by the simple name of "Die Lewe"' (*S.A. Opinion* April 1944:26). Bosman's dedicated antipathy to politics, in both art and life—part of a strongly-felt Romantic approach which he was seldom shy to promote—was expressed at a time when the work of left-wing writers like Stephen Spender, Harold Laski, and Cecil Day-Lewis still enjoyed widespread currency<sup>17</sup>. It seems likely that it was precisely in response to the contemporary vogue for left-wing ideas that Bosman advanced an ultra-Romantic position of this kind. His articles on a range of subjects written between November 1944 and September 1948 celebrated artistic freedom and individuality, gloried in the image of the artist as uniquely gifted and god-like—a 'divinely inspired madman' (*S.A. Opinion* August 1944:24)—and (echoing Bernard Sachs) rejected the constraints which ideological conviction and an obligation to community imposed upon imaginative flight. The polarisation of life and politics that is key to this argument reflects a denuded definition of the political as well as a failure to recognise ideology or politics except as it occurs in the arguments of others.

An article entitled 'Art and Feudalism', published under the by-line Herman Malan, was one of Bosman's most contentious. An artistic manifesto of the most politically incorrect kind, deliberately calculated to

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<sup>16</sup> In this regard, see Peterson's discussion of Bertha Slosberg's involvement in Durban-based theatre group, the 'Mtetwa Lucky Stars' (2000:170f).

<sup>17</sup> The *S.A. Opinion* published at least two articles by Stephen Spender on this issue in October 1946 and May 1947; see also 'Politics and the Writer' by H. Gill (May 1948:32f).

offend the liberal sensibilities of *S.A. Opinion* readers, it was essentially a plea for artistic freedom and integrity versus state-controlled art, and a defence of the virtues of an apolitical stance. Its more outrageous qualities relate to the way in which, in making this case, it provocatively celebrates the opportunities presented to the artistic sensibility by the spectacle of vast social inequalities; in short, the benefits for art in a feudal regime:

My view is that poetry can reach its ultimate power of expression only in a state in which a monied, leisured and useless aristocracy is at the head of the nation. Art can leap forth as a tiger only in a state governed by an aristocracy, or—even better—in a slave state. For poetry to be great and inspired and a living force you have got to have a world in which there are magnificent and terrible contrasts .... Anything less than this is no material for poetry .... You don't need much more than a standard four intelligence to say that it is not fair that some people should be rich and others poor, and just for no reason .... This is all obvious stuff .... But it is only an artist with the stature of Christ who can dismiss the whole question with the magnificent finality of 'the poor you always have with you' (November 1944:24f).

Bosman's insistence that this was not a satirical piece compelled editor Bernard Sachs to insert an explanatory note. He had decided to publish it, he said, 'because it [was] well and amusingly written' but made it plain that he rejected its 'blatant ultra-Romantic, ivory tower conception of art' (*S.A. Opinion* November 1944:24). Confronted with the spectacle of this seemingly callous indifference to human suffering, most respondents were quick to distance themselves from the kind of ultra-Romantic escapism and extreme individualism which they took Bosman's position to represent<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> It is difficult to differentiate between the 'authentic' Bosman and his many satirical masks. Left-wing activist Fanny Klenerman's reports that at a protest organised by the South African Garment Worker's Union, he saw Bosman ('our great writer, our South African hero') walking amongst the demonstrators and poking them with a plank which had a nail in it (Klenerman Papers, William Cullen Library, Autobiogr. Material A2031/a).

Even the ever-cautious Professor Greig, called upon against his better judgement to respond to Bosman's argument, was forced to concede the value of a more politicised stance, even going so far as to make the weak counter-argument that it was the artist's duty 'to revolt' (*S.A. Opinion* March 1945:22). For someone with such an extreme aversion to the politics of literature, this acknowledgment was quite exceptional<sup>19</sup>.

Others responded to the controversy by taking issue with Bosman's Romantic view of the artist. Rejecting the familiar Romantic tropes of the artist as 'lone eagle', or 'man of prophecy', the anonymous author of 'Social Background and Literature', for example, argued that, like all others, 'the artist is subject ... to the frailties, prejudices, and ambitions' which are the lot of ordinary human beings (*S.A. Opinion* August 1945:24). Writing about changing currents in both local and international poetry, Charles Gulston also approves of the contemporary shift away from the image of the artist as 'creature apart' or lofty truth-teller:

[The poet's] inspiration ... comes not from a sojourn in the Aegean Isles, but from the pavement outside the poet's doorstep .... The poet in South Africa to-day is going not so much to the mountain top or the flowering field for his inspiration, as to the mine shaft and the city slum ... (November 1946:24).

Instead of exchanging 'his birthright for a mess of pottage', Gulston continues, the artist has finally come to the realisation that 'there is a poetry of the street as well as the cathedral'. For Gulston, this shift is evident

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<sup>19</sup> Just how far Greig was prepared to go to deny the political significance of literary-cultural texts is demonstrated in a review of Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* in which he responds to the contemporary interest in political significance: 'I shuddered at the thought of Charlie Chaplin in the clutches of an 'ism''. Happily he remains 'no more contaminated by isms than a child of ten'. The film, he suggests, is not modern at all: it is 'as old and therefore as new, as the story of Harlequin and Colombine, the fooling of Shakespeare's clown, and the pretty fable of Cindarella. In essence, it is clean outside time .... I would have called it "Houp-la!" or "Nuts and Boltings" or "Oil and Chianti"' (*S.A. Opinion* 24 July 1936:15).

among a new crop of South African poets who eschew the eternal truth and the Romantic pose for poetry which is 'part of themselves, and wholly of their age', and which 'if it expresses no immortal truth' at least expresses 'a temporary one, which is creditable' (24). With these debates, we also return to the realist aesthetic advocated by the likes of Feldman and Bodmer.

Despite these voices—and despite the horrified reactions to Bosman's apolitical stance—the bulk of the criticism in *S.A. Opinion*, tended in the opposite direction, namely an outright hostility to literature with a political purpose, including both left-wing and proto-feminist critique. The tendency to wish away, misread or condemn political content was especially evident in a pioneering series of articles on South African literature which appeared from the late 1940s onwards. In the first series on South African literature published in 1947, Edward Davis, of the University of South Africa, evinces an almost schoolboy delight in the irreverence and political irresponsibility of a figure like Bosman, whose literary aesthetic is very close to his own. Unlike Bernstein's appreciation of the tragic mode in South African writing, Davis criticises Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* for its tendency to 'wallow' in tragedy, its bleak dissection of human suffering and its weak characterisation of men: Waldo, for example, is lightly dismissed as 'a primrose by the river's brim, if not quite a pansy'. He is equally unimpressed by Schreiner's treatment of women's issues, declaring that he finds it 'impossible to admire a prose which sometimes bristles with a feminine moustache'. Schreiner's portrait of Africa is particularly difficult to accept, mainly because its sombre preoccupations are so far removed from his own more Bosman-like appreciation for the comically absurd. For Davis, Schreiner depicts an Africa in which 'the clouds return not after the rain, and in which the grasshopper is a burden. Africa is not like that. It is not a land of weeping and gnashing of teeth. The voice of the veld is thunder, silence or a snore', a 'guffaw', rather than 'groan' (*S.A. Opinion* January 1947:22). Sarah Gertrude Millin is similarly chastised for her insistence on wearing the wearisome 'hair-shirt' of social consciousness and her tendency to 'linger wretchedly over many thoroughly unpleasant things' (*S.A. Opinion* February 1947:27). Similarly, in an article which compares Steinbeck's *Tobacco Road* with Bosman's *Mafeking Road*, Davis registers a strong antipathy for the social realism of the Steinbeck tradition, preferring Bosman's less earnest style which 'doesn't point out

anything', least of all a moral truth (*S.A. Opinion* January 1948:32).

The same aversion to the 'social problem' novel is also to be found in J.P.L. Snyman's study of South African literature (for which he had just been awarded a D.Litt from Unisa). Also writing about *The Story of an African Farm*, he suggests that 'one is inclined to over-estimate the value of this book because it happens to be the most famous novel in South African English fiction' (*Trek* September 1950:16). As a novelist,

Olive Schreiner's temper, and her biased, even angry, attitude have a harmful effect on her work. *The Story of an African Farm* is a statement of her opinions on religion, and a challenge flung to a bigoted society by a young woman who hated cant but did not have sufficient experience in writing to practise literary restraint and thus obtain objectivity (16).

In an echo of Virginia Woolf's response to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, he concludes, 'Olive Schreiner's writing expresses 'angry' convictions—and most critics are agreed that no true artist should allow personal convictions unduly to colour his work. The true artist stands above such contentious issues' (18). This response is clearly motivated by more than a general hostility towards politics in art. A woman with a bad 'temper' and 'angry' convictions has overstepped the boundaries of acceptable femininity.

An article entitled 'New Writers and the Colour Problem' by 'Masque'<sup>20</sup>, which examines the work of Alan Paton, Wulf Sachs, Doris Lessing and Oliver Walker, repeats many of the same aesthetic and political demands. Beginning with a review of Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*, 'Masque' echoes a dominant view that good literature should convey 'objective' truth: 'Masque' appreciates the novel's 'objective' stance on racial questions and the fact that it 'paints no obvious moral'. Instead, its position 'derives from a broad moral attitude to life rather than from any particular political or ideological point of view' (*Trek* June 1950:3). This gives it 'universal' appeal. In contrast to Paton's sentimental optimism, Wulf

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<sup>20</sup> The article appears with the following note: 'Masque was the non-deplume of a contributor who was a lecturer in Literature at a Scottish University before he settled in South Africa' (*S.A. Opinion* June 1950:2).

Sachs's novel, *Black Anger*, is too despairing: its 'obvious prejudices', its undisguised sympathy for its black hero, and its 'countless illustrations' of white obstinacy, stupidity and cruelty give the impression of 'a lack of balance'. Similarly, both Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* and Oliver Walker's *Kaffirs are Lively* are too heavy-handed, too earnest, and too strongly partisan in their approach to the 'colour question'. They lack 'poise' and 'objectivity' and 'Masque' wonders at their 'strange compulsion to take sides' (5). For 'Masque', this is to muddle the 'aesthetic' and the 'moral'. As a result these writers 'have failed to attain that universality which would have brought their work into the enduring prestige of world appreciation' (46).

Joseph Sachs's examination of the work of Nadine Gordimer and Doris Lessing places the early Nadine Gordimer as the more 'universal' and less political of the two writers. For Sachs, while Gordimer gently points to South Africa's conflicts, Doris Lessing is 'like the Classical Fury in her merciless pursuit of stupidity, prejudice and social injustice'. More political than her contemporaries, she 'formulate[s] her problems socially, before treating them artistically'. A naturally 'tendentious' writer fully absorbed by the realities of her context, 'she is at her best ... when she forgets her moral mandate and writes out of the sheer exuberance of her talent' (15). Once again, Bosman's work provides the more attractive example: in contrast to this earnest propagandising, Bosman,

travels light .... He does not carry the ideological luggage of the young writer today, and seems to get along very well without it. On the rough road he has taken, it would only be an encumbrance. Freud and Marx would be out of place in the Marico Bushveld (*Trek* November 1951:16).

Reacting against this liberal consensus were Johannesburg trade unionist and radical theatre director Guy Routh, novelist Oliver Walker, and leftist literary critic and novelist R.K. (Jack) Cope. Routh's critique of Edward Davis's five-part series on South African literature centres on its failure to offer an 'integrated view'. By ignoring the social and material contexts 'on which [South African literature] is based', Davis overlooks one of the most important aspects of the South African experience, namely the

problem of its 'human relations' (Letter to the Editor, May 1947:3). Routh's suggestion that a literary critic should 'attempt to assay the mineral' rather than merely 'describe the quartzite' invokes a familiar Marxist critical method, and his emphasis on 'human relations' leads to an awareness of racial division and tension which is rare amongst mainstream critics like Davis. Sensitive to the way in which Africans are represented in fiction by white South African writers—regarded as either 'lovable children' or 'mysterious savages' (3)—Routh also gives credit to a more socially-conscious South African tradition. Particularly concerned that Davis omits both William Plomer's *Turbott Woolf* and Olive Schreiner's *Trooper Peter Halket*, he also suggests, in anticipation of a much more contemporary debate, that an adequate account of South African literature would need to give attention to non-literary genres like travel writing and popular magazines.

Where Oliver Walker goes against the grain in his satire on white South African racism, and offers a thoughtful critique of the patronising sentimentality of Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*, R.K. Cope, the only remaining contributor from the original *Trek* team, also made a case for art which was socially responsive<sup>21</sup>. In a rare gesture towards existing political realities in South Africa, Cope suggests that South African writers should offer honest and forthright comment on the world in which they live: and '[if] I am accused of advocating a literature with moral and social implications', he says, 'I must answer that is precisely what I'm doing!' (March 1950:10). His case for a political art is qualified by two important assumptions. In his suggestion that 'a moral and social aim does not make literature', Cope offers a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between literature and ideology than is generally credited to Marxist or left-inclined literary critics. The second qualification (surely a reference to Engels's comments on the work of Honoré de Balzac) that 'the conscious aims of an author have sometimes been in contradiction to his creative achievement' (10) also makes it clear that Cope's sense of what it means to produce a socially-conscious art is far removed from any simplistic notion of art as 'message' or 'propaganda'.

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<sup>21</sup> During this period, Cope wrote only two pieces for *Trek*, concentrating instead on his 'Art and the People Column' which appeared in the Communist newspaper, the *Guardian*.

*S.A. Opinion* registered the contradictions of its unstable socio-economic context in its heterogeneous politics and its many unresolved debates. The growing conservatism of the magazine, the demise of the original *Trek* and the story of Bernard Sachs's gradual shift from a leftist political stance to the more 'expansive' territory of the free artistic imagination are emblematic of a significant shift to the right in South African politics in the post-war period which is also echoed in other parts of the world. Mirroring these shifts, in turn, are the cultural debates in the magazine itself. If *S.A. Opinion* records the gradual disappearance of left-wing perspectives in mainstream cultural discussion, and the ascendance of a liberal consensus, it also marks a moment in South African literary history where the areas of 'political' and the 'aesthetic' become increasingly separated and polarised. This is illustrated not only in the general tenor of the magazine's cultural debates, but also in the editorial decision to exclude political content altogether. A moment of South African 'canon-formation', *S.A. Opinion* is an important antecedent to the canon-making processes of university journals such as *Theoria* and *English in Africa* (Barker & de Kok 2007). Of equal importance for the genealogy of South African criticism, however, are the core values which this criticism encoded, namely a profound hostility to all forms of political art, the conflation of a liberal position with 'neutrality' and 'objectivity', the tacit acceptance of racial hierarchies, the valorisation of colonial masculinities and the corresponding degradation of the feminine. More problematic perhaps than this is the assumption of moderate rationality which informs it.

With the benefit of hindsight it is easy to be alert to the contradictions which structure this discourse—the immersion of these critics in particular historical contexts; their blindness to the enabling conditions of their own intellectual production; and the wider context of economic, social and political violence hovering just beyond the closed office door or the comfortable suburban home. For Theodor Adorno (2002), these intellectual and political complicities are not so much an act of bad faith as the necessary effects of being in the world. Rather than experienced as an uncomfortable impingement from without, the values of the existing social order have migrated into the 'immanent' structures of consciousness itself (198). In these conditions, the choice of a critical perspective outside the sway of existing society is therefore illusory: cultural criticism is necessarily

complicit in the wider social world. Much more difficult than pointing to the blind spots of the past is to understand, and to be aware of, the complicities of cultural criticism in the present, to recognise the powerful pervasive influence of dominant social norms and to critique the enabling conditions of present-day intellectual production. Ironically, of all the writers in *S.A. Opinion*, it is Herman Charles Bosman, with his perverse celebration of art under Feudalism and his refusal to conform to the critical posture of the reasoned moderate, who comes closest to demonstrating this point.

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