

Reading the Ideological Contradictions in *Time of The Butcherbird*

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Summary

This paper focuses on Alex La Guma's last published novel, *Time of the Butcherbird*. Starting with the critical reception of this work, in which it becomes clear that the bulk of the critics have reservations about the aesthetic quality of the work, the paper attempts to locate *Time of the Butcherbird* within La Guma's literary oeuvre of social realism by employing George Lukács's theory. Although I share with other critics the sentiment that this novel seems to be somewhat different from La Guma's previous work in terms of its focus and ideological orientation I argue that this does not diminish the aesthetic validity of the novel in any way. The central thrust of this paper, however, is that, unlike other La Guma novels, not only is this novel somewhat inconsistent with La Guma's own ideological convictions, but the text itself is characterised by ideological contradictions which may, arguably, be attributed to La Guma's attempt to deal in fictional terms with the (still) unresolvable South African national question at the time of the text's composition.

Opsomming

Hierdie essay fokus op Alex la Guma se laaste gepubliseerde roman, *Time of the Butcherbird*. Die essay begin met die kritiese ontvangs van sy werk, waar dit duidelik word dat die meerderheid van die kritici voorbehoude het oor die estetiese gehalte van die werk. Die doel van die essay is om die plek van die roman in La Guma se gesamentlike literêre werke oor sosiale realisme te bepaal deur George Lukács se teorie toe te pas. Hoewel ek ander kritici se sentiment deel dat hierdie roman ietwat anders as La Guma se vorige werk is ten opsigte van die fokus en ideologiese oriëntering daarvan, redeneer ek dat dit nie die estetiese geldigheid daarvan op enige manier verminder nie. Die sentrale tema van hierdie essay is egter dat hierdie roman (in teenstelling met ander romans deur La Guma) nie net teenstrydig is met die outeur se eie ideologiese oortuigings nie; die teks self word gekenmerk deur ideologiese teenstrydighede. Hierdie teenstrydighede kan stellig toegeskryf word aan La Guma se poging om die (steeds) onoplosbare Suid-Afrikaanse nasionale vraag in die tyd waartydens die teks opgestel is – in fiktiewe terme – te hanteer.

For those readers and critics interested in La Guma's craftsmanship, the political logic of *In the Fog of the Seasons' End* (1972) raises certain expectations about the author's subsequent work. The assumption is that since *In the Fog* ends with activists leaving the country for military training in a neighbouring state the next novel would have as its subject an armed confrontation between the returned freedom fighters and the forces of the state. *Time of the Butcherbird* (1979) does not really meet these expectations. For neither is its protagonist a militarily trained returned activist nor does the novel itself really celebrate such an armed confrontation. Instead, the central focus of the text is on the contradictions of racial capitalism examined against the backdrop of a rural community under threat of a forced removal, which is prompted by the government's discovery of mining resources in the area. What is also central to the plot is the unfolding drama of Shilling Murile's quest to avenge his brother's death at the hands of Hans Meulen and Opperman. Such content in La Guma's last published novel has been seen by critics such as David Maughan-Brown (1991: 27) as "a step backwards rather than forwards".

In fact, with the exception of such critics as Scarlet Whitman (1979) as well as Gerald Moore (1980), who is impressed by what he calls "the poetic interpretation of landscape and action" (120), and a few others,¹ this novel has generally not been well received. Felix Mnthali (1984), for example, sees *Time of the Butcherbird* as "lack[ing] verve". According to this critic, the novel's "revolutionary fervour overwhelms [its] artistic completeness (49)." On the whole, the critical reception of *Time of the Butcherbird* has largely been marked by a comparison of this novel to La Guma's earlier novels. Thus we find Abdul JanMahomed contending that this novel fails to rise to the occasion because it lacks "the subtle and complex insights of the previous novel" (1983: 260). This comparative perspective is best epitomised in Mbulelo Mzamane's essay, "Sharpeville and its Aftermath", in which he comments, *inter alia*, on what he sees as a change in La Guma's "intended" audience in this work, La Guma's "putting of Sesotho words in the mouths of Xhosa-speaking Africans", and "a lack of concreteness" (1985: 40) about the novel. He concludes: "*Time of the Butcherbird* lacks the authenticity and penetration of his earlier work in its evocation of the social milieu in which his characters move, a shortcoming which a number of his readers close to the source will immediately recognize" (40). It is precisely these aspects of *Time of the Butcherbird* that Maughan-Brown, following Mzamane, draws on to back up his claim that there are "awkwardness[es] and anomalies ... in every area of this novel – from narrative technique to the depiction of setting to characterization, to dialogue

1. See Louis Tremaine (1994), Balutansky (1990), Abrahams (1985), Wafawarowa (1995), Ezeigbo (1991) and, to a certain extent, Gagiano (1997).

to plot” (1991: 30). Maughan-Brown attributes some of these “anomalies” to the fact that the novel was produced under conditions of exile. In his own words: “The enforced adjustment of the focal length consequent on exile has blurred the focus and dulled the sharp edge of the realism which had served La Guma’s purposes so well in earlier novels” (36). What Maughan-Brown and Mzamane have in common with regard to this novel, then, are their reservations about La Guma’s aesthetic achievement – the difference, however, is that, elsewhere, Mzamane acknowledges this work’s “revolutionary import” (Mzamane and Tadi 1986: 10).

Some of the criticism levelled against this work is, of course, justified – I must admit, for example, that on reading the novel, I could not stop wondering why Africans in the Karoo speak Sotho and Zulu instead of Xhosa. It seems to me, however, that a stringently comparative perspective (as adopted by some of these critics) denies *Time of the Butcherbird* its validity as a text in its own right.

Time of the Butcherbird, it could be argued, represents a significant point of departure not only for La Guma himself but also for his scholarship. For one thing, it was, according to Abrahams, the first of La Guma’s longer works “to be conceived and written in its entirety [in exile]” (1985: 118). For another, it is also the first of La Guma’s novels to focus attention on the rural struggles of the peasantry. Furthermore, *Time of the Butcherbird* renders visible La Guma’s conscious attempt “to represent human experience across the colour line in South Africa” (Tremaine 1994: 31). La Guma’s fictional project in *Time of the Butcherbird* is, arguably, far more ambitious than that of his previous novels, not just in terms of its “broad historical sweep”, which in its coverage includes “glimpses of precolonial times and the Boer War to the urban anti-government demonstration of the late seventies” (Gagiano 1997: 59), but, most significantly, in terms of its broader representation of racial conflict. That La Guma should have written a truly representative South African novel at some point in his career does not, however, come as a surprise. As early as 1966 in his interview with Robert Serumaga La Guma expressed his concerns about the difficulties that racial discrimination presented for a writer trying “to project [himself/herself] across the colour line” (Duerden and Pieterse 1972: 92). This preoccupation is reiterated in La Guma’s 1975 essay, “South African Writing under Apartheid”: No writer in South Africa can see life steady and see it whole. Out of his own experience he can only tell what he has seen and known, and this is inevitably only part of the total picture. No White writer has yet managed to create a real and convincing Black character, and vice versa. Nor has any writer, White or Black, been able to describe the relations between White and Black which are accurate and valid for both parties (18).

Time of the Butcherbird (which was published four years later) would seem to be a direct product of this preoccupation. For it is precisely these limitations that La Guma attempts to transcend as a means of providing a

“total picture” of the South African situation in this work. To this end the novel explores the relationship not only between Blacks and Whites but also between Afrikaners and English-speaking South Africans – a coverage that is not as prominent in the previous novels. As Field points out, *Time of the Butcherbird* provides La Guma’s “most detailed portrayal of black and white characters” (2010: 201). La Guma’s allusion to the idea of presenting a “total picture” is significant here since it calls to mind Lukács’s concept of totality. The question, however, is: in what ways does La Guma attempt to provide a “total picture” of the South African situation in this work?

One of the ways through which *Time of the Butcherbird* attempts to achieve this is, as Carpenter points out, by offering readers “a typical history of each [ethnic] group, with its thoughts and values” (1991: 10). There is, for example, a clear attempt in the narrative to depict “from the inside” the attitudes and resistance of the African people of Hlangeni against forced removal. From Kobe the praise singer’s reluctance “to [eulogise] this frightened old man” (44), Hlangeni, as well as the approval accorded Mma-Tau for strengthening the resolve of the people to resist. We are made to see Hlangeni the chief, for what he is – namely, “the betrayer” of the people.² Mma-Tau refers to his compromising speech as “[a] song fit to be sung at funerals” (45). The English-speaking “white people in the text are represented by Edgar Stopes whose contemptuous attitude towards the Afrikaners and what he sees as ‘their narrow arrogance’” (4) is meant, according to La Guma, to demonstrate “the schism” that exists between these two groups despite their apparent affinity when it comes to attitudes towards black folk” (Abrahams 1991: 39). It is, nevertheless, in La Guma’s portrayal of Afrikaners, as represented by Hannes Meulen, amongst others, that the text attempts to achieve its aim of providing a total picture. For unlike Edgar Stopes, who seems to have very little, if any, significant encounter with Africans, it is the interaction between the Afrikaners and the Africans that constitutes the central thrust of the novel. As is well known, the notion of totality in Lukács’s aesthetics of realism is linked to the concept of typicality. This involves, according to Lukács, the portrayal of “typical characters in typical situations”. As Kiralyfalvi points out: “In creating the typical the artist embodies in the destinies of certain concrete [people] the most important characteristics of some historical situation that best represent the specific age, nation, and class to which they belong” (1975: 80). In *Time of the Butcherbird* typicality is embodied in Hannes Meulen and Mma-Tau, both of whom are clearly shown in the “context of interaction with relevant elements of their social-historical environment”

2. Hlangeni’s betrayal of his community reminds one of “the headman of the village, a servile man and a betrayer” in La Guma’s only short story that has a rural setting, “The Exile” (1972), which takes as its subject the peasants’ revolt of the late 1950s in the Transkei. For more on this revolt see Govan Mbeki’s *The Peasant’s Revolt*.

(85). To this end the novel provides extensive coverage of the character portrayal of Hannes Meulen, a bourgeois politician who is keen on “buying a substantial amount of shares” available in the prospective mining area (61). We learn of three generations of his family: his grandfather, Oupa Johannes Meulen, a farm owner who was involved in the Boer War (29), his father Christopher Meulen, a political figure and a capitalist who serves as the role model “he had learned to emulate” (57), and Hannes, himself an Afrikaner politician trying to grapple with the problems of the 1970s. His father, Christopher Meulen, we are told, loved the land: to him country was not only a geographical entity, an anthem, celebrations of Dingane’s Day, the day of the Blood River. For him country was a matter of who owned the flat, dreary red and yellow plains and the low, undulating hills the grass and the water (57). Thus, although Hannes Meulen’s generation is faced with new threats in the 70s such as liberalism which is gaining momentum, blacks’ complaints “about money, wages, and rights” (63), and the impending threat of decolonisation in the Portuguese colonies (64), in his concern with capital and politics Hannes takes after his father. (The novel’s detailed account of the Meulen family raises curious questions about the possible intertextual connections with Gorky’s *The Artamotovs* (n.d.), a novel that has as its subjects three generations of the Russian bourgeoisie.) The portrayal of the Barend family is brought to the fore against the background of historical incidents such as the 1922 white miners’ strike (30), the Second World War, and the 1946 black miners’ strike (32). It appears that Susan Thornton has both these families in mind when she bestows accolades on La Guma for his portraits of white characters that “are as complete, well drawn, and unsentimental as those of blacks ...” (1992: 34). Chandramohan also comments favourably on the “greater complexity” of La Guma’s “pursuit of extra-ethnicity in this novel” (1992: 149). In contrast, Maughan-Brown raises some questions about La Guma’s somewhat “exhaustive interiorization of the enemy” in this work, attributing La Guma’s use of representative characters such as Hannes Meulen to “the liberal aesthetic imperative of ‘rounded characters’ and giving ‘the whole picture’” (1991: 35). Whether this could be regarded as an indication of La Guma embracing a liberal aesthetic is a moot point. What is important for our purposes is that this “interiorization of the enemy” strengthens rather than weakens typicality in character portrayal in this work in accordance with the demands of realism. La Guma confirms his concern with a realistic portrayal of his characters when he points out that Afrikaners “are people and not machines and in literature they have to be dealt with as humans” (Abrahams 1991: 39). This would seem to explain why Hannes Meulen, for example, comes across to readers as both an individual (especially in his relationship with his wife which is contrasted with that of Edgar Stopes and Maisie) and a representative of his own generation of Afrikaners. In a

similar vein, Mma-Tau emerges as both an individual and a representative of the Hlangeni community, as will be shown later.

It could also be argued that *Time of the Butcherbird* is perhaps indicative of La Guma's attempt to deal imaginatively with the national question in South Africa. This would seem to explain not only La Guma's choice of, in his own words, "characters representative of the South African scene" (Abrahams 1991) in this work – a choice that could be seen as being in line with the "multinational" character of South Africa as endorsed by the Freedom Charter – but also in the novel's attempt to show how the national and class struggle intersect in the struggle for land, as will be shown later. Edgar Stopes's question ("Who's running the country, anyway?" 24), although directed to the Afrikaners, is significant in this regard. That La Guma would have attempted to grapple fictionally with the national question does not come as a surprise. *Time of the Butcherbird*, it will be remembered, was published in 1979, just three years after the revival of the national question in the pages of *African Communist*, a debate largely prompted by the advent of Black Consciousness ideology in the late 1960s with its redefinition of a black subjectivity and its emphasis on black unity.³ Although it appears that La Guma did not produce a written submission to this 1976-1977 debate, as a senior member of the party he would have taken part in discussions on this issue at other levels. Whether La Guma succeeds in his attempt to deal with this issue imaginatively in *Time of the Butcherbird* will, I hope, become clear in the course of the paper.

Time of the Butcherbird invites a number of possible readings with regard to its realism. Some readers, for example, might opt for a comparative perspective in which the realism of this novel is compared to that of *In the Fog of the Seasons' End*. Read in this way, one could argue that unlike the previous novel in which the focus is predominantly on the forces working towards the future (namely, the workers), *Time of the Butcherbird* revisits, albeit in a different context, the conditions of racial capitalism. The text does not only examine racial animosities and tensions within the rural communities in the Cape but also underscores the fact that these tensions have their underpinnings in the economic system. The fact that the forced removal of the Hlangeni people from their land is primarily motivated by a realisation of the prospects for mining resources in this area is significant in this regard. By emphasising the conditions of racial capitalism rather than

3. For the earlier debates (1954 and 1958/59) see Forman and Odendaal (1992: 179-189). For the 1976-1977 debates see issues of *African Communist* of the same dates – Joe Ngwenya's article is particularly interesting since, in its ambiguities, it shows the complexities of dealing with the national question. One also wonders about the coincidental publication of *Time of the Butcherbird* and No Sizwe [Neville Alexander]'s *One Azania, One Nation* which deals extensively with the national question. See particularly No Sizwe's chapter 5 which critically deals with the 1976-1977 debates.

focusing on the forces working towards a different future, one could argue, the text opens itself to be read as being informed by critical realism. Other readers of the novel could argue that to locate the text within the confines of critical realism is to miss the point somewhat. I have in mind here a critic such as Anthony Chennells, for whom La Guma's "reputation as a socialist novelist" is not only based on *In the Fog* but also includes *Time of the Butcherbird*. According to Chennells (1989), *Time of the Butcherbird* is "a product of socialist consciousness" (39), as can be seen most obviously in Mma-Tau's speech to the Hlangeni people:

The meaning is this: that men are of two kinds, the poor who toil and create the riches of the earth; and the rich who do not toil but devour it. The meaning is this: that the people demand their fair share of the fruits of the earth, and their rulers, of whom the white man is a lackey, a servant, refuse them a fair portion. And it is this: that the people insist, the rulers deprive them of work, drive them from their homes, and if they still resist, send their lackeys to shoot them down with guns.

(La Guma 1979: 47)

That Mma-Tau "sees whites not as oppressors in their own right but as the lackeys of a larger economic order" is indeed suggestive of a "socialist vision of economic order" (Chennells 1989: 48) and, by implication, would seem to provide a socialist perspective to the text. For this reason it is tempting to read the novel as socialist realist. What is even more suggestive is the way in which the text dramatises the interaction between Mma-Tau and Shilling Murile. For it tips the scales somewhat in favour of a reading that regards the text as socialist realist. Such a reading would take as its point of departure the premise that there exists yet further evidence of the intertextual connections between La Guma's novels and Gorky's *Mother* (1988).⁴ But, in this case, the (Nilovna/Pavel Disciple/Mentor) relationship depicted in *Mother* is inverted, for it is Mma-Tau rather than Shilling Murile who might be seen as assuming the role of political mentor. This can be seen most clearly in the text's attempt to employ the "spontaneity/consciousness dialectic"⁵ in the portrayal of these characters. Read in this way, Murile's quest for revenge is an act of spontaneity because it is not based on political guidance but on the pursuit of personal interest. The first time we encounter Murile, who has just been released from jail, he tells us that he is "finished with white people" and attempts to provide a political justification for his intentions: "There were people in that place [i.e. in jail] who had also been put there by the white men and who said that we should fight on. I used to listen to them talking" (19). This in a way recalls the "rooker's" political

4. See Mkhize (2010) for more on this point.

5. For more on the "spontaneity/consciousness dialectic see Clarke (1981).

influence on Charlie in *And A Threefold Cord* and it is tempting to see it in this light. But Murile is insistent that this is personal: “What I have to do I shall do on my own” (20), a clear indication that his intentions are devoid of any political justification.

Mma-Tau attempts to persuade Murile to redirect his anger towards the collective political purpose of the Hlangeni people:

It is not for me to stand in your way if you wish to collect your debt, but hear this. A whole people is starting to think of collecting a collective debt, the time of this debt is drawing on. All over the country people are feeling it ... In relation to that, your debt, though important to you, becomes of small significance ...

(La Guma 1979: 80)

Annie Gagiano is certainly right in her argument that “to Mma-Tau Murile is someone who may become useful if he subsumes his project under the much larger struggle to come” (1997: 61). Murile, however, seems to be bent on personalising the situation, as can be seen in his response to Mma-Tau’s plea: “I have no need of people. This is my thing and afterwards I’ll go my way” (80). The self-centredness of Murile’s motivation is, ultimately, borne out in the fact that despite Mma-Tau’s attempt to give him a political sense of direction he, nevertheless, collects his debt by killing not only Hans Meulen but also Edgar Stopes. While it is true that Edgar Stopes could “by virtue of his skin [be] presumed a benefactor of the system” (Msosa 1984: 98), Murile’s killing of Meulen and Stopes is certainly not based on his understanding of this “system”. William Carpenter puts it succinctly: “Murile kills Stopes [simply] because he is also white” (1991: 14). Against this background, then, Murile’s killing of Stopes is “anarchic”, providing further evidence of the spontaneity of his actions. Such a reading would, however, eventually, regard Murile’s somewhat doubtful identification with his “people” (118) at the end of the novel as suggestive of his shift from spontaneity to consciousness, however embryonic in form. For example, although Balutansky does not necessarily contextualise the novel in terms of the “spontaneity/consciousness dialectic”; it is implied in her argument that Murile “ceases to be a self-minded individual” (115) and, ultimately, “reaches a level of consciousness that responds to the oppression of all Africans” (1990: 117). According to this reading then, like *In the Fog of the Seasons’ End*, *Time of the Butcherbird* moves towards socialist realism.

There are, nevertheless, some problems with this interpretation. Firstly, the narrative’s gesture towards a socialist realist perspective, as demonstrated in Mma-Tau’s subtle articulation of the people’s aspiration towards an equitable distribution of wealth (47), is marred by ideological contradictions within the text itself. The genuine attempt to use the “spontaneity/consciousness dialectic” by way of exploring the interaction between Shilling Murile and Mma-Tau is undermined by an analysis that underscores

social contradictions in terms of cultural nationalism. Mma-Tau's socialist rhetoric is, for example, undercut by a perception of the struggle that defines "us" and "them" essentially in terms of racial categories, as can be seen most obviously when she attempts to recruit Murile on the basis of his "hatred of them" (83). This renders somewhat problematic the contention that Mma-Tau "demonstrates an acute class consciousness" (Sougou 1994: 48). The result, as Carpenter correctly observes, is that Mma-Tau "presents a possibility that the ethos of racism will be turned against whites instead of transcended in a non-racial universalism" (1991: 12). This problem is further compounded by what Gagiano has identified as "the virtual absence from (the text) of any instances of cross-racial solidarity", an omission that leads this critic to suggest that the novel "in a sense replicates the apartheid it opposes" (1997: 64). This is the most glaring contradiction in La Guma's text, a contradiction that provides evidence that, unlike La Guma's other work in which the ideology of the text is consistent with the author's ideological position, *Time of the Butcherbird* departs from this trend. But then, as Francis Mulhern reminds us in his provocative essay, "Ideology and Literary Form – a comment", a "literary text need *not* ... coincide with the positions formally maintained by its author" (1975: 85) (emphasis in the original). For this reason, while I share with Maughan-Brown the idea that textual ideology in this work is inconsistent with authorial ideology, I do not, however, entertain the conception that this should be seen as an "anomaly". Secondly, such a reading would seem to accord Murile the role of a positive hero, thereby rendering the ending of the novel unproblematic. Indeed some critics have accorded Murile this role without necessarily suggesting that this novel is socialist realist. I have in mind here Maughan-Brown's ideological reading of this work. Comparing *Time of the Butcherbird* to La Guma's earlier novels, Maughan-Brown points out that his intention is to show that this work differs from the others "in its political and potential ideological effects" (19). Accordingly he begins his analysis with an examination of the author's intention in writing this novel and this leads him to La Guma's explanation of the title of the novel in his interview with Cecil Abrahams:

The title of the novel comes from African folklore. One of the riddles from the oral tradition indicates that the butcherbird represents something which not only cleanses the cattle but also cleanses the society. It does away with the wizards, the sorcerers, and the people who have a negative effect on the society. What I'm trying to say is that conscious resistance of the people heralds the time when the butcherbird will cleanse South Africa of racism, oppression and so on.

(1985: 118)

Maughan-Brown then goes on to argue that both the choice of the title and the explanation that La Guma provides "give primacy" to Murile's private

revenge rather than to a collective programme of political resistance which Mma-Tau advocates. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that his reading of the novel leads him to conclude that in the “acute tension” that exists in the novel between “the sponsorship of collective political action ... and a celebration of individual reaction” (1991: 25-26) it is the latter that the novel endorses. His claim that there is “a contradiction between the political position La Guma maintained outside his fiction, and in the majority of his novels, and that apparently endorsed in *Time of the Butcherbird*” (29) is thus a logical conclusion to this argument. Maughan-Brown’s reading of the novel is both perceptive and thought-provoking; however, by assigning Murile the role of the butcherbird, he (perhaps unwittingly) implies that he is meant to serve as a positive hero and, in this way, seems to be imposing a resolution to the very (unresolved) contradictions he identifies in the text. The truth of the matter is that by killing Stopes and Hannes Meulen, Murile assigns *himself* the role of the butcherbird – a role that La Guma in fact assigns to a collective “conscious resistance of the people”, an idea that is articulated by Mma-Tau in her invitation to Murile to be involved in the people’s collective debt (80) and endorsed by Madonele (117) in the text: “Then you must join us, the villagers, and be lost among us” (117).

It is not, however, Murile who is meant to serve as a positive hero in the novel, for unlike Tekwane in *In the Fog*, he does not represent any moral and political virtues. Murile’s role as a positive hero is further undermined by his refusal to “tame personal feelings under the guidance of his [mentor]” (Hosking 1980: 11), Mma-Tau in this case. If anyone, it is Mma-Tau who assumes this role. As an individual Mma-Tau is depicted as an adamant character who always wants to “have her way” (49) but the Hlangeni people look up to her not only for political guidance but because of her other role as a community worker – as a qualified nurse she plays the role of midwife to women in labour in this rural community (83). Mma-Tau stands out in her community not only because of her insistence on her democratic right to participate in the decision-making process of the community (“Is this not a meeting of the village? I shall speak” (45)) but also because of her understanding of the dynamics of racial capitalism. In some of her utterances, Mma-Tau, at times, serves as La Guma’s ideological mouthpiece, as can be seen in her socialist rhetoric, which is couched in the terminology of the SACP’s definition of the South African situation as “colonialism of a special type” (47), as well as in her argument that a collective programme of political action will solve social problems. As a political veteran, whose experience as an activist includes her participation in the 1956 women’s demonstration (81); she gains the ideological assent of members of the community in her speeches (“Hauw! The she-lion has roared”, says Kobe in approval (47)) which give them a sense of direction, strengthening their resolve to resist the forced removal, and eventually she takes the lead in “bringing the village people into the hills” (118). It is to this communal

programme of political resistance that Murile is being invited. A strict adherence to the “spontaneity/consciousness dialectic” paradigm would require Murile to gradually move away from his self-centred concerns, demonstrate a development of his political consciousness and his unequivocal endorsement of, and participation in, this communal programme of political resistance. In the case of *Time of the Butcherbird* it is difficult to say with certainty whether Murile really joins the communal struggle of the Hlangeni people in the end, and, if he does, whether he joins it for political reasons – the “we” at the end of the novel remains ambiguous.⁶ When Madonele asks, “You said *we*. Are you coming with our people?” Murile’s response is, “Let us say I am coming with *you*, old man Remember you have my tobacco” (118). The result is that, to borrow a phrase from Hosking, “spontaneity” and “consciousness” is never really “synthesized” (Hosking 1980: 15). It is perhaps not a coincidence that we ultimately have a conclusion in which nothing is really concluded about Murile’s fate. Whether this open-endedness of the text is the product of La Guma’s conscious intention or essentially the objective ideological function of the text is, nevertheless, a moot point. Murile’s unresolved fate which would have completed the “spontaneity/consciousness dialectic”, nevertheless, leads to the possible conclusion that despite the text’s gesture towards socialist realism as seen partly in Mma-Tau’s socialist rhetoric and intimations towards the “spontaneity/consciousness dialectic” in the dialogic interaction between Mma-Tau and Murile, the text remains, in Lukács’s terms, critical realist since it does not “reject socialism out of hand” (1971: 107).

In conclusion, one could argue that although the following statement was made in 1985, six years after the publication of *Time of the Butcherbird*, La Guma might have had this novel in mind when he commented:

Progressive literature from South Africa ... must transcend the group divisions which apartheid tries to force upon society via separate development. Bantu education, bantustans, and the like. Literature should be able to examine our society as a whole. In short, by doing so, writing to-day will contribute to the founding of the nation of the future.

(Gala [Alex La Guma’s pseudonym] 1985: 42)

Lukács raises the question of the need to reflect the national context(s) of class struggle in socialist realist literature and, in my view, La Guma takes cognisance of this aspect in *In the Fog of the Seasons’ End*. The problem in

6. Despite her attentiveness to other “ambivalences ... ambiguities ... and uncertainties in La Guma’s text” Gagiano reads this aspect of the text unproblematically. She reads the end of the novel as implying that “Murile *is* now joining the villager’s communal cause” (1997: 63) (Emphasis in the original).

the case of *Time of the Butcherbird*, however, is that, in La Guma's pursuit of character representation across the racial spectrum, this project is pushed too far to the point where the basic premise is no longer consistent with his extra-textual ideological stance. The silence on the possibilities for a demonstration of non-racial solidarity in the text is a case in point. It should, nevertheless, be pointed out that the implicit attempt to find a fictional form in which to get to grips with the national question is, nonetheless, significant, even if it does not entirely succeed.

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